In the Shadow's Glow

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Summary

By Etro's hand, she was chosen to decide the people's fate. Whether she wanted to or not wasn't an option, and she feared the Lucian royal circle would be next.

*This story is a canon AU*
The Matter of Luck

Chapter Summary

It's just another day on the royal circle's journey through Duscae (hey, that rhymed!). Everything seems to be going smoothly after the car's repairs are finished, but their lucky streak doesn't last long. And just when things seem to be headed downhill, a light shines through the dark to help them out.

When it came to the matter of their luck since the beginning of their journey away from Insomnia, the percentage for the royal circle had hit an all time low on that particular day. It began when the last gas station they stopped at overcharged them when they had to refill the Regalia. The employees running it had handed them the 'Imperial Army' reasoning, which all the businesses they stopped at had used since Nifelheim's power in the world increased. The men understood things had gone south since Emperor Iedolas Aldercapt took over the Nifeli throne and doubled his efforts to claim the world as his own. They knew the hardships that befell Eos since he ambushed their kingdom with his robotic army in an effort to gain control over the crystal – they'd witnessed it first hand. But with the need to save every last bit of gil they had to put towards food and supplies, that one overcharge bothered Ignis greatly. The issue dug itself under his skin and left an uncomfortable itch he couldn't ignore. With the amount of time he'd spend recalculating their expenses and remaining funds until they could claim another bounty, the strategist knew sleep would be far from attainable that night.

Matters only worsened when, in a moment of pulling over for a brief stretching break after hours of driving, the group was stalked by some of the local wildlife. They were badly outnumbered, five beasts to one human, and despite their best efforts, were overwhelmed by the swarm of beasts that were attracted to them – by what, they had no clue. Ignis thrust out one Fire spell after another in an attempt to ward the sabretusks off, while Gladiolus stayed close to Noctis and slammed his blade against the ground to scare them away. Prompto was in charge of covering Ignis' back and keeping the creatures from treading too close to the car, and he felt a blessing from the gods rain down on him when the monsters died with only two bullets a piece. It was when the new, unidentifiable monsters joined the fight that the party was really caught off guard. The half-slithering, half-crawling reptilian fiends worked in tandem with the sabretusks and gave the men a run for their money, drawing blood and slapping bruises onto each of them. Whenever one was taken down, three more would jump on. It felt like an eternity was spent on fending off the monsters, and when the last one fell dead, everyone's stances calmed and they breathed sighs of relief.

Except the Prince, who was lying on the ground in the fetal position, yelling in pain and holding his right arm for dear life. His friends immediately caught wind and sprinted to his side, Ignis sliding to a kneel beside Noctis first and cradling him. “Highness!” he cried out, examining his body for the wound that was causing him such agony, but the only response given was another round of hisses and stinging screams. Prompto ran to the car and popped the trunk open in search of potions and antidotes, and Gladiolus helped scan the Prince's body. The bodyguard managed to pry Noctis' arms apart and found a pair of raised puncture wounds that had gone plum in color. He glanced at one of the fallen creatures, and when he saw the fangs the dead bodied bared, he knew what had happened. “One of those things bit him,” Ignis concluded. He sucked his teeth, disappointed in himself for not thinking of the possibility one of the monsters could be venomous. Thunder pounded shortly after his realization, and the men knew their situation went from bad to worse. Two things were evident: they needed shelter and an antidote. “Prompto! What's the hold up?”
“We're out of antidotes!” the blond yelled, jogging back to his friends in a noticeable limp. “Potions, too.” Now the circumstances were dire. They needed a doctor. “But the nearest hospital’s all the way in Cauthess.”

Gladiolus was the one to get everyone moving as he knelt in front of Ignis. “Let's put him in the car,” the bodyguard suggested, holding his arms out. “The sooner we move, the sooner he’ll get help.” No one knew if they’d be able to get to the hospital in time, but no one wanted to say it. As Ignis handed the Prince over to his partner, he stood up and dashed to their vehicle. Lightning cracked through the gathering clouds, bringing them men to move in sync and quickly load themselves in the car.

With the exception of one other time – their escape from Insomnia – nobody had ever seen Ignis speed above what was necessary, but with everyone's injuries and Noctis' current state, hurrying was a priority. No one flinched when thunder banged again, louder than the first time. The storm was drawing closer. Sensing the approach of rain, Ignis pressed a button on the dashboard to bring up the car roof. Prompto took out a pen from the glove compartment and handed it to Gladiolus, who drew lines on the Prince's arm to mark the progression of the venom, which was moving too fast for comfort. The blond was left with the task of lookout, who was practically standing in his seat before the roof clicked into place. His eyes darted left and right in search of any buildings. Noctis' moans became pained whimpers in his now unconscious state. Aside from the Prince's poisoning and the impending storm, the collective injuries of the party were manageable. It was a miracle Ignis was still able to drive without so much as a swerve after his gloves and the skin on his hands was nearly seared from his overuse of Fire magic. The guys were fortunate to make it through the fight with survivable injuries and no broken bones, though their bodies were bruised and battered from the struggle. Searching for a place to rest and heal was beginning to seem futile, until shortly after settling into his seat, Prompto jumped up and threw his arm forward to point at something. “I see on-OWW!” He swiftly retracted the outstretched limb and cradled it, feeling a severe cramp occupy the muscle in his shooting shoulder. “Turn right, toward those trees. I saw a house behind them, and the lights are on.” Ignis didn't hesitate and followed his comrade's directions, turning off the road and under the mentioned trees before traveling up a long dirt path. When a dark building came into view he hit the breaks and shut down the vehicle. Prompto was the first to leave the car, using his less wounded arm to propel himself out, and ran to the single door of the house. He banged his fist against the wood and shouted over the next crack of thunder. “HELLO! We need help! Out friend was poisoned!”

As the tactician and bodyguard lifted Noctis from the back seat, the door to the house swung open. A woman stood in the doorway, her eyes frantic, and when they fell on Prompto, they showed immediate concern. She first studied the gunner in front of her, then peered over his shoulder to get a view of the black-haired man being carried by his friends. Her worry-stricken expression intensified. “Oh my...what happened to you all?” She ran outside to meet with Gladiolus and the Prince, who she began to examine without hesitation. She peeled one of his eyes open and not a second later ran back into the house, holding the door open. “Bring him in,” she ordered. “There's a room at the back with some beds. Lay him in there.” The men followed her command without vacillation, walking all the way to the end of the main hallway and laying Noctis on the first bed they spotted. The woman rushed to another room briefly to grab her medical equipment and rejoined the group seconds later, who'd taken nearby chairs to sit at their friend's side. She set the medical bag next to the bed and dug inside, pulling out a stethoscope, flashlight, cotton gauze and a bottle of iodine. As she placed the buds of the stethoscope in her ears, she began to bombard the men with questions. “What's his age?”

Ignis was the first to respond. "Twenty years old."

“Blood type? Weight?” The questions poured from her as she started to listen to his breathing and removed the glove from his left hand. “What was he doing before you brought him here? What types of creatures were you fighting? How long has it been since he was bitten? What did the creature that
The friends answered her questions to the best of their ability until she felt satisfied with the given information. “I’ll be right back.” The woman jumped from her chair and vanished from the room again, quickly returning with an IV bag attached to a metal pole. She positioned it next to the headboard and threw on some gloves, then tied a third around his arm. She unwrapped a sterile butterfly IV and pushed it into a vein on Noctis’ elbow. Securing it with tape, she attached the IV line to the needle in his arm, and after a quiet moment, a long sigh left her lips. She turned to his friends, who stared at her with anxious glances. “This is the antidote for the venom in him. The type of venom in his system contains proteolytic enzymes, which break down structural components in tissue.” Confusion swam in their gazes. “It means any longer, and his body would've been digested by the venom. But you brought him here in time. The venom won't leave him with any permanent damage. He'll be out for a couple of hours, but once the antidote starts to work he'll be alright. All he'll have is a scar.” She saw their muscles and expressions relax at the news that their friend would survive. The woman continued to treat Noctis, looking over each of his wounds and administering a syringe full of potion into the IV. When she finished he was stable and resting, the entirety of his right forearm wrapped in gauze.

“We owe you a huge thanks,” Ignis started as she wrapped the stethoscope around her neck and removed her gloves. “We'd just run out of first aid supplies before our fight against the beasts, and didn't know if…” He was cut off by pain surging through his palms. The woman put on fresh gloves and took his hands into hers to examine them, quickly noting the burns he'd sustained and the fragments of his gloves left over. She was careful to peel the remains off and toss them in the trash, which Ignis didn't argue with.

She flashed him a brief smile. “Thank me after I've examined every one of you,” she told him, and pulled the advisor into his chair to get a closer look at his burns. “Lucky for you, they're not too bad. Some damage sustained to the top few layers, but nothing serious.” He sensed relief in her voice when she spoke, and watched her spread a layer of translucent white paste over his hands. The cream cooled his skin immediately, and she split a section of gauze in half to wrap around his hands, taking care to keep his fingers separated to prevent the skin from fusing. “I'll check on your hands in the morning. You can still use them, but move slow and don't bend your fingers too much.”

He nodded. “We can't thank you enough.” The woman gave him another momentary smile and moved on to Prompto, checking his cramped shoulder and bicep. Ignis moved his chair closer to Noctis' bed and kept an eye on the doctor in his peripheral vision. He had some medical training, more than the others in his party, but nothing he knew compared to the woman who treated each individual's injuries with expertise. She applied the utmost care in treating Prompto, cleaning up the scrapes on his arms and knees, and placing one arm in a sling to support it while the muscle relaxed. Gladiolus was the last to be examined, and as tough as he was, the deep scratches and bite he'd received from one of the sabertusks hurt like hell. The blond cringed when she folded the fabric of his pants upward to get a closer look at the nasty wounds, determining without hesitation that he'd need stitches. The scar on his face was nothing compared to having his leg practically sewn back together, but the bodyguard dealt with the pain 'like a champ', as she commented. Forty-five minutes after their arrival to the house, all four men were treated and their injuries wrapped up. As they began to discuss finding lodgings for the night, the sound of heavy rain and thunder clapping outside took over the room.

“You're either brave or crazy if you think you're leaving tonight,” they overheard the doctor tell them. “That lightning would scare even a Behemoth away. You're better off staying here for the night.” She fished three glass bottles from her medical bag and set them down on the nightstand. “Heal up first, then head out.” The doctor removed the corks from two of the bottles and handed them to Ignis and Prompto, then passed the third to Gladiolus. “Drink up. I'm going to get cleaned, then get dinner started. Hope you all like Garula stew.” She stood up and grabbed her medical bag, nodding to the men as she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.
The scent of the liquid in the bottles was flowery and thick, giving away the classic potion smell. The guys held their noses as they downed the liquid, feeling it tingle the backs of their tongues when it traveled down their throats. They heard the rain outside pick up, and Ignis was elated to have put the Regalia's roof up before the rain started. “We're extremely lucky,” he started as he settled himself on the bed nearest Noctis', being careful in removing his blazer.

“No doubt about that,” Gladiolus quickly agreed. “Shelter and a doctor in one instance. Lucky in an understatement.”

“Not to mention, she's cooking for us,” Prompto added, placing his arm back into the sling after removing his vest. “Looks like our luck percentage just shot up.” A yawn escaped his lips. “Man, what a day...” It wasn't until then that they realized just how exhausted they'd become. Fighting, stress, and their injuries had drained the men more than initially thought. All three pairs of eyes fell on Noctis, watching his chest rise and fall at a methodic pace. The day's battle gave them a scare, and they took it as a sign to stay more vigilant and formulate a better plan to protect Noctis the next time they were forced to do battle. Reliving the fight in his mind sent shivers down Prompto's spine, and he pushed himself off his bed, suddenly not feeling tired anymore. “I'm gonna take a walk,” he told his comrades, and left the room.

The aroma in the air quickly changed from potions to cooking meat and vegetables, and Prompto couldn't help following the scent through the hallway. The doctor's house appeared small on the outside but had more than enough room for both a living residence and a practice. Curiosity got the better of him when he peeked through a barely open door and saw expensive medical equipment piled in the tiny room like a dumping closet. He pulled the door shut and continued into the kitchen, where he heard low music coming from a small radio. He drew in a breath to smell the cooking food. “Mmm...” he hummed when he heard the bubbling of the stew over the music, “something smells great.” The woman turned her attention away from the pot briefly to see who'd entered the kitchen. “So, what did you say was on the menu?”

“Home-grown vegetables and carefully prepared Garula meat for the perfect stew,” she replied as she gave the pot a stir. “The four of you need something that'll help you get your strength back.” The woman laid the lid on top of the pot and lowered the flame to a simmer. She wiped her hands off on a kitchen cloth and gave Prompto her full attention, allowing him to study the savior of his party. She had a fair complexion, and a line of beauty marks followed the shape of her face from her left eye down her cheekbone to her chin. She was shorter than him, though not tiny to the point where she had to go on her toes to be at eye level with him. And when he focused on her eyes, he saw how light the gray irises were compared to the murky clouds outside. They were bright against her copper-colored hair, long and pulled into twin tails secured by white leather wraps. “How are your friends doing?” she asked.

“They're doing okay, just settling in now.” He stepped toward the small table in the center of the room and put his free hand on a chair when he noticed her reaching for some bowls in an upper cabinet. “Oh, here.” He shifted next to her and easily retrieved the china, setting the bowls in her waiting grasp.

“Thank you.” The doctor moved her arm under his to grab some utensils, and as she pulled back, her shoulder bumped into his. “Oh, sorry!”

“I'm alright,” he reassured her, though it was difficult to hide the pained grimace growing on his face. “Just a little bump.” The pain was quick to subside, to his shock, and he uttered a whistle. “Wow. That was some strong stuff you gave me.”

The doctor began to set the table. “Not strong to the point of making you delirious, but yeah. You all
needed the stronger stuff, no doubt about that.” She arranged all the cutlery neatly on either side of each bowl. “You’ve got to be on your toes when you’re out in the wild like that. Can’t have you returning to my door as more serious patients, Mr... Umm...”

He didn't know why it just occurred to him that she'd been taking care of nameless vagrants. "Sorry," he started. "Here we are, invading the privacy of your home, and you don't even know our names.” Prompto offered his good hand to her. "I'm Prompto. And what should we call the lovely doctor who so humbly took us in?"

His flamboyant wording made her chuckle as she shook his hand. "Dr. Nebula Ardere," she told him. "Or just Nebula for short."
Safeguarded

Chapter Summary

With everyone's injuries treated, they have a night to rest, a meal to enjoy and some new company. Things have turned around for the better, but it is all too good to be true?

The thunderstorm was nowhere near letting up. Every ten seconds thunder would whip across the sky, cracking the air and shaking the ground with its power. To say they were glad to have not been forced to set up their tents would've been a gross understatement. Ignis, especially, was relieved to have a dry place where he could focus on recalculating the group's remaining funds, and still being able to use his hands made the task easier. He'd tuned the lone radio in their room to the first news station that still fed through without the storm's interference, then took out a pen and paper pad and started looking over everything they'd spent since their last bounty claim. The task kept his worry of the prince, while strong and immediate, at its usual level. The room was quiet with Prompto in the kitchen helping Nebula set the table and Noctis resting nearby them. Gladiolus knew better than to say anything to Ignis while he was taking care of money issues. The day's events had worn down on everyone, and with Ignis already worried about cash on a regular basis, it was best to leave him be until the strategist felt satisfied with his work. Instead, the bodyguard pulled his chair up to Noctis' bedside and watched the prince. He already looked better. The color that drained right after the poisoning returned to his cheeks. If his arm hadn't been wrapped and there wasn't an IV shoved into his arm, the ebony-locked man could've been mistaken for taking one of his usual long naps. He remembered Prompto's words clearly after discovering the punctures on Noctis' arm, and he felt awful about the whole situation; while he wasn't personally responsible for the four of them being out of stock, he felt that it should've been him who'd taken the venomous bite, not his prince. Gladio sighed, running a hand through his hair. He was beginning to understand why their gunner friend wanted to get some air...or maybe he just wanted to flirt with the doctor. He rolled his eyes at the thought. The bodyguard hadn't gotten a good enough look at her to determine if her appearance was keeping the blond, but knowing his friend as a notorious skirt-chaser, the assumption fit pretty well.

Sitting for so long had started to cramp his thighs. He slowly stood up, not wanting to pop the stitches sewn into his calf, and stretched his arms over his head. He let out a long yawn and rolled his head, loosening all the muscles stiffened in his neck. To his surprise, the pain in his leg had subsided drastically; he wasn't forced to shift more weight to his good leg than necessary. Even with Ignis' expertise in immediate battlefield wound care he'd still be letting out a hiss or two from the sting, but when he lightly tapped his hand above the wound he felt nothing he couldn't bear. Curious, Gladiolus decided to go against his better judgement and have a peek at the gash. He pushed up the fabric of his pants and momentarily observed the bandage before sliding a thumb underneath it and guiding it down a few centimeters. Amazingly, the skin had already stitched itself together, leaving a faint scar in its place. He had to rub his eyes and look again, just to make sure they weren't playing tricks on him. The line didn't change, to his surprise, and he shot up again when a knock hit the door. "Dinner's ready," the woman's voice called to them, and they heard her walking away.

Almost immediately his stomach growled, rivaling the pounding of the storm's thunder. He'd forgotten about them missing lunch, and the mere thought of a meal made his mouth water. "Coming, Iggy?" he asked his friend, who was probably feeling the same emptiness. Gladio wasn't too surprised to see the strategist rise from his seat and saunter toward the door. The second he
opened it, their room flooded with the sweet scent of home cooking. Further down the hall they saw Prompto laying the last of the utensils on the table, something that even shocked Ignis. They didn't wait any longer and joined the two in the kitchen/dining room area, taking their seats at the circular table. Nebula served them before taking a portion for herself, placing bread biscuits and a bowl of rice in the center.

"I hope it's enough," she said after taking her seat between Gladiolus and Ignis. "If not, I can make something else afterward." Prompto was lost for words as he piled the meat and rice into his mouth, chiming hums from the flavor coursing through his taste buds. His friends were soon in immediate agreement, and even Ignis couldn't hold back an exclamation of satisfaction. Seeing everyone enjoying the meal she started to eat, taking smaller bites compared to the bodyguard sitting to her left.

While he ate, Gladiolus used the time to observe the woman sitting next to him. There wasn't anything too flashy about her; she was beautiful, but then again, Prompto thought every woman was beautiful. Her outfit didn't have any scantily revealing qualities: even with the long black sleeved shirt clinging to her body the way it did, she didn't have prominent features that called for attention. Perhaps the gunner's playboy instincts were returning following his failure to get Cindy's attention. It was difficult to tell with him: sometimes he'd act like the master of suave, using crafty pick-up lines to make the ladies swoon, and other times the blond was a total nerd whose words faltered when trying to impress a woman. Maybe his hunger just had him over-thinking the entire situation. "So, uh," he began once he stopped for air, "your cooking's great. Sorry in advance if we eat all your food."

She waved her hand and shook her head. "Don't worry. I have to go shopping anyway." She paused, taking a sip of her drink. "You three need energy to help the medicine heal your bodies. I'm only worried about having some left over for your friend once he wakes up."

"He's looking a lot better," Gladio replied. "And my leg feels back to normal. Those potions you gave us worked like magic." He was about to continue when Prompto, who'd been sucking down his meal as opposed to actually chewing it, started to choke a little. Gladiolus rolled his eyes and gave the blond's back a quick slap, saving him from turning blue. "Try chewing it, why don't ya?"

Prompto swallowed and downed a gulp from his cup. "Eh, sorry. I'm just so hungry-" A burp escaped his mouth and he quickly clapped a hand over it, not wanting the woman across from him to hear it.

Ignis shook his head, then focused his attention to their gracious host. "I apologize on his behalf. Prompto tends to forget his manners when he doesn't eat." He took another bite, his eyes widening momentarily. "By the way, the flavor is exquisite. I haven't been able to find those specific herbs in any of the shops around here."

"Thank you," she answered. "I grow them myself behind the house. Unfortunately the variety I grow's pretty rare around here. Even the seeds are hard to come by." Nebula wiped her napkin across her lips. "If you'd like, I could give you a sample to take on the road."

"That's very kind of you, but you've already done so much for us..." His voice trailed when she held her hand up, letting him know it was alright. With a simple nod it was settled, and as everyone finished their plates and seconds, she began to clear the table. Ignis got up and helped her pile the dirty dishes into the sink. "I find I'm repeating myself in expressing our gratitude. You took us in without a thought and treated our injuries. Please, if there's any way we can repay you, Miss..."

"Ardere. Nebula Ardere." She turned on the faucet. "You're Ignis, right? Prompto told me a little more about the mess you got into earlier." She took one of the plates and began to scrub it.
Ignis raised an eyebrow. "Did he?" He was slightly alarmed, but made sure to not reveal any obvious concern. Being on the run from the Imperial Army, the four of them were always careful to not say too much about themselves or where they were headed when it came to interacting with outsiders. Cindy was an exception to the rule, since her grandfather was a trusted family friend and former ally of King Regis. As for anyone else, they made sure to keep any conversations condensed to directions, the weather, and word of any bounties in need of claiming. It was a pact the four of them had managed to keep so far, so to hear that one of them might have breached that contract was startling. The Imperial troops were already finding them by chance, so to have their identities revealed to the general public wouldn't be good.

Nebula nodded to him. "Mhm. He said you were on your way to Lestallum for a vacation." Her words brought relief to the strategist. "But when you stopped driving for a break, you got ambushed. Not a good idea unless you're near a rest stop. I'm sure you know about the special barriers they have in place to prevent that kind of thing from happening."

"An honest mistake," he assured her. "Then again, I'm sure our meeting would've never happened if we didn't stop." She smiled at his statement. Their small talk told him she wasn't aware of anything, especially not of Noctis' bloodline. Their critical information was safe for the time being.

She finished washing the dishes and turned to the table, finding that Gladiolus had placed the leftovers into the fridge. She gave him a nod of thanks before walking around the table and down the hall. "I'm going to check on your friend. Be right back."

When she disappeared behind the closed door of the bedroom, Ignis walked past Prompto, giving him a pat on the shoulder. "Good job with our cover."

"What, you thought I'd spill the beans just like that?" he questioned the strategist as he leaned back in his chair. "Geez, thanks a lot."

"You know he's just concerned," Gladiolus cut in, keeping his voice low. "We're in a dangerous situation here. Anything we say can be used against us. The less info that gets out, the better." He scratched at his beard. "So what's the story?"

"Vacation in Lestallum. Just a couple of friends out to see the sights and party 'til dawn. Y'know, except Ignis." Prompto let out a chuckle and tapped the table, nearly falling backwards when he pushed his chair too far. Gladiolus caught him with his knee and pushed the blond back to a proper seated position.

"Do we have cover names?"

"I told her Noctis' nickname," Prompto replied. "No one really knows our identities so we should be fine."

Gladiolus crossed his arms with a hum. "True, but let's hope she's not one of those 'royal family' fanatics. That'd be the worst outcome, and with our luck, she might just be."

"She doesn't look the type. Haven't found any secret rooms with newspaper clippings mixed in with her medical supplies. " Prompto stood up and rolled his right shoulder in a circle. The cramp had loosened itself and lifted any pain he had away, earning a low whistle from the gunner. "Man, you were right about those potions, Gladio. I feel better than before we got into that mess. Maybe we should buy some off of her before we leave. We need to restoc-"

"IF we can afford them." Gladio cut him off and looked up at Ignis.
"If she charges the same as the last store we passed, we may be limited on how many."

"Then let's hope her generosity hasn't run out," the bodyguard added.

As his sentence finished, Nebula returned to the trio, a relaxed expression readable on her face. "Good news. It looks like the venom is gone from your friend's bloodstream. He'll definitely be back to normal by tomorrow morning." Whatever stress had built up in the men was gone with the news of their friend's rapid recovery. "I should warn you, though, he'll need an extra day to regain his strength. He's absolutely not allowed to fight tomorrow. Not even squishing a bug. Got it?"

Gladiolus gave her a thumbs-up. "No worries about that. I can take his kill for 'im, and all the glory, too."

Prompto sucked at his teeth, adding, "You're just saying that so you can get his plate for dinner." Laughs were exchanged as the men grew relaxed, their minds eased from the turmoil brought about by the years of tension between Nifelheim and Lucis. They could take it easy for these few hours, and when Ignis glanced up at the clock on the wall, he realized how much time had passed.

"We should turn in," he told his comrades, then laid his attention on Nebula. "But before we do, I wanted to ask you about acquiring some potions for when we depart."

"Alright," she answered, and pointed to a door next to the main hallway. "Follow me downstairs. You can see what I've got in stock." He waved to Prompto and Gladiolus, letting them know he'd join them in a short while, and followed Nebula to the basement. A light switch was flicked, banishing the darkness from the downstairs and they walked down. It was a small room, shelves elixirs lining most of the walls. Ignis couldn't remember the last time he'd seen such an assortment of brews; not even the stores they drove past on their journey had a collection like hers. Three tables were visible, the largest one at the center, covered in glass jars and ingredients, with a hot plate waiting to be used. His silence told her of his astonishment. "As a doctor, it's good to have them somewhere close by."

The heavy scent of the healing liquid filled the room. "You brew every one of these yourself?" he asked.

"The quality of the mass-produced ones didn't meet my standards," she explained, leading him toward one of the smaller tables. "There also weren't antidotes available for the poison of certain creatures or plants, as you experienced first-hand today." Nebula grabbed a stack of stapled papers and handed it to him. "These are the prices. I charge based on the ingredients - rarity, amount, and skill needed to take down the beast when required. The ingredients are listed next to the names. Take your time in choosing." With a gesture of understanding he started to walk toward one of the shelves, eying each jar and switching between reading the label and its cost on the list. Relief hit him when he read the numbers typed out on the paper, finding them much more reasonable than many of the places selling them. There were plenty he hadn't seen available on the main market, meant more for specific ailments and to aid healing for post-surgery patients, and he was glad to see such a wide array for him to choose from. Choosing, though, was the problem. He glanced up from the list to Nebula, who was already working on another batch of potions in the middle of the room. She crumbled some leaves in her right hand and sprinkled them into the pot atop the hot plate, then added what looked like blood to the mixture she had cooking. He couldn't bother her while she was occupied with her own matter, so he decided to pick from more of the generalized items, then chose a few for more specific needs.

As he approached the shelves on the next wall the sound of something crumpling under his foot hit his ears. Looking at the floor, he found a paper under his shoe. Ignis leaned down and picked it up, briefly inspecting it. Something on the paper caught his eye, enough to leave him frozen for a brief
second. Letting the information sink in, he turned around and approached the table, flipping the paper over to its blank side. "This was on the floor," he said to her as he laid it out of the way on her work station.

She gave him a brief glance and a, "Thank you," before returning to her work, not paying the paper any mind. "Find any you're interested in?"

"Yes," he said to her. "It's quite amazing that you've created such a vast collection on your own. The prices are very reasonable, too."

"Oh, yeah, I didn't want to overcharge people just because there's some war going on. Health care shouldn't have to be sacrificed for anything." She stood up and went to the last table in the corner of the room to grab an order sheet, handing it to him. "Just write down the ones you want and I'll have them boxed for you in the morning." He left her to her work and continued shopping, adding more advanced elixirs to the list he already had in mind. The form filled out, he handed it off to Nebula, who pinned it to a cork board on the wall. "You should get some rest. It's late."

"You're not going to sleep?"

She shook her head. "I want to finish preparing this before it goes bad. Go on ahead. I won't be long." There were slight bags under her eyes, but he didn't protest and followed her suggestion, walking up the stairs and his group's room.

Gladiolus was still awake, and poked his head up when Ignis closed the door. "You sure took your time," he commented, and pointed to Prompto fast asleep on the other side of the room. "He caught food coma right after you went downstairs."

"Apologies," he said to his friend, his tone more stern than earlier. One look at the tactician's expression told the bodyguard something was off.

"Her prices too high?"

Ignis crossed his arms. "It's not that. We can afford plenty. It's just..." He walked across the room, sitting beside Gladiolus. "There was a document I came across laying on her floor. I picked it up, and while I'm not one to inspect the belongings of others...it had the shield of Lucis printed on it."
A Lesson

Chapter Summary

With the wild day finally drawing to a close, exhaustion takes over everyone...except Propmto, who ends up getting a lesson in first aid. Of course, there's still the matter of the boys paying the medical and lodgings bills...

"The shield of Lucis...?" Gladiolus shot up from his bed, his brow furrowed and eyes wide. "Please tell me your eyes were playing tricks on you. You couldn't have seen the Lucian insignia here!"

"You don't know how much I wish I was wrong," he replied, sitting on the edge of the adjacent mattress. Removing his glasses, Ignis wiped a fingerprint from the glass. "There was no mistaking it, though-" He paused when Prompto moaned in his sleep, rolling over so his back faced them. Ignis folded in the legs of his glasses and placed them on the nearby nightstand, then worked on removing his blazer without aggravating the burns to his hands. "It was on a paper on the floor of the basement. Didn't have a chance to read it thoroughly, but from what I saw, it also had the Marshal's signature."

The bodyguard's lips parted as he tried to understand the sudden alarming discovery. "Cor signed it?" His concern heightened. The Lucian Marshal's signature was unmistakable. Though he personally hadn't been trained under him, Ignis had heard many stories about him since the time he was appointed to Noctis' council. Cor Leonis was a man of few words, preferring to speak through his actions rather than a face-to-face conversation; and on the rare occasion he chose to speak with Noctis or his court members, it became more of a history lesson on the previous Kings of Lucis, or a lecture to keep them on track - a habit Ignis quickly picked up on. "But why would he be communicating with a country doctor? We had plenty of the world's best working in the palace."

"I wish I had an answer..." Ignis shook his head. As he tried to comprehend such a finding, his thoughts knotted in confusion. "Maybe it'd be best to confront Nebula about this in the morning. Now wouldn't be a good time to disturb her." While Gladiolus wanted nothing more than to march down to the basement and demand answers from the young doctor, his partner proved a good case. She'd taken in them in at a critical time of need, saved their Prince, treated their injuries, fed them - he was sure he'd find more things to add to the list. They were already indebted to her, and with the need to build up supplies to continue their journey, it was sure to rise even higher. Charging in with an excited mind wasn't the best plan of action. He knew it was best to sleep on the matter, especially with the costs building in Ignis' mind. Taking a last glance at their sleeping comrades, the men laid down in their beds and settled down for sleep. As comfortable and warm as the mattresses were in comparison to their last days of sleeping in tents, the image of the official document haunted Ignis' dreams as he wondered what connection the Lucian official had with their caretaker.

The bedroom door creaked open at the same time Prompto awoke mid-dream, momentarily not remembering where he was. His dream had him and the guys sleeping in a trailer, and when the door opened, he sat up and noticed a figure treading quietly inside. It held a large bag in one of its hands, which was placed beside Noctis' bed, and Prompto became alert. He shot upright from the repose of his blankets and reached for his firearm, resting on the table next to his pillow. The figure turned his way and saw the gun pointed to them, and raised their hands up to calm him. "Ssh! Calm down! It's
me!" the figure told him in a hard whisper. A flashlight was turned onto the lowest setting, and when it shined on the figure's face, Prompto realized his aim was focused on Nebula. His arm relaxed and he set the pistol down with a sigh.

"Nebula!" The doctor brought a finger to her lips to silence him. She knelt next to her medical bag - the object he'd seen her place by Noctis' bed - and rummaged inside. He slowly pushed himself off the bed, stopping whenever the mattress beneath him creaked, and tiptoed over to the doctor. Gladiolus let out a snore as the blond passed him by, and when he got to the other side of the room, Prompto was glad to know he hadn't woken his friends from their slumber. He glanced at the clock sitting at Ignis' bedside and read the time. 2:37am. "Something the matter?" he asked, scratching under his chin. "It's really late."

She stood up and placed the earbuds of her stethoscope in place before leaning over Noctis. "I just wanted to check on him," she explained, quickly gazing at the empty IV bag hanging next to them. "The creature that bit him has a pretty nasty venom. I have to make sure the antidote is doing its job." Nebula held a single finger to her lips, signaling Prompto to keep quiet as she laid the other end of the stethoscope on the Prince's chest. She listened to his breathing, moving the metal circle all over to make sure each breath he drew in was sufficient. A few minutes passed before she felt satisfied with his breathing patterns, and she removed the stethoscope from his torso. "He's sounding completely normal," she concluded, "much better than before." Nebula leaned down to grab the blood pressure cuff and a small bandage from her bag. She first removed the IV from Noctis' arm and quickly stuck the bandage over the puncture hole to seal it, then slid the dark blue cuff over his arm and up his bicep. She pumped air into the cuff and laid the stethoscope right underneath, watching the needle on the dial dance into an accurate reading. "Well it's safe to say that your friend here's made a full recovery." She released the pump and removed the pressure cuff from his arm.

Prompto watched her listen to Noctis' breathing with intrigue. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a proper medical exam, and their run-in with trouble on a regular basis was a serious wake-up call for the group. Ignis mentioned during one of their grocery shopping trips that he wanted them all to get a physical when they had a moment's peace, and Gladiolus joked about when that would be. As she gathered her tools and put them away, something clicked in the gunner's mind. He was the least experienced in the quartet when it came to either combat or first aid. Ignis was always the go-to guy whenever one of the guys were injured or poisoned; he was able to assess the severity of an injury and perform battle zone-grade treatment, though it never neared the quality of a hospital. Gladiolus was a well-trained warrior whose family served as the royal guards of the Lucian royals under Cor's guidance. Noctis was lucky to have them both by his side to teach him, and though they were more than willing to teach Prompto, he felt a little out of place asking the royal court members for advice. He wanted to be useful to the cause and show how much he could contribute, more than creating cover stories and building up morale through his humor. "Hey, uh..." his voice trailed, pulling Nebula's attention from her packing. He cleared his throat. "You think you can show me some first aid tricks?" he finally asked. "I don't know much aside from telling potions and antidotes apart, and I think it could really help my friends if I knew a thing or two..." His words began to drift, but from the look she gave him, Prompto could tell she understood what he was getting at.

"You don't want to depend solely on your friends for help, right?" He nodded, and saw her take out the stethoscope again. She laid the rubber-wrapped tubing in his grasp. "I can show you a few things. First, and the most important aspect: breathing." Nebula showed him how to wear the stethoscope and motioned her hand just above Noctis' heart. "Now you just sit and listen. You want to hear air going through both lungs and an even heartbeat." She fell silent to allow him to try it himself, watching his face light up when he heard the gentle thumping in his friend's chest. He moved the metal disc to the left and heard the flow of oxygen swirl in Noctis' right lung.

"Wow..." Having gotten his fill of listening, he handed the stethoscope back to Nebula, who tossed it
into her bag. "So what's next?" The moment he asked both of them heard Noctis stirring. He gained their attention, rolling his body and letting out a groan. His eyes opened, and his vision cleared to see the blond and an unknown woman staring down at him. "Well, look who's finally up. Quite a nap you had there, Noct."

Noctis rubbed his eyes. He quickly realized he was in a dark room, laying in a soft bed, not outside in the middle of battle with reptilian beasts. A sigh escaped him. "What happened to the monsters?" the Prince asked, eyes half-lidded, then glanced at the copper-haired woman sitting beside his friend. "And who's she?"

Nebula answered for Prompto. "I'm Nebula, the local medic. You friends brought you here after a nasty fight with those creatures. Unfortunately you were poisoned by one of them, but I took care of that." The Prince's stare shifted to his bandaged right arm when she laid her hand on his wrist. "You should be completely healed now, so I'm going to remove the dressings on your arm." Without waiting for his consent Nebula took his limb into her hands. She moved each of his fingers and asked him how they felt, to which he said everything felt fine. "Prompto, can you grab the scissors from my bag?" she inquired.

"Right away!" He opened the bag wider and looked through its contents, finding materials he was familiar with and tools he couldn't even remember the name of. At the bottom he found the scissors and pulled them out, handing them to Nebula.

"Thank you. Now, Prompto, I'll show you the basics of wound examination and cleaning. Take out two pairs of gloves, some cotton balls, the bandage roll and the bottle of iodine. They should be in the main pocket." While he dug around for the needed tools she opened the scissors and slipped the lower prong under the dressing on Noctis' forearm. "Alright, Noct," she began, surprising the Prince, "just hold still for me. This'll be quick." He was too tired to even attempt objecting, and seeing his other friends still fast asleep, he knew they'd placed their trust in her to do what she needed to. Nebula moved slowly, taking her time to cut through the wrapping and not scrape the scissors against his patient's still healing skin. "Sorry that you ended up as Prompto's test dummy," she muttered in a partial giggle. "He was eager to learn some first aid." With the last cut the dressing split in half, revealing several scratches and the two punctures just below his wrist. She threw the old dressing into a nearby trash pail and took a pair of rubber gloves from Prompto, pulling them on before starting the examination. With the blond prepped and sitting beside her, she showed him everything necessary to treat a wound. The lesson was short but informative, and when she re-wrapped Noctis' arm the gunner felt confident in himself. "Simple, right?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Now Ignis won't be the only one with first-aid knowledge." They both looked down at the Prince, who'd fallen right back to sleep. Nebula gave him a concerned look. "Don't worry," the blond reassured her, "him falling asleep like that means he's back to normal. He's a notorious narcoleptic." As the last word left his mouth, he couldn't hold back a yawn of his own, and stretched his fully healed arm above his head.

Nebula peeled off her exam gloves and disposed of them. "Speaking of sleep, you should follow his lead and go back to bed." She glanced at the clock and read 3:12am. "I'm going to turn in myself. I need to be up early. I have to go hunting."

"A morning hunt?"

"Yeah. I have to get more supplies for my potions. My stock is low." She let out her own yawn and closed her medical bag. "Well, goodnight..." Nebula turned for the bedroom door and exited the room, closing the door behind her. With nothing better to do Prompto returned to his bed and laid down, dragging the blanket over his exhausted body. He smirked as he fell into unconsciousness.
Prompto was the last of the four to wake up. The world outside the house was quiet, save the singing birds that flew past the window. Opening his eyes, he immediately threw a hand up to shield his face from the sudden assault of sunlight peeking through the blinds, one ray happening to locate his lying form and choosing him as a target. He sat up and extended his arms and legs away from his body, feeling the stiffened muscles in his limbs loosen. Ignis and Gladiolus were already dressed, the latter coming out of the bathroom connected to their suite with a toothbrush in hand. Even Noctis was awake, though as he stayed sitting on the bed and pulled on one of his boots, Prompto swore he was seconds away from passing out again. Upon laying eyes on the blond Gladio flashed him a smile. "Mornin', sunshine," he commented, patting his younger friend's shoulder. "Noctis beat you to the punch. It's not every day the somnolent one is up before any of us."

The blond shrugged his shoulders with a grin and stood, smelling a mix of mouthwash, toothpaste and eggs as Gladio stopped beside him. "I assume Ignis was up at the crack of dawn?"

"Surprisingly, he slept in for a while. But someone had to get our stuff, and he insisted on doing it himself since he dozed through the alarm."

"Oh? Where's he now?"

Noctis pointed to the bedroom door as he walked past them to the bathroom. "He said to wash up. Breakfast's almost done." The Prince dug in his overnight bag, which Ignis had left beside the bathroom door, and whipped out his toothbrush. After being unconscious for half of the previous day, he happily welcomed the feeling of a clean mouth. Prompto soon joined him in the bathroom, sharing the sink with him to brush his teeth. Gladio left the younger men to themselves and headed for the hallway, but stopped in front of the bedroom door. Ignis' words were still fresh in his mind. He could picture the document in his comrade's hand so clearly, as if the ghost of the tactician was shaking the paper in his face. He hoped it was a forgery, but he had to wonder why someone would create a fake document with the seal of the royal family. It didn't make any sense either way. Gladiolus pondered what Ignis' plan was to confront Nebula. It felt wrong to do it, in a way; she was their godsend, and if it weren't for her, who knew what would've become of the Prince. He shook his head an sucked his teeth, realizing he was overthinking things again. As he leaned his head against the door he could smell eggs and bacon. Hunger overrode his anxiety, and with a lick to his lips he opened the door and ventured down the hallway

The radio in the kitchen blasted alternative music, and Nebula nearly knocked into Gladiolus as he entered the space. "Whoops! Sorry. Didn't see you there," she said to him, then approached Ignis and handed him the ingredients in her hands. "Really, this isn't necessary. You've just finished healing."

"Think of it as a way to show our thanks," the strategist replied. "And like you said, I've completely recovered. I'm more than capable of handling the cooking."

She was ready to tell him otherwise while setting the table, but the bodyguard silenced her when he took the silverware from her grasp. "Trust me, just let him. Once Ignis has his mind set, there's no talking him out of anything." He took over setting the table, giving her a break. "So I'm told our order is ready?"

"Yup. I have the bottles packed and labeled. Receipt's attached to the top box." She gestured her chin to the stack of small boxes on the shelf next to the front door. "I appreciate your business."

"And we appreciate yours," Prompto interjected as he and Noctis walked in. "Mmm, smells like another delicious meal. Too bad, Noct." He tapped his friend's arm. "You missed quite the dinner last night." They pulled out chairs next to each other.

"I hope this little hiccup didn't screw up your vacation plans," the doctor told them as she helped
Ignis spread out the food at the center of the table. Noctis gave the blond next to him a questioning gaze, to which his friend responded with a nudge to the gut, telling him to play along for the time being. The prince dipped his chin in understanding and picked up his fork when his friends and the doctor sat down to serve themselves. As breakfast commenced, Nebula took the moment to assess Noctis and watched him eat. He seemed back to normal by the way he was eating, but the rule she informed Ignis of the night before still applied. "So, Noct," she began, quickly getting his attention mid-forkful of bacon, "I know you're probably feeling 100% and all, but I need you to stay away from any fighting for the next twenty-four hours, okay? That was some pretty strong poison in you." She got up briefly to fetch the coffee pot and brought it over to the table, serving those who wanted it. Noctis eagerly took some and added some cream before stirring and sipping it.

"I'll try my best," he stated, having a feeling that Ignis would be enforcing it heavily.

Prompto downed his glass of juice and refilled it. "Oh, when are you going on your hunt, Nebula?"

"Hunt?" As the blond's attention was grabbed by the subject the night before, Gladiolus' head tilted upward.

Nebula set her fork down on her empty plate. "Yeah, I was telling Prompto last night that I need to gather fresh ingredients for more antidotes and potions. I don't have enough to start the next batch. They're made using the local wildlife and flora." Her gaze moved to the ceiling. "And I still have to go shopping..." She sighed and suddenly looked quite tired, scolding herself mentally for staying up so late. As quickly as the exhaustion set in she got up from her seat and brought her plate to the sink, then headed for the front door, uttering an, "Excuse me," as she exited the house.

"Oh, dear..." Ignis exhaled, remembering the expense they still owed her for taking care of them.

A sudden thought came to Prompto's mind and he grinned. "Hey, why don't we help her out? I'm sure she'd appreciate it." He started to collect his friends' dirty plates.

"You just trying to get into her pants?" Noctis asked him, and the guys were sure it was just to get a rise from the gunner.

"No, whe- Wh- Why would you think that? I'm just one human being looking out for another. 'Sides, we have a budget to stick to..." He eyed Ignis, hoping for some support.

Ignis, who was cleaning his glasses, uttered a, "Hmm," in thought. "Prompto does make a valid point. There are times where services are deemed as legitimate a payment as the money itself." It was at the end of his sentence that Nebula returned inside, and though she noticed they were in the middle of a conversation, paid them no mind as she cleared the table. Gladio was the first to notice the weapon at her side: a sheathed sword hanging from a strap around her hips. Their focus was briefly brought back to the center, discussing their course of action when she vanished into the back for a moment, and when she returned it was decided that Prompto, having suggested the plan, would initiate the offer.

He jumped out of his seat and cleared his throat to get her attention. "Nebula, we think we've found a way to repay you for treating us and letting us stay the night."

"I'm listening..." She leaned against the counter, resting a hand on the hilt of her weapon.

"We want to help you out on your hunt today."

Her head perked up at his statement. "Are you sure? I don't want to delay your-"

"It's okay, really," Noctis added. "We'd offer to pay you in gil, but...we're kind of low." Nebula
observed each of their expressions, and quickly realized they weren't going to let this go. Ignis' face was especially adamant.

Nebula sighed, relaxing her stance. "Alright, you can help me. But you-" she pointed to Noctis, "are barred from any sort of combat today. Frankly, I don't even want you outside. More beasts tend to show themselves right after the rain hits."

The answer to their money dilemma collapsed into another issue. Deep in thought for a resolution, Ignis snapped his fingers and tapped the tabletop. "You mentioned you had shopping to do. Noct-" it felt so strange to not refer to him as 'Highness' - "and I could take of that while Prompto and Gladio join you on the hunt." It was an interesting twist in the offer, almost too good to be true, but the men had given her no reason to distrust them. And Ignis seemed like a responsible man. Nebula chewed on her thumb, contemplating the offer. It would kill two birds with one stone, she knew...

"Alright. Let's do it."
The Hunt

Chapter Summary

Having found a suitable way to repay Nebula without breaking the bank, the group splits into two and work on paying off their debt. Gladiolus gets to see first-hand how well she is in battle, all the while Ignis and Noctis confirm the suspicions they had earlier. Answers await them, but they may not be the ones they want to hear.

They'd never seen someone hunt for ingredients in person. Any time they'd watched a hunting experience was through TV shows, and the norm for them was heading to the local store to stock up on the needed supplies. When it came to hunting, the only time the quartet would resort to it was if they needed to make a quick buck off a bounty. So when Gladiolus and Prompto headed out with Nebula, they didn't know what to expect from the hunt. Having known her for only a few hours, the sight of a sword now resting against her hip was still something to get used to. Gladio was eager to see her in battle, but at the same time, a small part of him was anxious about her safety. It wasn't that he doubted her skill; however, she was much smaller than them, something he felt the beasts they passed by would see as a weakness they'd attempt to exploit.

And then came the matter of confronting her about the paper once they returned to her home. He quietly wondered what his group was going to do about it: if she'd confess everything flat out, or if they'd have to force the truth out of the medic. It was vital they find out her connection to Cor, for their safety. A quick glance at Prompto, whose gaze was fixated on her, told the bodyguard he wouldn't take the news well. To Gladiolus' amazement she'd given her house keys to Ignis, having assumed that he and Noctis would return from food shopping before their hunt was over. He found her immediate trust in Ignis to take care of her home amazing. And with that trust, he and the Prince could probably take a quick look around for answers before they got back.

The trio left the protection of another tree-crowded area of the land and entered the grasslands, coming close to a grazing herd of Garulas. It was then that Prompto's focus left Nebula to watch the creatures, who seemed to pay them no mind when they crept by. Gladiolus hoped they wouldn't be fighting one of the large wooly beasts, still feeling a twinge of exhaustion from their last battle. One on its own was hard enough to take down, and with eight of them so tightly packed together he knew they'd be overpowered. He could take one on without a problem, but unlike him, Prompto wasn't exactly a tank, and as deadly as bullets were it'd take a lot to even slow down one of those creatures; their thick skin kept the bullets from digging too deep. They'd be in more of a bind than when the royal circle fought the reptilian monsters. "Not today," Nebula speaking drew Gladiolus' mind away from the potential battle. "I have enough tusks to last me a while, so don't worry. Plus I'd never pick one while it's with its herd." She flashed the bodyguard a quick grin before continuing ahead, putting his mind at ease. His face must've been pretty obvious for her to say what she did. "We'll hunt first, then pick up herbs on the way back." She pat the satchel resting above her sword. "Easier to take care of the hardest task first."

Nebula shook her head. "Too far off. Our target for today is an easier monster..." Her voice trailed off as she looked ahead of them, and she motioned for the two men to crouch down. "There," she whispered. They followed her pointed finger to a group of antelope-like creatures, around fifteen of them, feeding on the various plants around them. None of them seemed to notice their presence from several yards away. After surveying the immediate area Nebula turned to face her hunting partners.
"I need three of them," she started. "They're weak, but quick to react. Some will flee, some will stay and fight. Surround them and aim for the frail-looking adults."

Gladiolus peered above the tall grass for a moment. "Prompto's a long-range expert. He won't have any problems." The copper-haired woman didn't catch on right until Prompto drew one of his guns and loaded bullets inside. Her eyes studied its shape and design, then shifted back to the targets, who were still none the wiser to their presence. "I'll head out to the farthest point," he told them, and crawled through the grass to get around to the other side of the herd. Watching him make his way to the designated point, Nebula briefly glanced back at the blond, who was busy sliding a magazine into his other firearm. Their eyes met for a quick second before she looked back to the bodyguard. The gunner placed his firearm back into its holster and followed her as she moved forward. She'd been the first person to see him armed since his departure from Lucis. Though few in number, most who saw the guns in his grasp cowered in fear. They were forbidden in Lucis, as far as she knew, and were the power behind Niflheim's takeover of the kingdom. Seeing her indifferent reaction was a bit of a shock; even Gladio had tried to disarm him the first time he showed it off. As strange as it was he shook the thought from his mind and took his place to complete the circle around the beasts.

As expected, Ignis and Noctis were back at the house long before the others. He unlocked the door and set the bags of groceries in his grasp on the table. Throughout the ride to the store and back, and even as he began to unpack the bags, the strategist had thought of how he was going to address Nebula about the letter from the night before. He'd discussed the matter with Gladiolus, who was using the hunt as an opportunity to get a better read on the medic. It was a delicate situation. For all they knew, the doctor could've been aware of their true identities from the moment of their arrival to her home. She could've recognized their faces, voices, or names. The Regalia - their high-end car - could've been the dead giveaway of who they were. Figuring out how much she knew was only half the battle; the second half would be her reaction. The more difficult part would only be solved by snooping - something Ignis really hated to do, especially to someone who'd done so much for them.

He'd told Noctis about his discovery on the way to the store. The prince was just as shocked as he'd been, though his level of panic wasn't as controlled as the strategist's. He wanted to be one-hundred percent sure of it, and was all for the snooping. "I know it's not your style," the raven-locked man told his friend as they put the groceries away, "but it's the only way to be sure of it. We'll be quick." Noctis didn't feel too good about it, either. Nebula had practically saved his life. In a sense, he owed her a debt. At the same time, not knowing whether she was an ally or enemy, or just a neutral party mixed up in an unfortunate situation, ate at him. "Hopefully you were just tired and seeing things last night." Ignis knew the prince was a bit shaken up from hearing that Cor's signature lay in the basement of the house. The Marshal didn't associate with just anyone, and rarely with people not involved with the royal family. And he was a man dedicated to his work, so the crazy idea of him having a secret lover wasn't a possibility.

"I'd hoped the same thing, originally," Ignis replied. "Unfortunately, my memory is too good to miss something like the Marshal's signature." They finished putting all the food away and, with a nearly regretful look, the strategist started for the basement door. He hesitated, his arm outstretched to open the door. After a deep breath Ignis turned the doorknob and pulled it open, treading down the stairs one at a time. Noctis stayed close behind him, looking over his shoulder every few seconds to listen for the front door suddenly opening. The strategist immediately went for the center table and found the paper from the night before. He turned on his flashlight, not wanting to risk Nebula seeing the basement light if she were close by, and his eyes scanned its contents, moving to the bottom of the page with haste. The prince stood next to him and glanced at it, seeing the seal of Lucis translucently printed at the center.

"Dammit..." It was authentic.
"And there's the signature," the green-eyed main pointed out, flicking his thumb against the corner of the paper. It was then he noticed a second signature, positioned on the left side of the page next to Cor's. "Hang on." Ignis brought the paper closer to inspect the second name. **Nebula Ardere.**

"...She signed it, too."

Noctis, even more on edge, snatched the paper from Ignis' grasp and read over the two signatures, then started from the top and skimmed down. The further he got, the more his brow furrowed. "If's...a contract," he finally told Ignis, handing the paper back to his friend. "She's got some sort of agreement with the Lucian army." Noctis leaned against the closest wall and crossed his arms, head hanging. Though not as deeply as his father, the Prince knew the Marshal well. He was strong-willed and dependable, and never hesitated to speak his mind if he felt Noctis or his comrades were potentially headed for the wrong path. Sure, he didn't know every little detail of how Cor ran the army or royal family guards, but he figured something along the lines of a secret contract would've been one of the things he'd be let in on. "I don't get it," he said after a moment of silence. "Why wouldn't he tell us something like this? I mean, not even Gladio?"

Ignis pushed his glasses up, letting out a sigh. "I wish I had the answer, Highness. But even I don't understand what would bring him to have an agreement like this under wraps." Perhaps it had something to do with the war between Lucis and Niflheim, but he couldn't be sure. At least they had the information they needed to confront her. "The only thing we can do now is talk to Nebula," he told Noctis as he neatly folded the contract into a small square, placing it in his blazer pocket. "Hopefully she's willing to inform us of the circumstances with her and the Marshal. And once Lucis is safe again-"

"Then we make Cor talk," Noctis finished, and headed up the stairs. Ignis didn't know whether he was serious or joking, though he had a sense the Prince meant it. The strategist took one last glance around the room and, when nothing else suspicious caught his eyes, he followed Noctis upstairs. One part of the answer sat in his pocket. Now he felt more comfortable about confronting the doctor.

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Gladiolus was taken aback. Nebula held herself well in battle, fighting almost as if she'd been professionally trained. The two of them worked together to round up the selected creatures and tire them down, while Prompto laid low and fired single shots to take them out quickly and painlessly. Nebula showed them how each piece of the animals would be used or sold off for money, and once she tied them up the bodyguard hauled them behind him as they made their way back to her house. Prompto helped collect plants and herbs once they reached the forest-covered area again. He treated it as another lesson, memorizing which plants were poisonous and which could be used as emergency medicine. They filled her satchel in no time and returned to the house a half hour later. Upon reaching the small patch of cleared land Nebula motioned for Gladiolus to follow her to the nearby shed, leaving the blond to continue inside on his own. He entered the house and instantly smelled one of Ignis' signature meals. "Is that your dry-aged tender roast stew I smell?" he asked, finding a chair to settle into.

"Hey, Prom," Noctis greeted him, giving him a pat on the back. "How was the hunt?"

The gunner leaned back in his chair. "Pretty interesting. Nebula sure knows her way around the land." The mention of her name brought an uncomfortable air over the Prince and tactician, which Prompto failed to notice. "She taught me about the local plants, too. Turns out some of them are pretty useful for-

"I hate to intrude," Ignis interrupted while he turned away from the cooking for a moment, "but we have a serious matter on our hands." Prompto raised an eyebrow, not understanding why his friends were in such a weird mood.
"You guys okay? You look a little...worried."

Before either of them could answer, Gladiolus and Nebula walked in. The latter wiped sweat from her forehead, smiling at the scent of the food. "I'd normally say you didn't have to," she started, "but your friends have already advised me against that." She approached him and drew in a deep breath above the pot. Ignis was quick to notice the blood and dirt stains on her clothing. "Smells delicious. I'll just change and wash up before we eat." Nebula backed away from the stove and headed toward the bathroom, leaving the four men alone in the kitchen.

Gladiolus took the seat next to Prompto and crossed his arms. "She's no pushover," he told Ignis. "If she had to, Nebula could keep up with any of us. She's definitely been trained at some point in her life." Ignis hummed in acknowledgement, making him more nervous about the plan than before.

Prompto drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Can someone please tell me what's going on? I'm out of the loop over here." The advisor pointed to his blazer, which was thrown over the adjacent chair. Noctis reached toward the pocket and dug inside, pulling out the folded paper and handing it to Prompto. "Okay..." Still confused, the blond carefully unfolded the paper and read it. It didn't take long for his jaw to drop. "Whoa...what's Cor's name doing on this?"

"We found it in her basement," the Prince began to explain. "Her signature's on there, too. It's a contract. They have some sort of agreement going on, but it's not detailed out on the paper. We can't decipher Cor's language." Prompto read it over and over again, finding nothing that told of the purpose of their agreement.

"He certainly knows how to be discreet."

"No kidding." Gladiolus gestured for the paper, which Prompto handed over. He glance down at the text and, as if on cue, Nebula returned to the kitchen, taking in the scene. The men were all apprehensive and tense, even Prompto.

Nebula stayed in the doorway. "Is something wrong?" she asked, her words slow to come out. It was easy to tell something was amiss. Her gaze fell on the item in Gladiolus' hands and widened, reluctant to look back at the four pairs waiting on her.

Having been the one to find it, Ignis felt it was his place to begin. He turned off the stove's flame and took the closest chair, folding his hands on his lap. He exhaled. "...How do you know Cor Leonis?"

"...Excuse me?"

"The paper I found last night." He motioned a hand toward the mentioned object, still in the bodyguard's grasp. "Though it's not my place to inspect other people's belongings, I couldn't help but to noticed the name on the bottom right-hand corner. And the seal on the paper is unmistakable. So how is it that you, a mere country doctor, are in contact with someone of such high status from the kingdom of Lucis?" He chose his words carefully. Ignis didn't want to sound cold; at the same time, he needed to get answers from her. He kept his tone calm, not wanting to scare her to the point she might do something crazy.

"And from the way it's worded," Gladiolus continued, "it looks like some sort of contract. And I've never heard of marshals taking their business outside of the kingdom they associated with, unless directly ordered by their superiors." He wouldn't admit it to his friends, but watching the doctor fight against the monsters sent chills down his spine. There had been a point where Nebula appeared to get herself cornered between two of the leaders of the pack, but when Gladiolus ran her way to assist her, she surprised him by knocking them aside with little injury to herself and the creatures. As Nebula shuffled in place, his eyes squinted, a little afraid of what she was capable of.
She was trapped. Nebula cursed herself for leaving something so important in plain sight, and again for having it found by an outsider. "...So you're from Lucis," she began after a minute. "I had a hunch." The reveal of her own suspicion put them on higher alert than before. Instinctively, Gladiolus surveyed her for weapons. He'd seen her place the falcata sword back in the shed, but his instincts as a bodyguard to the Prince of Lucis told him to be sure of it. Nebula fell silent again, her eyes darting left and right as she tried to stall herself from answering. Even Prompto, who'd been cheerful earlier, had a sense of distress on his shoulders. She wanted desperately to lift her hand and chew on the hem of her sleeve, the only coping mechanism she had, but she didn't want them to assume she was preparing to strike. Doing her best to keep calm she grabbed one of her hair tails and swirled it between her fingers to relax herself. It was a moment later she felt tranquil enough to answer them. "Alright, you've found me out. I've been in contact with Cor Leonis."

"How?" Noctis wasn't afraid to put a little force into his voice.

Her lips parted to speak. Instead, a low buzzing sound took over the room. The five of them became momentarily distracted from the situation and searched the room for the source of the noise. Prompto jumped from his seat and looked out the window. He immediately turned back to his friends, yelling, "It's an airship!"

"You've got to be kidding me!" the Prince yelled over the noise growing in volume.

Gladiolus joined the blond at the window and watched the airship land out in the field. They were at least forty yards away, but from the looks of it, they were headed toward the house. "They're on their way here!" He reached for the doorknob, ready to run out and deal with the soldiers headed their way, but Nebula held him back.

"Don't."

"He gave her a half-bewildered, half-annoyed glance. "Why not?"

"Please, just trust me on this!" To hear her ask for their trust after what they discovered irritated him. But something in her eyes told him to, something he couldn't ignore. As much as he didn't want to, Gladiolus stepped back from the door. "Go hide in the basement!" she told them.
Chapter Summary

As Nebula deals with the Imperial Army soldiers, the Lucis royal circle can only watch and listen from afar as the doctor takes matters into her own hands.

They were hesitant to abide by her wishes. After hearing her say she did, indeed, know Cor, the guys were more on edge than they'd been in a long time. But her voice pleaded with such emotion and worry that it struck a cord with the men, and as reluctant as they were to do it, they did as she wanted. The army was still far enough away where Ignis had sufficient time to hide the car under some brush, though as he laid the branches on top of the Regalia he knew he'd want to give it a good cleaning. But keeping their vehicle clean was the least of his concerns as he and his comrades were guided into her basement, the place where it began. Nebula made sure the four of them hid themselves under the staircase, just in case the Imperial Army wanted to 'take a look around' for whatever ridiculous reason they gave. "You've obviously encountered them on more than one occasion," she said to the guys as she moved them into place, "but you've all just recovered. I don't want to risk your safety against them again."

Ignis gave her a silent nod of understanding, and while he was still suspicious of her and the situation, Gladiolus agreed to not get involved. "You're telling us everything once they're gone," the bodyguard told her, his tone serving as a warning. "We're not leaving until we know everything about your involvement with Cor AND the Imperial Army." He had a hunch she knew something about the Niflheim soldiers headed their way. The medic looked away from him and shook her head, sealing their deal. "We'll stay put until you deem it's safe to come out."

"Alright," was her response before she turned away from the Lucis royal circle and walked back up the stairs, closing the door behind her.

They listened for footsteps, hearing several pairs approach the house. Noctis close his eyes and counted. "One, two, three... Only three of them." He glanced at Gladio in confusion. "If it were an ambush, there would've been more. At least a dozen." The more that happened, the less anything made sense. Not having answers was beginning to drive him nuts. When he was sure Nebula wouldn't be coming back to the basement, the prince crept toward the stairs again, and signaled for his friends to follow after him. He reminded them to stay silent, placing a finger to his lips. They practiced the same technique they used when first encountering the Behemoth, treating the people above ground in the same manner as their previous target.

Gladiolus took point. Using hand signals, he told the other men to remain low and move slowly around the staircase before ascending. The airship was still fairly audible from the outside, having Ignis guessing there was a ventilation system installed in the basement. It made sense; Nebula was working in fumes all the time, most of which could be toxic to the human body. In a sense it gave him relief; if it turned out Nebula was out to get them, he knew her possible plan of murder couldn't involve gaseous poisoning. Noctis and Prompto stayed at the back of the line, the latter not feeling good about their predicament. As he was ready to voice his concerns, they heard the front door open. Steadily the bodyguard pushed the basement door open, keeping his movement at a snail's pace as to not alarm anyone on the main floor. He only opened it a crack, just enough to see the entryway and some of the kitchen/dining area. Once he felt comfortable that they wouldn't be noticed, the men
listened in on the conversation.

"Can I help you?" Nebula asked, making it clear she didn't want the likes of them on her property. None of them could see her face, but her tone was a dead giveaway to her dislike of the Imperial Army.

Then there was a clearing of the throat, one that wasn't hers. "Good afternoon, miss. I am Commander Orson Lugos of the 45th company of the Imperial Army of Niflheim." Gladio's eyes widened. He turned to his comrades and pat his chest, mouthing, 'it's a live soldier'. In all their travels since escaping from Lucis after Niflheim's takeover, every soldier the royal circle fought past were nothing more than a band of soulless dolls, animated scraps of armor equipped with weapons. To hear one actually speaking was a rarity, even for the amount of times they'd been ambushed. "These are some members of my party, Privates Remus and Denholm--"

"I could care less about your introduction. What do you want?"

"If we may come in..." The medic was disinclined to invite them into the house. Her eyes studied the men in front of her, each armed with a firearm and short sword in their holsters. Their uniforms were quite detailed: eggshell and porcelain from head to toe, with red and gold designs embroidered along the left shoulder and down the side. The insignia of Niflheim: a fog-swept sun, was sewn above the heart area of their ensembles. They gave off a calm demeanor, but everyone in the house knew the deal. Niflheim was in control. They held the power in the world, and weren't afraid to show it off when they felt it was 'necessary'. Drawing a deep breath, Nebula stepped aside and extended her arm, allowing the soldiers to enter her home. As the trio walked on, Gladiolus gestured for his comrades to step back a bit, just in case one of the newcomers decided to snoop as Ignis had. He kept a close eye on them, not wanting to miss a second of whatever was about to transpire. The guys moved closer when Gladio signaled it was alright and continued watching.

Nebula remained standing as the Imperial Army soldiers sat down at the table. She looked uneasy around them, worse off than when being interrogated by her patients. They stayed in silence until the commander spoke up again. "The locals tell us you're the caretaker around these parts. You're the one people come to when they're sick or injured. And rumor has it the potions you make are outstanding." Orson crossed his legs, making himself more comfortable. "To put it simply: my men and I have come to you seeking medical treatment and supplies. Being the only three flesh-and-blood soldiers in our group, our small reserves have run out quicker than expected."

As she thought. Gently pushing toward the front of the pack, Prompto watched Nebula glower at the men, the lower soldiers removing their helmets. He wondered if she'd resist and demand they leave or comply, and found some solace when she chose the latter, the safer decision. While everyone would've preferred the first, Gladio especially knew taking on three armed soldiers by herself - without her sword - wasn't wise, and mentally applauded her for choosing the protected route. Nebula gave them a firm nod and left the men to retrieve her medical bag, swiftly returning before they could get a good look around. The soldier referred to as Denholm was the first to be examined, and Nebula silently treated the injury to his shoulder, not uttering more than a few words of command to remove his coat or raise his arm. As she wrapped gauze around his body, the commander spoke again. "There is another matter we must cover before our departure."

"And what would that be?" Nebula asked in a flat tone. "Just tell me how many potions you require and I can have them packed--"

"We're searching for someone," she was cut off by the one called Remus, who had pushed up his sleeves in preparation for his treatment. "Four fugitives, in fact. They're on the run from His Imperial Majesty Aldercapt, and all the companies are searching for them. Perhaps you've seen them." She
didn't answer him, only looking at the cuts on his forearms. "As a doctor, you're obligated to treat any patient whom walks through your door, be they criminal or royalty." The last word had Noctis on edge. Ignis gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, keeping the prince calm. "We're looking for a dark-colored vehicle, possibly a convertible, driven by four members of Lucis royalty...including His Highness, Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum."

Their jaws dropped behind the door. Their secret was out. Any moment now, as they saw her freeze in place, Nebula would sell them out and hand them over to the Imperial Army. The copper-haired woman took a moment to let the information sink in before continuing to treat Remus. "I've seen no such vehicle," she replied, keeping her gaze on the wounded arm. "And even if these 'fugitives of Niflheim' were under my care, even for one night, I couldn't tell you who they were. Doctor-patient confidentiality prohibits me from doing so." Taking the bottle of iodine, she intentionally poured out more than necessary onto the wound, bringing Remus to hiss in pain from the burn. She cleaned the cuts and wrapped his forearm in gauze, tying a knot to keep it secure.

"Very well." Orson pushed his hair out of his face and pointed to a single gash on his right cheek. While the medic pulled a chair next to him and started the examination, he glanced to the pot of food still on the stove. "It smells delicious," he commented, flinching slightly when Nebula pressed a cold cotton ball to his face.

"It won't be done for a while." The last thing she wanted was an Imperial soldier staying for dinner.

"Perhaps by the time you're finished-"

His voice hitched when she pinched his skin between her gloved fingers. "My apologies," she said to him in a stinging sweet tone, "I had to get the dirt out. But it doesn't require stitches." Nebula applied an opaque white ointment to the wound before removing her gloves. "I recommend letting your puppets do the fighting for the next few hours so the wounds can heal." She stood up from her chair. "Now, about the potions..." She took a step toward the basement door, causing the men hiding to retreat to the ground.

"One other thing." Nebula stopped in her tracks and looked over her shoulder to Orson and his men. "I failed to mention before that we're searching for a fifth person, though to call this person a fugitive would be an understatement." Orson stood up, folding his arms behind his back. "There are rumors of Lamia having passed through this area not too long ago. Have you seen her?" She remained still, as did the royal circle. They exchanged looks with one another, hoping someone in their group would know who this 'Lamia' was. The honor of knowing fell on Ignis, who felt a cold sweat develop on the back of his neck just from the mention of the name. After a moment Nebula shook her head, telling them she had no answers. Orson tipped his head back. "Two dozen will do just fine, miss."

Nebula nodded and opened the basement door, rushing to close it and get downstairs. As she busied herself with folding up a box, Prompto slowly made his way towards her and offered her a helping hand. She silently thanked him for the help by tapping the back of her hand to his, and with a deep breath, returned to the main level with the order. "Two dozen general potions," she recited the order, handing the box to Remus. He and Denholm counted its contents and bowed their head to the commander, saying she'd given exactly what they requested.

Orson gave her a graceful bow. "Thank you for your cooperation."

She couldn't wait to get them out of there, but at the same time, felt they owed her for wasting her time. She knew one of the three was an on-hand healer, so aside from restocking their potions, the reason for their visit was more out of recon than anything. The soldiers prepared themselves to leave
and headed to the front door. Nebula, not caring any longer, sighed and crossed her arms. "Funny. I was going to ask how the Imperial Army would pay for my medical services."

The men stopped in their tracks. Orson's stance tensed. "My sincerest apologies, Doctor." In a quick single spin, the commander was facing her again. His sword drawn, the blade slashed a long line across her left thigh, stretching from the knee halfway up. Orson sheathed his sword and asked, "Will that cover the tab?" Nebula bit hard on her bottom lip. She cursed herself for saying what she did and hesitantly nodded. Orson grinned and gave her one last bow before he and his men departed, slamming the door on their way out. She waited a few minutes, watching them leave through the window, and only relaxed herself when the army was far off.

Immediately her knee gave out. She reached for anything nearby to grab and keep her standing, and was taken aback when it was Prompto she grasped, pulling on a handful of his shirt and vest to stay on her feet. Looking over his shoulder, she saw Noctis, Ignis and Gladiolus emerge from the basement. "...They're not coming back," she finally said.

"Are you okay?" Prompto asked as he helped her into one of the chairs. Propping her leg up on another, he took a look at the wound the Imperial Army left her with. "Oh, man..."

"Could've been worse." She couldn't hide how badly it stung. Nebula leaned her head back and closed her eyes, and focused on evening out her breathing. A cold sensation suddenly hit her thigh and her eyes flashed open to see what was going on, finding the blond already treating the wound. Noticing his friends' stunned reaction at his quick care, the gunner motioned his head toward Nebula. "She taught me while you guys were asleep last night. Now I'll be able to help out more."

Noctis gave him a pat on the back. "Nice going." Prompto was quick to properly treat the wound, using the technique the grey-eyed woman taught him. In less than five minutes he was done, wrapping a bandage around her leg.

The pained look on her face, which had relaxed when the gunner was treating her, returned at the realization she still owed the four of them an explanation. Upon that dawned another realization: though it was brief, the description of the car the Imperial army was searching for matched the one the quartet had driven in. And the prince's name sounded an awful lot like... Her eyes widened, a high-pitched noise escaping her lips. Nebula jumped out of the chair and fell to her good knee, and she bowed before Noctis. "Your...Your Highness... I had no idea..."

So their secret really was out. Her bowing made him feel so awkward. Scratching the back of his head, Noctis groaned and rolled his eyes. "Please, that's not necessary. Just refer to me by name. And no bowing." Nebula slowly rose to her feet, using Prompto's arm as leverage, and returned to her chair. Sitting next to her, Noctis stretched his arms behind his head. "Nice comment you made to them, by the way."

"Oh, thank you..." Now she felt awkward. She should've known they were high class from the moment she first laid eyes on the men. "Now I really owe you an explanation, huh?"

Gladiolus could read her anxiety like Ignis read a book. "Now you know why we need you to tell us everything. This is a life-or-death situation for us, especially Noct." He leaned his arms against the table. "I'm sure you know our current situation."

"Not a lot, no. I'm aware of Insomnia being destroyed by invading airships, and the royals disappearing, but not much else."

Ignis, having turned off the fire on the stove, joined them at the table. "Iedolas Aldercapt, the emperor of Niflheim, has captured Lucis' crystal. The whereabouts of His Majesty King Regis and
the Oracle Lunafreya Fleuret are unknown even to us at this time, and the four of us are on the run from the Imperial Army." The information quickly sank into her mind. Ignis dug in his blazer pocket and fished out the contract again, unfolding it and placing it at the center of the table. Nebula stared at it hard.

"...Nine months ago, long before Niflheim's invasion of Lucis," she started, resting her hands in her lap, "I was visited by your Marshal, Cor Leonis. Had I known just who he was when he arrived I would've been stunned." Nebula met their gazes. "He came to me in search of aid for his kingdom. He told me of the war between Lucis and Niflheim, how the enemy was cutting off all their supply routes." Her glance darted momentarily from Noctis' to the window, watching the sun draw close to the horizon, then back to the prince. "Mister Leonis was informed of my status as a potions crafter, and upon seeing the quality of my potions, he proposed a deal with me. To keep it under wraps, we wrote up a generalized contract that simply stated I worked under him. No details were to be disclosed in its contents. He called it 'The Shadow Agreement'."

The four men's stares were fixed in place, each of them absorbing every word the medic spoke. "I agreed to become a primary potions and antidotes provider for the Lucis royal army." Four pairs of eyes widened. "Like the contract's name, the operation was to remain as discreet as possible. Packages would be sent out weekly from an undisclosed location to the Crown City, and I would receive pay substantial enough to let me live peacefully in the countryside." Nebula looked down at her hands. "I'm quite surprised he kept this from you."

"I'm not," Gladiolus replied. "The Marshal's a smart guy. He trusts us, but he probably wanted this contract safeguarded from any soldiers possibly hunting us down."

Prompto's head perked up. "There's one thing I'm not understanding, though. If you're the supplier for Lucis, why not just live in the Crown City? Transporting the product would be like nothing."

Noctis shook his head. "Had she lived there when the invasion began, the Imperial Army surely would've seized control of the exports. Cor and the army would've been in a worse position."

"Exactly. Something about him told me he never trusted Emperor Aldercapt or Niflheim, even long before the conflict began. I assumed the secret sourcing was a fail-safe for Lucis, just in case the invasion actually went through. And like I explained to Ignis yesterday, the mass-produced ones tend to be only 85 percent effective, and the quality isn't always good." Nebula felt a great weight lift off her shoulders. The fear their glares gave off moments before the army showed up was long gone, as were the expressions themselves.

"And now we understand why you hid us," Ignis commented. "Though I'm sure it was brought on more because of my discovery of the contract." Nebula's shoulders relaxed.

"Since I'm supposed to be no more than a country doctor, Mister Leonis understood that soldiers from the Imperial Army would possibly spring up here at any moment to seek treatment or purchase elixirs. He said it was alright for me to do so as if nothing had changed." A huff escaped her lips. "I know it's wrong for me to say this, but I wish I didn't have to take care of any of those daemons that walked through my door." Her stare moved back to the window. The sun was nearly touching the horizon line.

The others caught wind of the time that had passed. "Can't believe time flew like that," Noctis stated. "Guess it's too late to head out now."

Ignis pinched between his brows. "Oh, dear..." He looked up at Nebula, who was already giving him the same stare from the night before. "Are you sure?"
"Of course. What kind of caretaker would I be to send you off so late?" She stood up and opened a cabinet above the sink. "Plus you already cooked such a nice meal for us, we can't let it go cold."

The remainder of the evening was spent in a better atmosphere, with smiles exchanged all around the table with good food in the middle. Gladiolus saved Prompto from nearly choking again, complaining that he wouldn't be able to last through survival training with an appetite that untamed. Nebula learned the jobs of the prince's entourage; the gunner came up with another cover for himself, bestowing the title of 'firearms expert' onto his role in the Lucis royal circle. Nebula didn't seem to remember that firearms were illegal in the kingdom, sealing the fabrication tight. As dinner drew to a close, Noctis insisted on helping to clear the table, much to Nebula's surprise. He and Ignis took care of washing the dishes while Gladiolus turned in early for the night, giving the medic a moment to relax. She decided to spend some time outside and watch the stars from the nearby clearing, and Prompto, having no household duties to attend to, joined her. They settled on a flower and weed-free patch of grass near the street and kept their eyes on the clear sky. "So how long have you lived out here?" Prompto suddenly asked.

"Around five years," Nebula replied, bringing her knees to her chest. "I've lost count."

"Not originally from Duscae?" She leaned her chin on her knees when he asked and shook her head. "Can I ask where, then?"

"...You won't like the answer."

The blond gave her a warm smile. "Aw, it can't be that bad." Turning to look at her, Nebula found herself almost hypnotized by the cerulean gaze staring into her steel one. Her breath caught in her throat and she coughed a little, pulling her eyes from him. She could feel her face heating up.

He wasn't going to let up. That, and making her brain feel like mashed potatoes, were his quirks. She wondered if he did this to other women. Nebula sat up straight and faced him again, her face losing its relaxation.

"I'm from Niflheim."
Backup Plan

Chapter Summary

With everything now in the open, the tensions between Nebula and the Lucis royal circle have calmed. But little do they know that their meeting wasn't by pure coincidence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I wonder if my father knew," Noctis speculated as he handed Ignis the last of the dirty dishes. He had to have known; the king trusted Cor with his life, yes, but knowledge of an outsider joining their ranks wasn't something to keep from the ruler of Lucis. Though all the details had been laid out before him, even as his fingers skimmed over the contract itself, a small part of the Prince still found it difficult to believe that Nebula Ardere, the innocent country doctor who saved his life, was playing such a role for his kingdom. Her disposition didn't read 'Silent Partner of Lucis'. Perhaps that was what drew Cor to her. She had a quiet, calm demeanor, surprisingly excellent battle skills, and was capable of keeping secrets in high-pressure situations, as she'd proved when dealing with the Nifeli soldiers. And her potions, Noctis was told, were of the highest quality. Collectively, all the traits worked to the advantage of Lucis, making Nebula a great ally. Of course King Regis would've been informed of her. "But...she only knew of my identity. Nebula didn't recognize the three of you."

Ignis turned the faucet knob, shutting off the water. "Knowing the Marshal, he would've only disclosed the vital information. The identities of myself, Prompto and Gladiolus weren't needed for this task." For a moment Noctis thought he heard a hint of jealousy in the green-eyed man's voice, but he was sure it was all in his head. "Nevertheless, I'd say our luck has gone up since we met Nebula. Cor certainly knows how to select allies." He placed the remaining bowl in the cabinet above.

The prince nodded. "That's true. Only problem is..." The younger man crossed his arms and leaned back against the counter. "There's no way for her to send shipments to Insomnia anymore. The place is crawling with Niflheim soldiers." Neither of them had thought about it until the Shadow Agreement came to light. Any imports for Lucis would be intercepted by Iedolas' army, and if deemed suspicious or useful, they'd use the return address to track down the sender. If Nebula had put one on any packages... And then there was the possibility of the royal circle running into a situation similar to the day before. Thinking about it all was starting to give Noctis a headache.

"Maybe she has some kind of plan for such a circumstance," his advisor replied. "I'm positive that Cor wouldn't have left her without instructions to follow if communication with Lucis suddenly ceased." Of course, Cor wasn't so stupid as to not have a backup plan in place for someone so important to the cause. Noctis rolled his eyes, feeling inane for underestimating the leader of his military command. "Shall I put up a pot of tea for us?" Ignis offered.

"Please do." Tea sounded soothing after nearly being discovered by the Niflheim army. While Ignis readied a kettle of water to boil, Noctis took a moment for himself and sat at the table. He assumed it would be the last time they would be able to rest for a while, and he knew better than to waste it.
Prompto's eyes were wide. "You're from..." Several minutes of silence had passed, and it still didn't completely sink in. He could only stare at her and swallow, trying to force the lump in his throat to loosen. Her expression remained impassive at his reaction. After another moment, the gunner smiled and began to chuckle. "That's real funny. For a second there, you had me believing you actually came from Niflheim. You know, the empire that invaded Lucis and stole its crystal?" His sardonic laugh continued as he watched Nebula, waiting for her to loosen up and admit it was all a big joke. But the doctor looked at him with the same steel gaze, the gray swirls becoming dejected and ashamed. His chuckle quickly died. "...So you're really from there, huh?"

She hesitated her nod. "I wouldn't lie to anyone associated with the Prince of Lucis," was her response. "You're looking at a byproduct of a totalitarian nation." Nebula slumped her head, burying her face into her knees. A sigh, heavy in its release, could easily be heard. "It's not something I'm particularly proud of. If I had it my way, I would've been born a citizen of Lucis. Maybe even Accordo, or Virent. Maybe then, I may have been able to help you out during the invasion-"

"That's not something anyone could've predicted," he interrupted her. Having listened to Ignis give the same speech to Noctis over and over again, it was simple for Prompto to reassure her. "Look, Niflheim's invasion was awful. A total shitstorm. And as much as no one wanted it to happen, unfortunately, it did." He stood up and started to walk towards the distressed medic. "But that's not something you should go blaming yourself for." Prompto stopped next to Nebula and crouched to her level. "You defected, right?" Raising her head, she nodded. "Then that's all we need to know."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you really think His Highn-" Nebula stopped herself. "...Noctis will just accept my heritage without so much as an interrogation? I've heard rumours of the crystal's powers. I'm pretty sure he won't hesitate to cleave my head off as atonement for Niflheim's crimes." Her fingers gripped the fabric of her pants.

Prompto shook his head. "Nebula, come on. Give him more credit. He wouldn't just off someone who saved his life twenty-four hours ago." He rested one hand on his thigh and offered her the other. "I've known him for years. Trust me when I say he'll understand."

"...Alright." Uncertainty held her for only a moment as she reached for Prompto's hand, and they helped each other stand. Though his words alleviated her immediate concern, she didn't expect the prince to welcome her with open arms. Many who heard the names Niflheim or Iedolas Aldercapt either ran or attacked in fear. Nebula hoped the blond's interpretation of his friend was true enough that she'd at least be able to live for another day. She crossed her fingers and turned with Prompto to go inside.

When they opened the door, the creaking caught the attention of everyone inside. Ignis jumped in his seat, Noctis perked his head up from his cup of tea, and Gladiolus - who had rejoined the group - leaned back in his chair. The silence was awkward enough, each second that ticked by eating at her conscience. It was only after the strategist cleared his throat that Nebula realized her hand was still locked with Prompto's. She immediately separated from him and tugged at her sleeve, her eyes hitting the floor. "Gentlemen," she started, "I, uh..." Nebula swallowed hard. "I think we have some things to discuss."

Gladiolus' sight shifted between Nebula and Prompto, raising an eyebrow when he noticed how agitated the former had become. "Okay." He motioned his chin to Noctis, who pushed his chair over to make room for them. "I s'pose you're right, Nebula. There's a lot we need to talk about." The knot in her throat moved down and settled itself in her stomach. "We talked about a few things while you two were outside, and since you're now affiliated with Lucis, it wouldn't feel right keeping you out of the loop." The tension in her shoulders relaxed to a small degree. The bodyguard rested his chin atop his folded hands and turned to his right, where Ignis sat.
"The three of us were discussing plans that Marshal Leonis left in case something happened where we couldn't return to Lucis," he began. "For us, we're to seek out assistance from our allies in Tenebrae. The royal family there will help us formulate a plan to take back our kingdom. Unfortunately with the Oracle missing, that plan has been foiled." He paused to let her absorb the information, then continued when she signaled that she was ready. "Did the Marshal leave an emergency plan for you? Perhaps a specified drop-off point only he would know of?"

"Yes, he did. Mister Leonis gave me instructions shortly after the announcement of Lucis and Niflheim's treaty was made." Nebula excused herself from the table and moved to the basement door. She felt the panels on the door and halted at the one in the top left-hand corner, then dug her nails in between the boards. The panel popped off and she reached inside the door, retrieving a sealed Manila envelope. "I hid this in case any Niflheim soldiers decided to ransack the place." Joining the quartet again, Nebula broke the seal on the package and removed its contents. "Let's see..." A single document, a folded worn-down map, a hotel key card, and a smaller white envelope made up its contents. Noctis and Gladiolus unfolded the map and spread it across the table while Nebula scanned the lone paper, Ignis and Prompto reading over her shoulders. "I've come to heal the sleeping lion's heart..." Her brows furrowed as she read the sentence again, along with the one underneath. "10-7 at dusk, where the locals sing of sunlight." She started chewing on her lower lip while attempting to decipher the code. "I have no idea what this means.

Noctis scratched his head. "Yeah, that's Cor for you. Always making crazy puzzles for us to crack." Looking over the map again, it hit him. The prince pointed to an area in the southern region of the continent. "Lestallum, the place we used for our cover story. It's a popular vacation spot, and the locals are always throwing parties and singing about something." Nebula handed him a marker she'd dug out of her junk drawer and he drew a circle around the city. "I've been there a few times, and there's only one part of town where they sing about the sun." His voice ceased, and the medic noticed how he almost seemed reluctant to finish. "...What does the rest of it say?"

She continued reading the document. "Contact will approach and ask, 'What brings the shadow into the blinding light?' Respond appropriately and contact will be confirmed. For precautionary measures, do not remove the ring..." Nebula froze, squinting at the paper.

"What's wrong?" Prompto asked. Instead of replying, she took the smaller white envelope from his grasp and shook it, listening to the things inside rustle around. Something didn't sound right. The envelope was torn open. The first thing the gunner saw was the stack of bills inside. "Whoa!" Uninterested in the money at the moment, Nebula handed him the stack to count and turned the envelope upside down. A metal object fell out and clanked against the table surface. It was a ring, made from sleek and polished platinum, with a trio of diamonds surrounded by smaller flecks of amethyst. The shimmering gems captured the attention of all five of them. Prompto was lost for words, only able to utter a high-pitched screech in response to the sight before him.

"Wow..." Nebula coughed. "I...I'm not sure what your Marshal's plan is, but..." She slumped in her chair, handing the ring and instructions to Ignis as she struggled to catch her breath.

Taking in all the evidence, Gladiolus crossed his arms and smirked, his head shaking in disbelief. "I thought he was crazy before, but... Damn, Cor." Everyone seemed to know where the plan was headed; however, only the bodyguard had the guts to say it. "I wonder who he picked to play your fiancé."

Fiancé. The word overwhelmed her. Even Ignis, as calm as he managed to stay in even the most dangerous situations, didn't know how to react. His focus returned to the instructions. "According to this, the lucky man is you, Gladiolus." The doctor felt blood rush to her face.
Gladiolus, as shocked as he was with the news, did his best to keep his cool. He shrugged at the reading of his name. "Frankly, I'm only surprised that he predicted we'd meet. Must've thought we wouldn't be able to handle ourselves out in the country," he commented. "Did he mention how long he'd be staying in Lestallum?"

"Not a word. We'll just have to assume he's there now." Ignis' glance fell on Nebula, who was still trying to collect her emotions. "Believe it or not, this isn't the craziest thing he's done. At least you'll be well protected on the way there."

She drew in a breath, regaining her composure. "This won't delay your meeting with the Tenebraen royal family, will it? You've already sidetracked your mission by two days." Nebula looked at the ring in Ignis' grasp, then to Prompto on her right, who handed her the stack of bills. "I can just use this to find transportation there."

"No can do," Noctis told her. "Once Cor gives an order, we have to abide by it. It's kind of an unwritten law."

"Besides," Prompto added, "we can't let you go alone knowing you might be followed. You had our backs twice already. Now it's time we had yours."

In all the excitement and embarrassment, Nebula had nearly forgotten about the main reason she'd wanted to speak with them. Prompto's encouraging words reminded her. The memory hit her hard and the medic became uncomfortable again. "Before we do this," she started, "there's something you all need to know." Nebula laid her hands on top of the map, gradually inching the left toward the western region of the continent. "You need to know where I'm from." She came to a standstill over the westernmost country and pointed to its name. Niflheim. The men held their tongues when she continued. "I left Niflheim five years ago, long before the invasion of Lucis was even thought of. I don't affiliate myself with them. I swear to you, my allegiance is with Lucis." Sweat rolled down the side of her neck and under the collar of her purple bolero as she awaited the group's response. Their expressions unreadable, the medic couldn't tell what they could possibly be thinking, and every taciturn second that ticked by constricted her throat.

Finally, Noctis spoke up. "If you've defected from Niflheim, then your country of origin doesn't matter. The only thing that does is you working for the cause you believe in." Prompto grinned. "And if Cor picked you, well, we've gotta trust his intuition." Nebula stared at the Prince, amazed that he didn't even consider interrogating her first. Her shoulders relaxed and she breathed a sigh of relief. A small smiled worked its way onto her face, widening when the Prince offered his hand to her. "As an ally of Lucis, I believe more proper introductions are in order."

"Certainly not for the future king of Lucis," she replied, and took his hand into her grasp. "Nebula Ardere, medic and elixir supplier for the Lucian army." Any tension that was left in her loosened as she shook hands with the other men.

"Ignis Scientia, royal advisor to the future king."

"Prompto Argentum, firearms expert of Lucis."

"Gladiolus Amicitia, Noct's bodyguard. And now... your fiancé. Don't worry, I don't bite." Her breath hitched at the word, which the guys noticed and couldn't help laughing at. She wasn't surprised to learn that he was the bodyguard of the group; his physique perfectly matched the job description. She figured that was why the Marshal chose him for the job.

It was only after the introductions were finished that the quintet realized how much later it had gotten. The sun had set long ago, replaced by the moon and many stars glowing out the window.
"Looks like we'll be leaving in the morning," Nebula said to them. "How long is the drive from here to Lestallum?"

"About a three hour trip," Ignis replied. "And that's only if nothing stops us on the way."

Prompto eyed the map, looking for possible routes they could use and still be hidden in. "What about this road?" He suggested, pointing to a barely visible curved line on the map. It was far from a main road. The line cut through the Mistwood, yet lay hidden under the cover of the forest's dense population of trees. "Unless they've got some kind of heat-sensing radar, I doubt they'll find us on that road."

Ignis looked over the road's path. It connected to the main highway, only after trekking through the Duscaen landscape. "That works. And it won't add much time to the drive there." They were set.

"We can leave at 9AM tomorrow," Nebula told them. "I just need to downsize the shipment so it can fit into suitcases." She looked up at them. "You guys mind each taking a suitcase? I won't be able to fit everything into one." Nods and thumbs-ups were directed at her, and she headed toward the basement door. "You should head to sleep. I'm going to divide the stuff before I nod off. See you in the morning." The doctor pulled open the door and walked downstairs, switching on the basement light.

Everyone was exhausted. Secrets, diverting plans, cataclysmic encounters and near-death scares were enough to even drain Gladiolus' energy. None of them hesitated to retreat to their room and turn in for the night, especially Noctis.

Ignis removed his glasses and set them on the nearby nightstand. As he readied himself to lay down, he saw Prompto approach him. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Go right ahead."

"Earlier today, when we were hiding in the basement, one of those soldiers mentioned a name that I haven't been able to get off of my mind, and I don't know why I'm stuck on it. Do you know anything about that Lamia they mentioned?"

Part of him had hoped they'd forgotten about that portion of the soldier's speech. Ignis ran a hand through his hair. "Unfortunately, yes," he replied. He wished the others were still awake to hear his story; this was one he didn't want to repeat.

"From the rumors I've gathered, Lamia is a killer, a witch from Niflheim. She was named for the words she speaks to each of her victims shortly before their deaths." Ignis hunched over, his face stern. "Rumor has it that she's an agent of Etro herself, selected to deal judgement onto those whose time is up. It's said that Etro bestowed unbelievable magic upon Lamia, allowing her to foresee one's death and to carry it out. Her ability to see death is far worse than Noctis'. From what I've heard, she's claimed over thirty victims in Niflheim, but she hasn't struck anywhere else."

A chill went down the blond's spine. "W-what does she look like?"

Ignis shook his head. "The rumors give her many features, but only one of them is consistent." He drew in a breath. "Her eyes, like the Prince, change color when she sees death. But hers go black. They're empty holes devoid of light or life, only seeing blood and suffering, and they never waver."

The gunner regretted asking Ignis about the Lamia woman. Every time he closed his eyes, all Prompto could see was the murderous gaze of the witch as she reached a hand to his neck with the desire to snap it. He sat up in his bed, listening to Gladiolus snore on the other side of the room.
Usually the sound of a freight train leaving the man's throat lulled him to sleep, much like the sound of traffic in the streets of Lucis did, but not that night. He had too much on his mind. Grunting, Prompto threw the covers off his body and stood up, suddenly feeling thirsty. He figured a glass of water and the sounds of crickets would soothe his frazzled mind, and left the room.

In the kitchen, Prompto sat beside the window, glass of water in hand. The crickets were doing their job as their chirping reduced the headache pounding in his skull. He chugged the rest of the water and placed the glass in the sink. A yawn escaped his lips, and he finally felt relaxed enough to try sleeping. As he rounded the corner past the refrigerator, a creaking stopped him in his tracks. Prompto looked over his shoulder and saw the basement door fly open, then heard more creaks follow. One, two, three, four... Nebula returning from sorting the shipment, he figured. But something was weird. The basement light was off.

The creaking grew louder. Prompto turned around to face the direction of the basement door and saw a shorter figure exit the stairwell. He was right. "You almost scared me, Nebula," he whispered to her. She didn't reply. "Hey, you okay?" Still no response "Nebula?" He reached a hand out to her.

The woman spun around, so fast that he almost didn't notice, and the room suddenly felt so much colder. What was this pain he felt? Looking down at his hand, he noticed a line of red cut across his palm. His gaze move to her hand, where a knife sat in her grasp, red liquid decorating the tip of the blade. He gulped as he shifted his focus to her face, and the breath he drew in caught in his throat.

Her eyes were black.

Chapter End Notes

I am SOOOOO sorry for not updating! Life got in the way, and when everything had settled my computer broke. So I'm (barely) getting by with writing out chapters on my PS Vita. I'll be using it until further notice, so chapters will definitely be scarce.
Chapter Summary

Nebula and the Lucis quartet set out on their joint mission in Lestallum. Sounds like a piece of cake, until they hear news that can change the outcome of their backup plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He wanted to scream. Prompto shuddered, his gaze switching between his bloodied palm and the obsidian irises that glared back at him. The breath that still sat in his throat was forced inward with a swallow, and he feared it would be his last. He looked back at his hand. How deep had she cut into him? Judging by the pain that stung through the muscle and numbed his fingers, it was definitely more than a surface wound. Non-dominant hand or not didn't matter; the pain didn't compare to the fear that consumed his entire being. His mouth went dry, his uninjured palm drenched with sweat, and the cold air surrounding them left the gunner petrified. It was her. Nebula Ardere was Lamia, the witch whom Ignis spoke of, quietly lying in wait for her victims to approach. Was the whole doctor facade just a ruse to lure unsuspecting people into the security of her home, where she could kill and dispose of them without the few passers by noticing the screams or the lingering stench of blood? Prompto needed to warn his friends. The blond sucked in as much oxygen as his lungs could take and opened his mouth, prepared to scream for his life.

"Prompto!" Nebula's voice, calling to him in the worried tone he couldn't mistake, broke through and yanked him free from the reigns of horror. The medic set her knife down on the table and took his injured hand into her grasp. "I'm so sorry, Prompto," she told him in a panicked whisper. "I didn't hear you coming in. Are you alright?" She pulled out the nearest chair and escorted Prompto to it, then ran to turn on the kitchen light and grab her first aid kit. Frequent apologies spilled from her lips while she cleaned the blood from his skin and prepared a cotton ball with iodine, pressing it to the open wound. Prompto hissed at the slight burn of contact, the rust-colored solution seeping in between the severed flaps of muscle in his hand. "I'm very sorry," she said again. "I should've had the light on." His focus deviated from her treatment of his wound to her face. Had he been seeing things in his sleep deprived state? The display he saw before was exactly as Ignis had described: soulless voids cast in onyx that struck terror into those who dared to look into them, paired with pursed lips and a stoic complexion that, if tested, wouldn't hesitate to destroy anything in its path. But that wasn't the woman who sat across from him, frantic in the medical care of his wound, chewing on her lower lip when she wasn't apologizing for the sixtieth time for cutting into his flesh. And her eyes reflected not the blackness of an abyss, but the apprehensive titanium gaze that, just hours earlier, confessed the guilt on her conscience of being born a Niflheim citizen. The woman before him was no witch, no Lamia. She was but a humble country doctor.

Nebula finished treating his wound and moved on to bandaging him. She wrapped the gauze around his palm, remaining silent each time the roll crossed over the wound. With his hand bandaged, Prompto's agitated state fully relaxed. Pain aside, he felt fine again, only a little tired. A yawn escaped his lips. It was late, probably later than the amount of time he spent awake a day past, and the lack of sleep had begun to get to him. The blond glanced down at his hand again, still feeling the blade's tip cut a line across his palm. Though it appeared deep, it was more of a superficial scratch than a nerve-severing wound; the pain exaggerated the severity. Its scar would be light, not much of
a bother to him. Without looking up, he knew she was getting ready to deliver yet another apology, and he raised his good hand. "Don't. It was an accident."

"I still should've-" He cut her off by laying his injured left hand on top of hers, curled together and resting on the tabletop.

"You don't need to apologize again. It's alright, really. See?" The gunner gently tightened his palm around her fingers, suppressing the hiss trying to force itself out. He repeated the motion until the crease in her eyebrows calmed. "Thanks for patching me up."

Nebula nodded. "It was the least I could do. Now..." The medic rose from her seat. "We should get as much sleep as possible. Have to be up early for the trip." She stretched her arms over her head as she made her way to the adjacent hallway. She paused under the door frame. "Sorry."

"Nebula-"

"I mean for scaring you," she finished. "I turned around and you looked like you saw a ghost." It was then she noticed the dark circles under Prompto's eyes, adding weight to the normally vibrant young blond. "Sleep. Doctor's orders." A smile managed to find a way onto her face, also exhausted from the trip's preparations. Giving him one last nod, Nebula retreated down the hall and into her room.

Prompto watched her leave, not moving until she shut the door. "Night," he whispered to her moments before the door closed, and wondered if she'd heard him or not. Once she was gone, the gunner was quick to slap himself against the forehead. "I'm such an idiot," he groaned. Prompto couldn't believe that even for a second, he suspected Nebula of being the fabled witch. The black he'd seen in her eyes was caused by the room being dark, he assumed. As for her not hearing him when he called her name, he'd been whispering, for Etro's sake. Of course she wouldn't hear him. And she looked exhausted. Even if she had heard him, there was very little chance of her understanding his words. To think, if he had yelled the witch's name loud enough for his comrades to hear... Who knows what would've transpired. Prompto let out a second, teary yawn, feeling the time get to him. As he started walking back to his room, the blond pledged to himself that he would never ask anyone for legends or ghost stories again, especially not Ignis. He was too good at telling them.

Simply amazing. That was how Nebula described Ignis' organizational skills when he had to load five suitcases and two boxes full of potions, antidotes and elixirs into the trunk of the Regalia. Not even Gladiolus thought he could pull off rearranging their current possessions to make room for all the extra cargo, but the strategist proved him wrong after only twenty minutes. "There's no secret to strategic organizing," he commented afterward. "Just trial and error." He looked proud of himself, until Noctis gave him up and told Nebula about the hundreds of puzzle games Ignis would play on his phone from time to time. The strategist couldn't keep his cool and huffed at the prince, muttering a sarcastic thank you for ratting him out.

Breakfast was kept short as everyone stuck to leftovers from the past two nights' dinners, and a portion was packed for the road ahead. Nebula made the men promise to split it equally, though the bodyguard had to promise twice more before she was convinced. When asked about her own provisions, the medic stuck to bringing a small duffle bag with three days' worth of clothes, her first aid kit, toiletries, money and the instructions Cor left for her, telling Ignis she'd be fine carrying it on her lap. She gave Ignis a few of the bills to cover gas if they needed - which she was sure would happen with the extra weight in the car. The quintet was set to leave when Nebula suddenly remembered something and returned inside the house, rushing to her room. She stared down at the ring on her nightstand, the ring Cor had slipped into the emergency package. It still bothered her a bit. She wasn't built for covert operations such as this. But the Marshal seemed to have some kind of
faith in her, and with the Lucians by her side, she certainly felt safer. Still, posing as Gladiolus' fiancé? That was a bit absurd. She didn't want to delay her comrades any longer. Inhaling a fresh breath and quickly letting it out, she took the ring and slid it onto the fourth finger of her left hand.

She rejoined the men immediately and locked up the house, posting a sign on the front door that stated she was 'out on vacation' and would return within the week. "Ready," Nebula announced after settling in the front passenger's seat - which Prompto graciously gave up - and clicked her seatbelt into the lock. Ignis drove on the dirt path next to her house and turned left onto the hidden road. Prompto, nestled between Noctis and Gladiolus, directed the driver down the shadow-enveloped roadway.

"We should be good now," the blond chimed after fifteen minutes of navigation led to a more recognizable street. Out on the open road again, Ignis tuned the radio until he found a news station and raised the volume a few decibels. Noctis settled into his corner of the car, nesting his head against the firm cushion until he found a comfortable position, and closed his eyes. Nebula noticed the prince's actions through the side view mirror and shook her head, still surprised at the possible narcolepsy his friends had grown so fond of. Everyone in the car was quiet, even Promoto. Perhaps it wasn't the right time to ask...

She needed to know. Nebula's lips parted to speak, to ask them what happened during the Niflheim invasion, but the sudden report looming over the radio airwaves grabbed hers and the men's attention. The man's voice was solemn. "...nce again, it has just been announced that the bodies of His Majesty, King Regis Lucis Caelum, and that of his son, His Highness Prince Noctis, were found inside the Lucian royal palace earlier this morning by Niflheim soldiers. The body of Tenebrae native Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret was also discovered in the palace, in the western sector near the crystal's former location." The reporter choked. "No official word has been given, but it is believed that His Majesty, His Highness and Her Highness are dea-"

Ignis turned off the radio. A quick glance through the rearview mirror told him that Noctis had heard every word of the report. "No..." He shook his head, fists clenching on his lap. "They can't be... I would've-"

"They're NOT, Noct," Gladiolus calmed him, sensing the prince's eyes were at least violet by now. "The King wouldn't go down that easily. He's got Cor and my old man protecting him. I'm sure they hid him somewhere safe until we meet with the royals in Tenebrae. As for Luna, I'm sure she's fine. She can take care of herself if it comes to that."

Prompto put an arm around the prince's shoulders. "He's right. Luna's a strong girl. If she can handle being your fiancé, she can definitely take on those Niflheim punks." His words didn't go past Nebula. She turned around in her seat and looked at Noctis, her eyes wide.

"You're engaged?"

"Since he was twelve," Ignis filled her in as she properly sat back down. "Don't be so surprised. Arranged marriages are common in royalty." Nebula stared at the ring on her finger. The strategist did make a valid point, but still... The whole idea of engagement had her mind frazzled. First she had to pose as if she were marrying into the Amicitia family, then she learns about Noctis' betrothal. And then all this news of dead bodies and covert operations was making it a bit much for her to handle. "Interesting ploy Aldercapt's trying," he added, "trying to make all of Lucis believe the monarchy is no more."

"All the more reason to take him down quickly," the prince finished, crossing his arms. "Soon as we get to Lestallum, Cor's telling me everything." The tension in the car was heavy, and Nebula didn't miss the transition of color in Noctis's irises when he spoke. At the mention of the emperor's name
they flared from cerulean to crimson, changing in less than a second. She was mesmerized and frightened all at once, having never seen anything like it before. Nebula held her tongue, but she knew all the rumors she’d heard from the locals about the Lucian prince were true. He possessed Etro’s gift.

An hour and some minutes in, the ride grew quiet. Ignis refused to turn the radio back on for fear of hearing more bad news from Lucis. It was the last thing any of them needed at the moment. Noctis rested his head on the upholstered seat once more, though he refused to get any shuteye. Was now the right time to ask? Everyone was still tense. But not knowing the details of Niflheim's invasion of Lucis made her feel guilty all over again. "Ignis," she started, "I have to ask you about the invasion. I know there's nothing I could've done to stop it, but I still feel some kind of responsibility falls on my shoulders. Not for what they did, but for Lucis' sake."

The strategist's hands tightened around the steering wheel. "It was on the day of the treaty signing, two and a half weeks ago. His Majesty was scheduled to meet with Emperor Aldercapt at approximately two in the afternoon to commence with the signing. Security was tight." The men in the back all listened to Ignis' account of that day, each of them remembering every detail of the fateful afternoon. "Highness was told to sit out of the meeting—"

"More like ordered," the prince scoffed behind her. "I should've been there..."

"Our group resided in the prince's quarters and waited for the signing to be over. We were told to speak with the palace guards if we needed anything during the signing." He stopped momentarily to change lanes. "The King took every precaution necessary to assure it would go as smoothly as possible."

"In my opinion, I think the King knew something funny was going to happen," Gladiolus continued. "I managed to get some information out of my father on the security measures for that day. It was agreed upon that Lucian and Niflheim soldiers would share guard duties around the palace, including around the conference room. Cor made sure all the security cameras were functioning properly in the hallways surrounding the conference room and crystal chamber, and extra guards were put in place at all entrances."

"So what went wrong?"

"It'd be easier to list what didn't go wrong. The first wrong step was allowing Iedolas into Lucis in the first place. Cor insisted that the treaty signing be held on neutral ground for the crystal's safety, but the King saw it being safer to hold the signing on home soil. But in reality, it was a ploy to corner us."

Noctis leaned his head on his propped up hand. "Which he was successful in," he sneered. "Iedolas' son excused himself from the conference right before the bastard made his move. Next thing we knew, the palace staff were running for their lives, screaming how Iedolas was 'gonna kill us all'. The four of us had to fight our way to the garage. Damn near got stabbed a hundred times before making it to the car." His fist slammed against the door of the car. "We don't even know how they were able to locate the crystal so easily."

The picture the Lucis circle had painted for her was frightening. Bodies littering the marble tiles floor, blood seeping into the grout lines, shattered glass scattered everywhere, debris from blown out walls... The palace must've looked like a war zone. She wanted to apologize for everything Niflheim did to them, to all the people of Lucis. But it wasn't her fault. When the invasion took place, she wasn't a Niflheim citizen. She was a Lucian ally. "I'm glad you made it out safely," she told them, laying her head back on the cushion. She needed time to process the information. Exhaustion took hold of her again, reminding her of the hours she spent the night before preparing the delivery for...
Marshal Leonis, and she was made aware of her standing in the world. But for now, what she
needed was rest, so she closed her eyes.

It was two hours later when she awoke, the sound of music in the streets and people singing startling
her from her slumber. Nebula pushed herself upright in the seat and rubbed at her eyes. "We're
here?" she asked.

"Just arrived," Gladiolus informed her from the backseat. "Surprisingly no airships flew close
enough to spot us. Not that I'm complaining." Her eyes clear of sleep crust, the medic took in her
very first sight of the continent's top vacation town. "Welcome to Lestallum."

To say the town was beautiful was a gross understatement. Lestallum was a gem, a diamond in the
rough after having driven three hours through the middle of nowhere. Duscae had its own charm to
it, but Lestallum was on a whole other level from the grassland. Tropical trees lined every street, the
sidewalks' edges decorated with flowers in colors she'd never witnessed in flora and fauna. The quiet
countryside had nothing on the lively nature of the town, each person making sure everyone
surrounding knew of its vitality. And the cake-topper of the city lay in the Astral shard they used to
power everything. People were all over the place playing music, selling trinkets, telling stories and
frying food for the tourists. It'd been years since the medic had seen such a densely populated area in
person. "Wow..." Nebula couldn't contain her excitement.

"First time here?" Prompto asked her, to which she nodded. "Too bad we're here on business,
otherwise I would've suggested a beach day."

"Wish we had the time..." A faint breeze rustled the tall palm trees, luring in her curiosity toward the
sky. The sun was strong and bright, throwing heat down onto the city. It hit them within seconds,
attracted by the dark paint of the Regalia.

Ignis pulled on his shirt collar. "We do have some time before we have to meet with the Marshal," he
told her. "Not enough for a beach day, but we can do a little sightseeing. Dusk won't be for a while."
The strategist turned right down the next street. "But first, we should determine our rendezvous
point."

"He said it's where the locals sing about the sun," Noctis said. "There's this group that always sings
at sunrise and sunset in the lobby of this hotel at the east end of Lestallum. It's the biggest hotel in the
city and exclusively for the higher class members of society."

Prompto scoffed. "He seriously picked the Platinum Palace? Isn't he supposed to, you know, lay
low?" The gunner leaned forward in his seat, grasping the side of the driver's chair.

"He must have some kind of security in place," Ignis replied. "The question is how we'll get in
without raising suspicion."

"Maybe that's why he came up with the fiancé cover for Gladiolus and I," the copper haired woman
added. She looked down at the ring on her hand. "If the hotel is as exclusive as Noctis says, then
reservations would've been put in place weeks ago. Mister Leonis may have put in the reservation
around the time of the treaty signing." Nebula reached down for her duffle bag and took out the
instructions, reading over them again. "How many floors is the hotel?"

"Ten or eleven."

It clicked in her mind. "Room 7 on the tenth floor... The rooms on that floor are probably huge
suites."
Ignis pulled into a parking spot and shut down the Regalia. "That would be more than enough room to house Cor's team." He pulled the keys out of the ignition." So all we have to do now is wait for dusk to come. Why don't we walk around for a bit? I'm sure you want to take in the sights, Nebula."

"I'd love that."

Suggested by Prompto, the first place they took Nebula to was the shopping district in the center of town. It was an adventure she hadn't experienced in over five years, crowds of people all packed on a few cobbled roads, the sound of vendors announcing the unbeatable prices of their goods. She almost forgot they were in the vacation town for a delivery for the Lucian army. Gladiolus stayed near her side the entire time, knowing they had to keep up the appearance of a couple in case of prying eyes, and he sensed her unease with the idea, but she went along with the act. The doctor couldn't resist buying a few trinkets for her home and some new clothes, making sure to keep her purchases at what could fit in her luggage. It was still early after the mini shopping spree, so Noctis gave more suggestions for places in town to visit. Their second stop was one of the city's many historical sights, marked with a plaque and some paragraphs on the significance of the location.

As the day wore on, Nebula felt the heat getting to her. Even Ignis had taken off his blazer and gloves to cool down. "Let's stop for water," he proposed. They stopped at a small restaurant and picked up a few bottles. "I almost forgot how hot it could get here." Instinctively, he checked the time on his phone. His green eyes drifted to the sun, which had moved across the sky and was beginning its descent into the western horizon. "It'll be time soon. We should head for the hotel before it gets any darker."

The doctor nodded. "Okay, but let's take a few more minutes to rest. We've been in the heat all day. And being in dark clothes, it's not good for you guys to be exposed for long periods of time." She paused to sip her water, mindlessly wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead.

"Maybe you should follow your own advice," Gladiolus told her. "You're looking a little overheated yourself. Can't have my fiancé collapsing in the street, now."

"Touché." Nebula shot a grin at him, knowing she couldn't get out of that one. She reached up to her collar bone and began to unzip her bolero, and slid the dark fabric off her shoulders. She folded the sleeves closed and tied the bolero around her waist, her arms now expose all the way to the wide straps of her tank top. "You're already beginning to sound like a husband with your remarks."

Their banter done and bottles empty, the group decided it was time to move on. "Nebula and I will go on ahead," the bodyguard told his comrades. "We'll see you at the hotel." Gladiolus waved his hand to the left and motioned for Nebula to follow him down the road. The setting sun loosened its oppressive hold on the town, allowing them to walk freely without being burned alive. Their walk consisted mostly of small talk brought on by the brown eyed man, curious to know more about the doctor and see what it was that Prompto seemed to like so much. "It's a good thing you taught him some first aid," he commented. "Poor guy usually freaks out when he sees blood."

"He wanted to learn and was willing to at three in the morning. No way I could deny him a lesson." She fell silent for a second. "Your journey must've been dangerous for him to be so eager to learn."

Gladiolus shrugged. "Not as much as you'd think. But when it does come time to fight, there's the possibility that it'll be rough. Honestly, it's worse against the soldiers than the animals. You can take down a saber tusk with little problem, but go up against Niflheim's Magitek forces, and then you know you're in trouble." He let out a long sigh and scratched at his head. "Their firepower's the biggest issue. You can't get anywhere near them because they're shooting at you."

"Oh..." Her gaze moved to the ground.
"S'not all bad, though. Having Prompto does even the odds a bit."

"Oh, yeah. I wanted to ask you about that." Nebula looked up at him. "I don't know much about Lucis, but from what I've heard, aren't firearms banned there?" At the end of her question, she realized how far they'd walked, and saw a large building across the street. Nebula counted the windows from bottom to top. Next to the building, between the level nine and ten windows, the sun had started to transition from gold to orange. "Ten floors. Guess this is it, huh?"

The bodyguard nodded. "Cor's waiting for us inside." He looked down at the medic, who couldn't hide the nerves jumping in her face. He didn't know what brought him to do it, but Gladiolus offered her his hand. The gesture surprised Nebula, who didn't think he'd try anything involving physical contact to go along with the fiancé ruse. It would convince the people around them that they were a couple, and holding his hand for a few minutes wouldn't kill her. Nebula placed her hand in his and interlaced their fingers before walking with him across the street.

The two entered the hotel's lobby. Nebula immediately took in the lavish design of the interior, each little fleck of polished metal and colorful upholstery catching her eye. Her attention was brought back into focus when a man stopped them before they reached the concierge desk. The medic tensed, but a reassuring squeeze from Gladia's hand told her the man in the Crownguard uniform wasn't anyone to fear. He folded his hands behind his back and stared at Nebula quietly for a moment, then spoke.

"What brings the shadow into the blinding light?"

Her eyes widened slightly. He was the contact. Swallowing her nerves, Nebula's lips parted. "I've come to heal the sleeping lion's heart," she replied. The man remained still as she answered, then pressed a receiver in his ear. He whispered something too low for Nebula to hear, then nodded and returned his focus on the doctor.

"Nebula Ardere, Gladiolus Amicitia. The Marshal is expecting you." He gestured toward the elevator and led them inside, making sure only the three of them were in it before pressing the button for the top floor. As the doors closed, Nebula's hand pinched the bodyguard's, not wanting him to let go until they reached the room. He squeezed back in understanding and held on as the doors opened on the tenth floor. They followed the Lucian guard down the right hallway all the way to the end, and watched him slide a keycard through the slot on the left side of the door. The small light on the slot turned green and the door unlocked. "Please go in," the guard said to them. Nebula and Gladiolus exchanged glances and entered the room, the bodyguard entering first.

His mouth fell open when he saw the man standing to the right of the dining table. "Dad?" he exclaimed, taken aback by the sight of his father standing beside Cor and one other Lucian guard.

The elder Amicitia shook hands with his son before pulling him into an embrace. "It's good to see you, son," he said before letting Gladiolus go. His eyes fell on Nebula as he let Gladia free, and extended a hand to her. "I am Clarus Amicitia, bodyguard of King Regis Lucis Caelum."

"Nebula Ardere," she replied while taking his hand. She examined Clarus' face, noticing all the features he and Gladiolus shared. Then her gaze shifted to Cor, and she bit her bottom lip. "Mister Leonis..." Nebula bowed in his direction.

Cor stood up from his chair and sauntered her way, watching her straighten back to a standing position. She averted her eyes to the tile floor and continued chewing her lip. "It's good to see you in one piece, Amicitia," he said to the prince's bodyguard. "How is the prince?"

"Considering what we heard on the radio during our drive, I'd say he's alright." Gladiolus crossed his arms. "Noct and the others should be here in a few. They've got the delivery in the trunk."
The Marshal kept his arms to his sides and didn't reply. He stayed silent for a moment, following Nebula's flustered glance across the room. Not once did they stop on him. "Miss Ardere," he called to her, gaining her attention. "Why don't you have a seat while we wait for the rest of the group?"

She quickly nodded and took up residence in the closest chair to her, laying her hands on top of the table. "How long ago did you meet?"

"Two days ago," she answered. "Prompto knocked on my door during the evening, shortly before a storm hit. I discovered Noct-" Nebula hesitated. "...The prince and his comrades were wounded from battle with wildlife, and I treated their injuries. They ended up staying an extra day due to...troubling circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

Nebula nodded. "A trio of Niflheim soldiers arrived with 'the need for medical attention'. I hid the prince and his group before handling the situation. The soldiers left shortly after without incident."

Cor rubbed at his chin while listening to her.

"How many times have they visited you in the last three months?" While the Marshal and medic continued their conversation, Clarus pulled Gladiolus aside to the sitting area. The younger Amicitia looked over his shoulder to Nebula and Cor, finding the interrogation a little strange. Then again, with Lucis in its current state and all the royals on the run, he knew all information was vital.

His focus landed on his father again. "Is the King alright?" he started asking. "How did you escape from Lucis??"

Clarus stared down at his hands. "It wasn't an easy feat. His Majesty had been shot three times by Iedolas. You saw it for yourself when the prince charged into the conference room. After you were sent off, Cor and I had to find sanctuary for the King and get treatment for his wounds. He survived, but is still recovering from the ordeal."

"Where is he?" He knew Noctis would be relieved to hear his father was still alive.

"Safe. That's all I can disclose at the moment." The older man focused hard on his hands, remembering the moments he had to carry the injured King out of the palace. "Once His Highness arrives, we can begin discussing the next step in our plans."

As if on cue, the door opened and the rest of the party walked into the suite. Prompto and Ignis lugged the five suitcases behind them, having insisted on doing so on their own. Noctis hadn't complained about it; his concentration was on Cor. He'd come in prepared to chew the older blue eyed man out: for withholding information on a Lucian ally, for not contacting him since the invasion, for a legitimate reason to vent his frustration. But when the Marshal turned his way and bowed before him, all the chagrin gave way to the distress that had been eating at him since the escape. "Cor..."

"He's alive." Noctis's head shot up. "His Majesty... your father, still lives." The prince lost feeling in his legs and his knees gave out, bringing him to sink to the floor. Ignis rushed to his side and laid a reassuring hand on Noctis's shoulder, feeling his body shudder from the news. All this time, he thought he'd seen his father's death at the hands of Iedolas Aldercapt... The vision was just a lie. The strategist helped him to the nearest chair and went to fetch a glass of water for his friend.

Cor waited until Noctis had calmed down to brief him on the details. "Though His Majesty hoped the signing would happen as peacefully as the treaty claimed our relations would become," he started, "I knew we'd need a location of sanctuary if Aldercapt showed his true colors. I arranged a safe haven where we could meet with our allies and plan our next course of action."
"You mean Tenebrae?" Ignis asked. The Marshal shook his head.

"Tenebrae is no longer an option. After word got out that Princess Fleuret was killed, the Tenebraen parliament went into hiding for fear of Niflheim coming to wipe them out."

Prompto raised an eyebrow. "That doesn't make sense. Why would they go after Tenebrae? Wasn't Lucis the last kingdom holding a crystal?"

"With the crystal in their possession," Clarus took over, "Niflheim can easily overcome other nations that no longer possess crystals. It's not a matter of how they'll get that power anymore, it's a matter of how they'll use it." The air in the room became downcast. "But it won't happen immediately. Aldercapt knows nothing of the crystal's deep power. He can't even touch it without being physically connected to it. Much like you, Highness." He gestured in Noctis' direction.

"So then, there's still time to get it back..." He tapped a finger against his upper lip.

"Precisely." Cor laid a map on the table top and spread it open, then pointed to an area near the middle of the continent. The area consisted of a densely populated city surrounded by water. "This is our rendezvous point now. I'm sure Luna is headed there as we speak." Nebula leaned over the table and read the name in larger font, then the one in smaller text. Accordo and its capital city, Altissia. "The King is being kept safe there now. We have the royal guard protecting him while he recovers." His gaze moving behind the medic, Cor's eyes landed on the row of suitcases lining the opposite wall. "How many do you think it'll take to heal him, Miss Ardere?"

The sudden attention surprised her. "It depends on the severity of the injury. I'd have to examine him for my-"

"He was shot three times. Once in the leg, once in the upper torso and once in his stomach. You'll just have to take my word for it." His eyes squinted when they rested on her, and a chill went down her spine.

"...One elixir and a drop of ether, twice a day, for four days," she replied. "Don't let him move for that time period. The wounds could reopen while they're healing."

He didn't answer her immediately, and instead walked toward the suitcases. Cor unzipped the first one in the row and reached inside, taking out a glass jar filled with shimmering blue liquid. After studying it for a few moments, he placed it back into the suitcase. "You're dismissed, Miss Ardere. We'll resume discussions in the morning. Clarus will show you to your room."

Nebula stood up, watching Gladiolus' father rise with her and go for the door handle. She bowed to Cor and Noctis, knowing he hated it but wanting to look respectful in front of the Marshal, and exited the room. In the hallway, Clarus pointed to the door on the right. "Do you have the card key?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." As she slid the card through the slot, she couldn't help but glance at the number of the door she'd just left. 10-7. Her new comrades were still inside there, discussing who knew what without her. Clarus pat her shoulder, reminding her to go inside. She entered her room, not at all surprised to see her duffle bag laying on the bed. As the elder Amicitia stepped back outside, he paused and lowered his voice to where only she could hear him.

"Marshal Leonis has requested that you do not leave your suite at all this evening. Precautionary measures, you understand..." The way he said it was almost threatening, but she didn't object. Nebula gestured her head in understanding and Clarus closed the door, leaving the medic alone in her room for the night.
A nice gift for my readers who so patiently waited for updates: a nice, long chapter. Let the S.S. Angst sail!
Noctambulous

Chapter Summary

Noctambulous: of, relating to, or given to sleepwalking. A phenomenon that Nebula, unfortunately, suffers from. Sometimes, it's just better to deal with everything in silence than ask for help from those around you. After all, what makes you so sure they'll understand and offer support?

Chapter Notes

Finally, we get more of an in-depth look at Lamia and why she's so feared by people. Also, new chapter. Yay!

The door closed behind Nebula and Clarus, leaving the five men to carry on with the discussion of their next course of action. "The Accordian government is hiding His Majesty well within the city," Cor continued. "Surveillance of his safe house is being closely monitored so no one but myself, Clarus or the President may approach the area. Any medical staff who were part of the King's immediate treatment are exclusively Lucian, and are working in the nearby hospital to keep up the appearance of regular doctors." The general retrieved a pen and a second map from his blazer pocket, laying the map on top of the larger one. He circled a small area in one of Altissia's many middle-class districts, indicating the location of the safe house. "Once Luna arrives and you reunite with your father, we'll meet with the President and his cabinet to decide the best course of action to take in obtaining the crystal."

"Tactical planning with Accordo," Noctis mused. "Never thought I'd see the day that would happen."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Gladiolus replied. "With Tenebrae out of the game, we have to take all the help we can find. Can't exactly pick our allies."

Cor crossed his arms. "Unfortunately, this is what it's come to. We have to play the defensive until we can find a crack in Niflheim's wall to crawl through. But I'm sure they've quadrupled their forces since getting their hands on the crystal." He folded the map of Accordo in half to partially reveal the world map underneath, and pointed the pen at Niflheim. "Aldercapt could figure out how to bond with the crystal at any time, so the sooner we get to Accordo, the better." His voice ceased when the door opened and Clarus re-entered the hotel room. "Did she receive the message?"

"As you recited it," the elder Amicitia answered him, to which Cor nodded in satisfaction.

The small exchange between the two reminded Noctis of the conversation he wanted to have with his father's most trusted soldier, and the confusion that stemmed from finding the vague contract resurfaced. "So when were you planning on telling us about the Shadow Agreement, Cor?" the prince inquired.

He was bound to be chewed out sooner or later. "Noctis-"
"Don't give me that tone," the ebony-haired man barked at him. "I figured something like the possibility of stumbling upon a secret Lucian ally would be pretty damn important information, something you might've told us about while we were running for our lives." His voice grew in volume with each sentence. "'We have an ally in Duscae; seek her out if you run into trouble.' That's all you had to tell us. I'm not some bratty kid that can't handle sensitive information. I can handle-"

"Highness." Ignis placed a hand on Noctis' forearm, and it wasn't until then that the prince realized he was about to snap the cup in his grasp into a million pieces. Noctis took a deep breath and relaxed, falling back into his chair. "Apart from the potential of secrets slipping out, is there any reason you couldn't disclose that information to us?" The prince had a point; had they known of the contract between Lucis and Nebula, they could've sought her out earlier and been able to keep out of the wandering eyes of Niflheim's armada.

Cor grimaced. "Very few people knew about the agreement between Miss Ardere and myself, and I had to make sure it stayed that way. The deal was made around the time tensions with Niflheim were starting to occur again. I was just taking every precautionary measure possible."

He was still hiding something. Noctis could feel it. "What are you not telling me?" Cor's stance tensed. Noctis glared at him. His patience was beginning to wear thin.

"...I suspected there was a spy within the palace. I'd had the sense that one of the lower ranking recruits of our military force was a bit off. She would always be found patrolling near an area she wasn't assigned to, mostly around the palace perimeter. After two months she quit, her reason having something to do with 'taking over the family business'. I attempted to track her down following her departure, but we couldn't locate her. She was gone without a trace." He waved his hands in opposite directions. "After that, I didn't want to take any chances. So when the deal was struck up with Miss Ardere, it was decided that only four people would have knowledge of it: myself, the King, Clarus, and the King's adviser. The contract was kept as vague as possible to avoid any code-cracking if she was somehow discovered."

"That...actually makes a lot of sense," Prompto chimed, having sat quietly for the duration of the conversation. "But it's still weird that she didn't recognize you, Noct."

Gladiolus shook his head. "She was assigned a job that didn't require knowing our faces. No need to throw out info like confetti."

"Precisely," Clarus agreed as he walked over to the couch and sat down.

The marshal rose from his seat. "We'll resume this conversation tomorrow. In the meantime, you boys should get something to eat. You leave for Accordo first thing in the morning."

Prompto felt hunger suddenly erupt in his stomach at the mention of food. "Dinner sounds so good right now." He started for the door. "I'll see if Nebula wants anythin-"

"Actually, Prompto," Cor interrupted the blond, "I must speak with Miss Ardere in private. If she gets hungry, I'll have room service ordered for her."

The gunner raised an eyebrow. "...Okay." He motioned for his friends to follow him out the door, earning a complaint from Ignis when his stomach emitted another low growl. "Oh, come on! It's not my fault I have such a high metabolism!"

"That still doesn't excuse you eating all the leftovers on the ride here," the strategist scolded him as they passed the door to Nebula's room. Cor waited until the boys were on the elevator, and when the door slid closed, he made his way to Nebula's room.
He knocked twice under the peephole. A muffled, "Coming," was heard from the other side of the
door. It opened seconds later, and a startled titanium gaze was met by a hard azure stare. He looked
down at her, watching the color fade from her cheeks. "Mister Leonis..."

"We need to discuss something," he told her, and pushed past her to enter the room. Nebula shut the
door and observed him patrol around the room, arms folded behind his back, then saw him stop just
before the bed. "I'm sure you heard at least half of my conversation with the prince. Correct?" He
didn't have to turn around to know she was nodding. "And I'm sure you're aware you won't be
joining us on our trip to Accordo. You understand why."

Nebula swallowed hard. "Marshal, I... I know I could help the King recover much quicker if I were
with you. He needs a proper examination-"

"We have a perfectly good team of doctors keeping watch over His Majesty. The only requirement
of you is your potions craft." His voice stung. "And the only help we need from you is from afar."
Cor turned around and faced her again, his eyes weighing on her with every passing second.

"And what if the elixirs don't work properly?" she asked with genuine concern. "What if the King’s
injuries worsen before you get them to him? Only I can determine how much and how many he'd
need to-"

Sentence interrupted, her head snapped to the left and she nearly fell over, grabbing the nearby chair
to steady herself. Nebula looked up at Cor while holding her quickly swelling cheek, seeing the same
stone gaze from the man moments before he'd slapped her. The older man crouched down to her
level and took her face into his hand. His grip was surprisingly gentle on the scathing area of skin
below her eye. "Stop living in your little fantasy," he started, his tone callous. "You and I both know
why you're not allowed anywhere near the King. To hear you even considering such a thing is
preposterous. You're isolated in Duscae for a reason, Nebula, and now you want to see the King in
person?" He leaned in close, his voice lowering. "If you're telling me that your elixirs won't be
enough to heal him, then there's no longer a need for the Shadow Agreement, is there? We can
proceed with Plan B..."

Her eyes were wide. They were words she'd heard before, but they still scared her all the same. Plan
B wasn't an option for her. Nebula shook her head, unable to answer with words.

"I see you understand now." Cor released her face and stood up, then turned to leave the room. "I'll
be taking you back to Duscae myself," he commented before walking out of the room. "You're
welcome to call room service if you want something to eat." The second the door slammed closed,
Nebula allowed herself to sink to the floor. Sitting on her knees, she trembled as water collecting in
her eyes from the impact released and ran down her face, stinging the raised skin of her cheek. Her
sight crawled down to her hands, limp in her lap, the same hands that had tended to Prompto's
wound...the same hand that had caused it. Cor was right: she was alone for a reason, a terrible one.
She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sucked in a shaky breath.

All the commotion had caused a headache to settle in. Having collected herself, Nebula pushed
herself off the ground and wandered over to the duffle bag on her bed. She rummaged around inside
and took out a small pill box, then pulled off the cover and retrieved one of the turquoise-colored
caplets from inside, which she tossed into her mouth and swallowed. She hoped the potion would
kick in soon and start to work against the pain of the slap and headache, and within five minutes, she
felt it begin to work. The drowsiness would come next. Not wanting to sleep in her clothes, Nebula
took out a set of overnight clothes and changed into them. She placed the duffle bag on the floor and
got under the bed sheets. A fantasy. That's what her life had been for the past three days. From the
moment the Lucian royal circle walked through the door to her home, to the home-cooked meals she
shared with them, to the wonderful day spent with them in Lestallum... It was all just a delusion. Her eyes fell onto the ring still decorating her finger. She'd done what Cor had asked; what was the point of wearing it anymore? Recognition was no longer needed. Looking at the amethyst stones reminded her of the marshal's cold stare, one she quickly wanted to forget. The medic ripped the jewelry from her finger and threw it across the room, hearing it slam into the granite surface of a dresser. "Guess my work here is done," she commented as she unwrapped her twin hair tails and laid down, closing her eyes.

Six-thirty. That's when Nebula woke up, feeling surprisingly well-rested following the previous day's harsh confrontation. She sat up in bed and stretched her arms to the ceiling, the muscles in her back and shoulders unwinding the further she reached. Her grey gaze trekked to the room's sole window, where she spotted the sky turning a reddish-orange at the horizon. It wasn't even daytime yet. "What time did I fall asleep last night?" she wondered out loud, grimacing at the taste of morning breath filling her mouth. She knew there'd be no use in trying to go back to sleep, so the medic threw the covers off her body and rose from the bed, heading toward the window. The sun was just beginning to peek from behind the horizon to greet the world into another day. Nebula approached the window and laid a hand against the glass. The awareness that Noctis and his group would be departing for Accordo without her started to sink in. Thinking about it hurt, knowing this would be the last time she would see the prince, Gladiolus, Ignis, or Prompto. "I wonder if he'll even let me say goodbye..." She knew he wouldn't, but a small part of her hoped that she could at least say goodbye to Prompto and have him deliver a message to the rest of the group. Though they only knew one another for a few days, Nebula knew she would miss them: Noctis' sarcastic, laid-back attitude; Ignis' quick wit and superb talent for cooking; Gladiolus' strength in battle and big heart; and Prompto's smile and comedic banter. It was almost like she had a little family and wasn't alone anymore.

"I suppose it's for the best," she told herself. The four of them had bigger plans that didn't - and couldn't - involve her. They were royalty, she was a country doctor. No further need for the classes to mix. As her eyes wandered down to view the astral shard and city below, Nebula couldn't help but to notice a streak on the window. It was under her hand and staining the glass...and red. She raised an eyebrow and lifted her hand away from the glass, and found her hand print on the window, cast in red... A few seconds of thinking was all it took for her mouth and eyes to widen, neither contracting when she looked down at her hand, also caked in a dark red hue. She recognized the smell immediately. There was blood on her hand, and now the window. Nebula backed away from the glass and ran to the mirror to examine herself. The first thought that ran through her mind was a nose bleed - which seemed entirely possible, until she saw her reflection. Blood coated her almost from head to toe, wide streaks and drips splattered across her skin and overnight wear, and caked in her hair. The amount of blood covering her body was too much for a simple bloody nose. She calculated in her mind how much was on her, and as each number ran through her head, Nebula felt sicker and sicker. "Oh my..." Nausea hit hard. She bolted for the bathroom and hung her head over the toilet, staying there for a few minutes until the nausea passed. Once calm again she stood up and rinsed off her face, scrubbing at the blood-littered areas until her own skin went red. She stared at her reflection, skin reddened from the friction of scrubbing, pupils contracted, and bags under her eyes. Nebula knew she'd been sleepwalking again; the phenomenon she couldn't control, and only bad things happened when she slept. She cursed at herself for taking the medication the night before, knowing full-well its drowsying side effects and ignoring it. "Damn it..." She remembered the many stories others had told her of her sleepwalking ventures: stumbling into the middle of the roadway, Wiz finding her sitting amongst the sleeping chocobos, and even one instance where she nearly came in contact with a behemoth. The medic couldn't believe she'd let such a lapse in memory take over her. Nebula scoffed. "I'm such an idiot." The medic turned off the water and examined her face, finding no more red blotches on her skin. As for the clothes, she knew there was no salvaging them. Nebula tore them from her body and placed them in a separate pocket in her duffle bag to dispose of
once she returned to Duscae, then got dressed to truly start her day.

Across the hall, the ring of Ignis’ cell phone could be heard all throughout the hotel room. The strategist was already wide awake and halfway dressed, waiting for his companions to rise. Gladiolus was the second to wake, rolling over with a grunt and nearly crushing the sleeping blond next to him. "Sorry," he told Prompto with an apologetic grin as he stood up and stretched his body. "C'mon, Noct," he called across the room to the second king bed where Noctis was fighting off his booming voice and the ring of the cellphone alarm. Ignis rolled his eyes. Of all the times for him to be doing that... He placed the phone on the pillow beside the prince's ear, and when he heard the deep grunt of annoyance, the strategist knew Noctis was awake.

"Rise and shine, Highness," Ignis began as he drew the curtain hiding the balcony door. Dawn sunlight poured into the hotel room, hitting nearly everything within range, including Prompto's face. The light was strong enough to startle him from his slumber, bringing the gunner to utter a groan and ask for a few more minutes of rest in a mumble. "Out of the question," was Ignis' reply. "You heard the general. First thing in the morning, we're leaving for Accordo."

It took a few extra pats and shakes from Gladiolus to wake the prince up. "Okay, okay," Noctis grumbled as he poked an eye open. "I'm awake. You can stop with the shaking." The bodyguard stayed closed, unsatisfied until the younger man sat up and opened both eyes. "Happy now?"

"Very." Gladiolus finally left him alone, giving Noctis room to breathe and fully awaken. He glanced over his shoulder to Prompto, who was pushing himself off the mattress and yawning loudly. "Hope they'll bring us breakfast this early," he commented, already feeling his stomach grumbling. The thought of food transitioned to the meals they'd eaten at Nebula's house, and his mouth began to water. "Though it probably won't be as satisfying as her cooking."

The mention of Nebula immediately caught Prompto's attention while he pulled his boots over his feet. "Right, she stayed behind and missed dinner last night. Maybe we should wake her up and see if she wants to grab breakfast before we head out." A knock at the door caught everyone's attention. Ignis unlocked and opened it, not all too shocked to see Clarus and Cor on the other side. "Highness," the latter began as they stepped into the room. "I trust you're packed and ready to depart?" Looking around the room, he saw the two older men of the group prepared to leave, and the two younger ones still half-asleep as they stumbled to put on the last of their clothes. As expected. Cor knew they'd be ready within the short time slot. "Clarus will be leading you to Accordo in an unmarked black SUV. We've taken the liberty of unloading some of your cargo into the second car to lighten your load." The elder Amicitia pushed a cart inside covered in an assortment of breakfast items. "Take what you can with you. We leave in ten minutes."

The bodyguard already had a remote control in his hand before Cor and Clarus' entry, and was occupied with watching the local news to check on any reports of Niflheim soldier activity. The main news story segment remained relatively quiet, and the weather segment was more than halfway through. Gladiolus pulled his gaze away from the television for a brief moment to snatch a breakfast sandwich before anyone else could get their hands on it and sank his teeth into it, tasting the freshly cooked bacon and sausage packed between two eggs and the bagel halves. His sight returned to the television while the others picked out their morning meals, at the same moment a flashy news segment interrupted the end of the weather report. The news anchors started their breaking news report with obvious concern as they notified the public about an urgent matter, to which Gladiolus turned up the volume. "Word is still pouring in over an apparent murder last night in the Flos section of downtown Lestallum, where local police received reports of a man laying in an old alleyway. The man, whose identity has not yet been verified, suffered multiple stab wounds and a near decapitation, and was pronounced dead at the scene. The coroner’s office has taken the body into custody to
perform an autopsy and determine the official cause of death."

The news sent chills down everyone's spines. Wide awake following the start of the report, Noctis and Prompto froze for a moment as they all watched the tape cut to a take of an interview with possible witnesses of the crime. One older woman, when asked by the reporter if she saw anything, wasn't shy about answering. "I know who did it!" she exclaimed in the accent of the locals. "It was that witch, Lamia! She's invaded our city to kill all of us!" The second tape cut and switched between several other eyewitness accounts, all claiming that Lamia was the one who murdered the man. The last witness' account came on screen. "I saw her myself! It was pretty dark out when I saw her and I couldn't define her face, but she had the eyes! Those piercing black eyes! She froze a pipe and drove it through his head! That witch got him, and now she's gonna get the rest of us!" The tape flashed back to the reporter on-scene, who finished his broadcast by reminding everyone of Lamia's Niflheim origins, and concluding with, "It is unclear what Lamia's connections with Emperor Aldercapt are, but it's safe to assume that she is helping Niflheim get closer to conquering the surrounding nations."

Their blood froze. Lamia was in the city. Not even twenty-four hours had passed following the Lucians' arrival into Lestallum, and the witch had tracked them down. Cor's fists were shaking. "We're leaving now!" he ordered, and grabbed Noctis by his bicep. "Clarus, lead them to their car. Make sure NO ONE sees you leaving." Suddenly everyone was scrambling to gather their belongings and any breakfast they could. The men could barely keep up as Clarus and Cor escorted them out the door and down the hall.

"Hold on!" Prompto called out as he stopped in the middle of the hall. "We have to get Nebula!" He bolted in the opposite direction toward the door to Nebula's room.

"She's not going with you!" Cor yelled, grabbing the blond's vest collar and yanking him back to Noctis. "I'm escorting her back to her home. But you four have to get to Accordo now! There's no time to waste!"

"But-"

"Prompto, come on!" Gladiolus called out to him. "If Cor says he'll take care of her, you know he will." The gunner was still hesitant about leaving her behind, but the bodyguard's words gave him some sense of reassurance. With one last passing glance, he joined the others in the elevator. His eyes never left her door as the elevator doors closed.

With the quartet gone, the marshal marched back to Nebula's room and knocked hard on her door. He didn't wait for her to open the door all the way to push through and knock her to the floor. He kicked the door shut and locked it, then looked down at the fearful doctor again, his gaze harder than the night before. "What did you do?" Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Cor slammed his foot on the ground. "You'd better start talking before I-"

"I just watched the news report! I don't know what happened!"

"What do you remember from last night?" he asked, lowering his voice. His eyes fell on her left hand, seeing her fourth finger bare, and he became furious. "You took off the ring."

Nebula was slow to stand. "You said it'd be used so the contact could identify-"

"I told you to keep it on at ALL times for the safety of the other people around you," Cor corrected her. "That ring had a magical barrier built into to suppress your powers." He growled and pinched the bridge of his nose.
"I'm sorry-"

"Stop," he snapped, reaching a hand to the sword strapped to a holster on his belt. "...Tell me what you remember. Don't leave out a single detail, or so help me, I'll-"

"Okay, okay!" she pleaded while sitting on the bed, hands up in a defensive stance. "...I don't remember much, but I...do recall some memory of last night." Nebula drew in a deep breath. "After our 'conversation' last night, I got a bad headache, so I took a potion pill. Stupid me forgot they have a drowsying effect. I fell asleep pretty quickly after taking the pill. The next thing I remember is waking up..."

Cor groaned. "You mean to tell me that report is because of your stupidity?" He stood in place with his head in his hand. "And because of that, you remember nothing of your little skirmish last night? Nothing having to do with that man's death?" Nebula shook her head. The marshal fell silent, and after a few minutes of thinking it over, he spoke again. "At this point, Nebula, I'm not sure what to believe from you. I'm starting to doubt we can trust you any further."

"Cor, please. I'm not a monster."

He drew his sword and pointed it at her.
Thanks to Prince Noctis, plans have changed for Nebula. Cor may not like it, but if it's for the good of Lucis and her people, he'll have to go along with the facade.

Something didn't sit well in the prince's stomach. He was used to having to run on a moment's notice, with him and his group constantly being tailed by the Niflheim army; running from Lamia was no different. But it wasn't the witch that bothered him. His father's condition had been on Noctis' mind since hearing he was still alive the day before. He hadn't seen the king in several weeks, since Niflheim's invasion of Lucis. The last memory he had of his father was of the man laying on the marble floor of the conference room, in a puddle of his own blood, holes riddling his body. There was barely a moment to exchange goodbyes or words of love as Noctis dashed down the hall, leaving his only remaining blood relative behind with his bodyguard and right-hand man, unsure if they'd ever see each other again. To hear of his survival was enough drive for the prince to head to Altissia immediately, but something held him back. As the elevator descended towards the main floor, Noctis couldn't help but think of Nebula. Her medical skills were exceptional, better than many of the doctors he'd seen throughout his childhood in the palace. Many of them had almost thirty years over her, yet their knowledge of elixirs and potions, and the effects of different poisons on the body, seemed dwarfed by the collection Ignis showed him in her basement. She crafted every one herself, knew every single ingredient included in the mixtures, how much for specific injuries and varying blood types...but she was only an outside supplier to the Lucian cause. A silent partner. Nothing more.

She had to see his father. As the elevator door opened on the main level, Clarus ran out and motioned for the four younger men to follow suit. Prompto and Ignis quickly went after him, and as Gladiolus took a step out of the elevator, he noticed the prince still lingering inside. "Noct?" he asked, capturing the prince's attention. "What's wrong? Come on, we've gotta go."

"We have to bring Nebula with us," he told the bodyguard. "She saved my life. I know she can save my father's, too." Overhearing the prince, Clarus fell back and spun around, his face grim.

"Highness," he began, "that isn't possible. We have not the time nor the resources to have her accompany us. Cor already said-

"I heard what he had to say," the prince retorted, growing annoyed again. "But you weren't there when I was poisoned. You didn't see how she brought me back from near death and save my friends, including your own son." Clarus' eyes widened slightly. "I trust her with my life. You should, too."

Prompto and Ignis backed away from the elder guard and stood beside Noctis in a show of support. "She did hide us from the enemy soldiers," Ignis added, crossing his arms. "To be honest, Clarus, I must side with the prince on this matter. Nebula has been nothing but helpful since we met her. And in the situation we're currently in, we could use every helping hand that comes our way."

"She's also exceptional in battle. We could use another ally on the battlefield with proficiency in combat," Gladiolus cut in. "I don't know why Cor wouldn't want her going with us. She could treat the King and have him back to one-hundred percent health in a matter of days. I say she should come with us."
Clarus sighed, wishing they would understand the situation. "I must ask all of you to trust in Cor when he says this is for the best..." His voice trailed when his eyes settled on Noctis' face, seeing not the usually stoic Prince of Lucis, but the same pleading locution he wore when he was forced to leave his father behind and flee from the approaching army.

"This isn't a request," he said softly, feeling his fist begin to shake. "Nebula's coming with us. That's it." He'd given in to the prince before, and now as he realized there was no getting past it, Clarus knew the prince would once again have his way.

"...Very well," he answered after a few moments of silence passed. "Gladiolus, escort him upstairs and fetch them. We'll be waiting for you in the car."

Gladiolus nodded to his father and stepped back into the elevator. Noctis pressed the button for the tenth floor and the door shut, bringing the two men back to their new ally. Noctis remained silent for the duration of the ten-second ride up to the tenth floor, his eyes focused only on the crack between the two halves of the door, ready to run own the hall the moment they opened. He did just that when the reached the desired floor and ran to Nebula's room, raising his fist to bang on the door.

They heard their voices echo through the metal barrier. "...not sure what to believe from you. I'm starting to doubt we can trust you any further." What was Cor saying? Gladiolus and Noctis exchanged confused gazes as they continued listening.

"Cor, please. I'm not a monster," Nebula seemed to plead to him. The next sound was faint, but the bodyguard was able to pick up on metal swiping. "You're making a mistake -"

"The only mistake I made was enlisting you," was his reply, and they stopped talking. He didn't know what was going on, but just hearing the conversation between the two agitated Noctis further. He banged on the door twice and fiddled with the door knob, finding it locked. The knob jiggling was heard on the other side and Cor cursed under his breath shortly before the door opened a crack. Cerulean eyes met with a sapphire glare, which read deep chagrin in the first pair. "...You two should be gone by now," he told them.

Noctis pushed the door fully open and saw Nebula sitting on the bed, eyes wide and afraid. He looked back at Cor, seeing the same neutral gaze as always. Nebula rose from the bed at a snail's pace and bowed her head to the prince. "What's going on?" the charcoal-haired prince asked both parties. The medic kept her lips sealed. "I could hear you through the door. What were you saying about her being a mistake, Cor?"

"Your Highness -"

"No, don't give me that 'Your Highness' crap!" The prince was confused and furious all at the same time. He wanted answers. He wanted his father. He wanted Lucis' crystal back where it belonged. He could feel the anger inside swelling. Gladiolus took hold of Noctis' arm and squeezed hard in an attempt to ground him.

"Noct, calm down. We just came up here to get her. Remember that." The bodyguard took the moment to look at the prince's eyes to see if they were changing color again, as they often did when his emotions were strong. As speculated, they were no longer blue, but bared a hue near amethyst. "We need to focus on your father's health. Getting pissed off at Cor isn't going to help with that. You know what will."

Instinctively Nebula approached him, taking his other hand into hers. "Highness -" She stopped herself. "...Noctis, please calm down. Gladiolus is right." Looking into the doctor's eyes helped ease the tension building in his mind, and after a few minutes passed, his irises were back to normal.
"So you came up here to bring Miss Ardere with you, is that it?" Cor questioned when the prince had fully relaxed. "I'm afraid that's not an option."

"And why not?" Noctis asked, keeping his temper in check. "She saved my life; she can save his. I already told Clarus this downstairs."

Cor groaned, already planning the speech he would give the elder Amicitia during the ride to Altissia. "Like I said, it can't happen. Miss Ardere has other obligations to attend to back in Duscae. She's still under contract as our supplier."

"It didn't sound like it, from what I heard." Cor held his tongue. Noctis turned from the adamant marshal to the medic, who had let go of his hand and tucked it into her sleeve. "Nebula," he began to plead, "please come with us to Altissia. Examine my father. Make sure he's alright. It would mean so much to me, to all of Lucis, if you did."

She was hesitant to answer. Her fingers twitched inside the sleeve as she registered the request. "All I want to do is help," she said after a second of silence. "I'll go with you to treat the King." Nebula glanced at Cor for a split second, taking note of the resentment in his stare on her, then severed the mental connection. "I'm ready to leave whenever you are." She held out a hand for Noctis to shake, which he did with a sense of relief. "How long will the trip be?"

"Several days by car," Gladiolus answered. "We'll probably stop for breaks, but nothing too long. The sooner we get to Altissia, the better."

"Agreed," was the last word to leave Cor's mouth before storming out of the room. Nebula was quick to zip up her duffle bag and throw the strap over her shoulder. As the remaining men jogged down the hall, the medic took a moment to search for the ring she'd thrown. She discovered it on top of the dresser opposite her bed, and after a quick once-over to see if it was damaged, she slipped it onto her finger. Knowing Cor, his sword would be at her throat at all times, so she hoped the ring would give him some form of reassurance that she didn't pose a threat.

The group was downstairs shortly after and exited the hotel, finding the royal circle's Regalia parked behind a black SUV. Clarus took the driver's seat of the SUV while the Lucian quartet piled into the Regalia. Another meeting with Cor's fixed stare told her to not push anything, and she decided to travel in the SUV. "Our first break won't be for a while," the marshal told everyone in the Regalia. "Try not to need any bathroom breaks until then."

"No promises," Prompto yelled from the front passenger seat of the Regalia while flashing a smile. Irritated enough, Cor rolled his eyes and opened the back door for Nebula, who slid in with her bag. He took the front passenger seat of the SUV, and after everyone was strapped in, the duo of vehicles pulled away from the curb, with the SUV leading the way.

Nebula kept her stare focused on the world outside the window. Though early in the day, the locals were already commencing celebrations and the outdoor barbecues were already hot with coals lit in flames. A small smile cracked on her face as she relived the previous day's sightseeing. Lestallum was a beautiful, lively city with much to offer the tourists who flooded in from all across the world. She began to wonder if Accordo would be the same. Would the locals be as friendly and welcoming? Would there be national monuments or museums to visit after she treated the King? The King...he took over her mind. King Regis Lucis Caelum had been shot at least three times during the Niflheim invasion of Lucis. Cor had said he'd been shot in the abdomen and chest, vital and possibly fatal areas, but he never spoke anything of the King's status other than the fact that he was alive. Was he in a medically-induced coma? Was he conscious and talking properly? She had to get more information on his condition, even if it angered Cor to hear her voice. "Marshal Leonis," she started, seeing the tension in his shoulder already become aggravated, "I need to know more about His
Majesty's condition if I'm going to be treating him."

"You only got here out of sheer luck," he retorted, his gaze staying straight ahead of him. "If it were up to me, you'd be dead or imprisoned right now. But chance had it that Noctis decided you were the perfect person to bring along to see the King. He's your saving grace." Cor snorted in disgust. "But don't go thinking you can use him as your little shield. You're going to be in my sight at all times, Ardere." The way he said her surname stung deep.

She let him go on with his dialogue, knowing he was half right; the rest was just him blowing off steam from dealing with the prince. "That doesn't change the fact that I require information. As the medical professional who will be treating him, I'm going to need all of his history, up until the moment I walk into his quarters." He was about to speak again when she cut him off. "And if you have a problem with that, I'm sorry, but you'll have to bring it up with Noctis." And there she went using the prince as a shield. Having silenced him on the consent matter, Nebula cleared her throat and folded her hands in her lap. "It'll be a long trip, as you already know. So we may as well start now so I'm adequately prepared to treat my patient."

Cor sneered at her tone. It hadn't been the first time she'd spoken to him with such arrogance, but with the prince and his posse backing her up, they both knew she no longer had to fear his authority. She wasn't thinking in the mindset of a fearful woman under oath anymore. She was in that of a doctor and potions maker, serious about her craft and not afraid to talk down on anyone who disrespected those titles, not even the marshal of Lucis, who wanted her out of the picture. "Very well," the older man exhaled. "You'd better have something to write down on. There's a lot to go through." He listened to her shuffle through the bag next to her and gave her a minute to find a pad and pen.

"First," she started, "I'll need his routine information. Age, blood type, height, weight. The general stuff."

"Age fifty-three," Cor replied without resistance. "A+. 5'11", 166lbs." Clarus, keeping his eyes on the road, observed their conversation while driving, staying silent to keep the calm air going. He heard the pen scribble across the paper as she took notes.

"Any medical conditions preceding the shooting?"

The marshal went to shake his head, only to have a memory resurface and change his answer. "Asthma stemming from when he was a teenager. He has an inhaler in case it's needed, but hasn't for years."

Nebula wrote down the information as he spoke. "Now tell me of the condition he was in when you fled from Lucis, and his current condition." Now the marshal seemed reluctant to answer. "Cor, please. The more I know, the better I can treat him."

A sigh escaped his lips. "I didn't want to say it in front of Noctis. The King..." It pained him to tell the story. "During our departure from Lucis, His Majesty was technically dead. His heart stopped. We had to revive him in the car as we were speeding away from the kingdom. His hand balled into a fist around the sheath of his katana. "He nearly died twice more by the time we made it to the outskirts of Accordo. He made it with his heart still beating, but he'd lost a lot of blood. Needed several transfusions." Cor took a moment to catch the breath he didn't realize he was refusing entry to his lungs. "After we got him settled in the safe house in Altissia, he had to be placed in a medically induced coma to keep him alive. Our medical staff seemed to struggle with keeping him alive: one of his kidneys almost failed, a bullet had torn through his lung, he broke many bones from the fight with Aldercapt... His Majesty was a broken mess."
"And how is he now?"

"Better, to say the least. King Regis is conscious and speaking, but there's something odd about his bullet injuries." Cor's eyes narrowed. "They refuse to heal with the aid of what little potions the President was able to offer us. We went through almost a dozen vials before seeing any results, and even then, the healing process has crawled."

The wheels in her mind turned as she reviewed the information Cor had given her. "The bullets may have been laced with something," she said. "I wouldn't be surprised if there were poison flowing through the King's veins, even now." Nebula scribbled more words on the paper and circled a section to remind herself later on. She let Cor have a moment before bombarding him with questions again. "How many people are in the medical staff currently treating him? What are their positions in medicine? How many years have they been in the field? What are their methods of treatment?" One by one Cor answered all of her questions, not leaving out any details he knew she'd want to know. She continued with the questioning for almost two hours, until she felt the information she'd gathered was sufficient in making a diagnosis and treating her patient. Nebula decided to leave him alone for the rest of the ride, knowing it was hard enough for him to speak on the matter while in her presence.

The first break of their long road trip was at a rest stop eight hours away from Lestallum, near the western Duscaen border and another hour and a half's drive. In the lead car, Nebula used the time following her questioning of the King's health to formulate plans to use in case of certain circumstances for his well-being. It was normal for her to write out possible scenarios she may encounter when treating a patient, anything from subduing and sedating them should they go berserk, to what surgeries would be needed if they suffered a traumatic brain injury or aneurysm, to reviving them when they were on the brink of death. She paid the most attention to the third scenario, feeling it could happen more than once when she finally saw the King. Cor would glance over his shoulder at her every now and then to make sure she wasn't falling into her own psychotic state or suddenly sleepwalking, and he checked on the ring on her finger every time, partly surprised to see her wearing again. It was made to last, but he didn't know what sort of tricks the medic had up her sleeve. Eventually she did fall asleep in the back seat, allowing the marshal time to speak with his partner without her overhearing them.

"I still think this is a huge mistake," Cor told Clarus. "Why did you give in to him so easily?"

"If you had seen his face, you would've done the same thing," Clarus replied as he momentarily sprayed the windshield to clean it. "Then again, you've never had a child, so you see things differently."

"You mean rationally." Cor crossed his arms. "This is possibly the most dangerous thing we've done. We're carrying a ticking time bomb in the back seat to see the King of Lucis, who'll probably end up the same as that ruffian from the news."

The elder Amicitia became rigid at the mention of the murder. "You wouldn't let that happen Cor. Just stay close to her, and everything should be fine." He turned the windshield wipers off when the glass was streak-free. "Perhaps we should've told them the truth last night during the briefing. Maybe then, we wouldn't be bringing her with us."

"Too late now," Cor muttered under his breath. He took another look at Nebula in the back seat, still fast asleep with her head resting against the window and arms loosely tangled in each other. She didn't look threatening; that was the biggest issue. Anyone could approach her without fear and think she was the sweetest doctor around, and remain oblivious to the consequences that could arise at any moment. At least with her in their car versus the Regalia, he knew she couldn't do anything to the four younger men in the car behind them. But seeing her resting peacefully, no sorrow or pain in her
expression, conjured memories he fought against to bury deep in his mind. He wished things had turned out differently between them, because in another life, maybe he wouldn't have to kill her.
AND we're back! And here's an action-packed chapter for all the readers who've waited for so long for an update.

Warning for this chapter for something pretty gruesome later on...

"Something strange is going on," Noctis said under his breath as he stared at the darkening environment passing by them. He couldn't get the image of Cor's katana pointed at Nebula out of his mind. The tip of the blade had definitely been aimed at the sensitive veins on the side of her neck, intending to subdue the target with a single swipe. He'd been able to tell that Cor had something against her, even before the moment he and the others entered the hotel room to rejoin Gladiolus. From the bodyguard's account, Nebula wasn't able to keep more than a second's worth of eye contact with the commanding officer before she averted her gaze to the floor. He'd watched her as she interacted with him. Chewing on her lip, twiddling her thumbs, tugging on the hem of her sleeves... Gladiolus didn't need to be a psychologist to know the signs of anxiety. And Cor didn't help with making her feel welcome, from what he took in. For such an important asset in their current situation, the Marshal looked upon her more like an enemy than an ally. "It sounded like he wanted to get rid of her."

"You mean end the Shadow Agreement?" Prompto inquired, having heard the basic details of what his friends encountered when they went back for the medic. "But she's done so much for the cause. Pretty much key for keeping us alive, if you ask me." The blond searched his mind, trying to come up with a reason why the Lucian marshal would suddenly want Nebula out of the picture. "...You think it could be because she's from Niflheim?"

Ignis shook his head. "Can't be. If Cor had such a grudge against Niflheim, he wouldn't risk having anyone with its heritage around the Prince." The strategist gave Prompto a long look through the rear view mirror, then returned his gaze to the road and the SUV three car lengths ahead of them.

"The only mistake I made was enlisting you.' That's what he said before we went in the room." Gladiolus crossed his arms. He wanted to ask questions. Why was Cor so hesitant on bringing such a talented medical professional, possibly the only person on the planet who could save the King, to Accordo with him? She started off as an outsider, that much was true; but the moment she met the royal circle and opened the emergency envelope Cor had given her, Nebula Ardere officially became a part of the fight for Lucis. Why else would he have arranged such a meeting for them? It couldn't have been for a simple supply drop. Gladiolus rubbed at his chin, trying to understand it all. Only one thing made sense in his mind: his father knew whatever Cor did. "I say we ask when we reach the rest stop," he suggested. His friends nodded in agreement.

Dusk had passed shortly after their conversation, and forty-five minutes before the first scheduled rest stop, the sun set. Stars were beginning to glimmer in the now indigo sky, forming patterns and pictures stretching all across, decorated with the backdrop of distant nebulae. Prompto leaned his head back and watched the tiny glowing dots shine, seeing one streak from right to left as it followed a path dictated by the stringy colors far off in space. He wondered if the sight above him was what inspired the medic's name; such an inspiration would make sense, at least, to him. His gaze trekked
back down to earth and landed on the car in front of them, and he pondered what she was doing in the other car as they kept heading to their destination. He hoped Cor wasn't scaring her.

Then another thought crossed his mind. "Hey, Ignis," he started, and knew he had the strategist's attention when he raised an eyebrow. "That news report from this morning... One of the witnesses said it was that Lamia person because the murder weapon was frozen? I'm confused. How would that prove anything? I know you said Lamia could use magic, but..." Saying the rest was more difficult than he thought it'd be. "...But it would require a lot of force to drive a pipe through someone's head, right? Brute strength. So how do they know it was the witch and not just some thug?"

"That's exactly the point: they don't." Ignis tensed in his seat. "Fear of Lamia has spread far since the Niflheim invasion, with that being speculated as the country the witch hails from." He paused for a second. "However, as you said yourself, the murder weapon was frozen. Not many people outside of government, royalty, medicine or the military know anything of magic or how to utilize it. The government of Lestallum is one of the few that don't use magic for the purposes of law and order, so the chances of it being her."

The SUV in front of them swerved to the right and veered off the road. "Whoa!" Everyone jerked to the left of the car when Ignis spun the steering wheel in the same direction and hit the breaks, the Regalia's tires smoking as it came to a stop. Before Gladiolus' voice could boom over the radio and question why his father's car had abruptly driven off-road, he and the other occupants of the vehicle saw the reason. Though slightly dimmed in the dark of the new night, thirty-three humanoid forms were visible: three in the middle of the road and fifteen standing on each side, bearing flags and large guns in their armored hands. Noctis, already feeling his bodyguard's tightening grip around his torso, looked from the people in front of them to the SUV on the side of the road. The windows on its left side had been shot out, bullets holes riddled the metal exterior, and he noticed several prominent cracks in the back windshield. "Cor! Clarus! Nebula!" Hearing the prince's voice, a pair of hands grabbed onto the remains of the window's base and pushed the door open. "Shit..." Nebula spilled out from the backseat with Clarus in her arms, his hands holding onto her shoulders for support.

"We're alright!" the medic yelled to the prince. Nobody's hurt-" Shots began to fire, aimed at both parties. Clarus and Nebula ducked and ran behind the opened car door for cover. Gladiolus shoved Noctis behind him and pulled both of them as far under the front seats as the space allowed.

Ignis ducked away from the barrage of bullets and tugged on his gloves. "Prompto!" The blond didn't wait for his name to be called a second time and drew his revolver from the waistband of his pants. In a swift motion too fast for eyes, he opened the Regalia's front door and rolled onto the ground. He fired six shots at the soldiers, knocking back six of those firing at the prince's group, reloaded the pistol and took out the other four on the left side. Distracted by Prompto's retaliating, two of the armored soldiers on the inner right never saw the fireballs gathering in Ignis' palms, and by the time they saw the light from the flames, they were being burned inside of their armor.

"Highness!" The strategist glanced over his shoulder to see Noctis and Gladiolus readying themselves to begin the second wave of the attack.

As the royal quartet dove into the battle, Cor had taken down and disarmed one of the soldiers, which fell apart upon impact with his katana. "Anytime now, Clarus!" the king's right hand growled while battling it out with another one of the empty armor husks. He couldn't believe they'd been ambushed, and not just by a few soldiers. It was almost as if they knew the route Noctis' group would be taking... The army leader turned and stared at Nebula for a split second, just enough time for one of the lead soldiers to elbow his gut and knock him aside. He cursed under his breath for letting himself be open to attack, and guarded the katzbaler with the flat side of his katana. It became a battle of weight, Cor doing his best to force back the assailant pressing down on the long
steel weapon above him. Using one arm was creating a struggle; he laid his other hand on the underside of the blade and pushed up, but the soldier wouldn't give in. The marshal was brought down to a knee, and as he grit his teeth and propelled his blade upward once more, the soldier finally took a sliding step backwards. Cor stood up and felt a gust of wind pass him to the right. He didn't flinch, knowing it was the recovered Clarus stepping in to duel the Niflheim serviceman.

The gunfire decreased dramatically, enough for Nebula to run around to the backseat of the SUV. "Come on..." She rummaged around in her duffle bag in search of her weapon, and ripped it free from the bag's confines when she felt the presence of a trooper behind her. Before the puppet could fire its gun the medic made a sweeping descent, cutting in between the plates of armor and into the soldier's knees. Its greaves collapsed, and as the remainder of the armor followed, the husk's arm reached for the katzbalger sheathed at its hip and drew it, using its last moments to attempt and take out the medic. Nebula leaned out of the sword's path and lunged her own sword forward, striking the soldier between its breastplate and left gardbrace. The blade went through to the other side without obstacle and she twisted the blade, lobbing off its arm and disarming it. A crackling could be heard as the shell fell apart, and when the soldier collapsed she could see wires sparking on the inside.

Knowing Cor and Nebula had a handle on the soldiers attacking their car, Clarus - once he'd regained his composure following the initial shots fired - stormed over to the Regalia to help the prince and his crew. He destroyed the servicemen sent back by Prompto, intercepting a sword strike with one of his own summoned weapons, and was by his son's side within minutes. "Brings back memories of the last ambush, doesn't it?" the elder Amicitia yelled as he slashed through the armor of another Niflheim puppet. He, Gladiolus and Noctis were at each other's backs, fighting off the soldiers that surrounded them, most of their strikes aimed at the prince. Clarus quickly realized what they were trying to do. "Of course..." Lunge at the main target to create a diversion, then take out the remaining party members when they were distracted. Years of dueling against Niflheim's forces had taught the king's guard that armored bodies were easy to program with performing simple tasks. But he knew by default, they lacked targeting abilities that came down to specific people. Special commands were required to narrow down the target range, something only a living, breathing soldier could accomplish. As he blocked an oncoming swipe of another katzbalger, Clarus turned to the prince and his son. "They've been programmed to target you, Highness!" He shoved the soldier out of his path and sliced at its midsection, separating the breastplate into two pieces. "We must go after the humans in command! They can't be far off!"

His order was loud enough for all the party members to hear. After winning his own battle of strength with one of the armored husks, Cor scanned the immediate area for any soldiers not wearing helmets. He quickly found them at the edge of all the fighting: three men observing the battle from afar, one looking as if he were recording the affair through notes. The soldier to the left of the trio held a device in his hand, what Cor assumed to be the controlling mechanism. "Seven o'clock from my position!" he shouted. Spotting the battalion commanders from Cor's position, Noctis wove between the oncoming attackers, blocking their swings with a summoned sword, and headed for the lead soldiers. Nebula followed suit, though she was slowed down more than the prince when evading the slashes aimed at her. The odds were now seven against twelve, but the empty suits of armor had a weight to throw around she couldn't handle as well as the battle-prepared members of the royal court. Cor watched the medic dive through the fight to get to Noctis, and as much as he wanted to try and stop her from advancing, taking care of the Niflheim soldiers took priority.

The closer Nebula got, the more she was able to make out the details of the battalion leaders' faces. As she neared the edge of the battle field, their faces became recognizable, and she knew she'd seen them before. "How nice to see you again, dear Doctor." Commander Orson Lugos and his subordinates, Privates Denholm and Remus, were responsible for the ambush against the Lucians. Her eyes widened. "You did such a good job treating my men and I that we just had to thank you again in person... Though it is a shame to see that you deceived the Niflheim Imperial Army."
"How-" Before she could get so much as get a question out, Noctis jumped in front of the medic to intercept an oncoming sword slash from Remus. Neither of them spoke as Gladiolus was teleported next to the prince and lunged at Denholm, the one holding the control device for the empty suits of armor. A quick exchange of glances between Nebula and the bodyguard told her to take advantage of the opening and deal with Lugos, who was drawing his own sword. The sounds of armor falling apart, bullets flying around, glass shattering and feet sliding against the asphalt and dirt ground became faded as she focused on the man in front of her, the scum who cut her leg and invaded the safety of her home and practice, and for what? Treatment for superficial wounds? It hit her at that moment that they hadn't come just to search for Noctis and his group. "...Surveillance..."

"You're smarter than you look, Dr. Nebula Ardere," Lugos commented when their weapons clashed. "Your practice has been under the radar of the Niflheim government for some time now. I must say, the work you do is quite impressive. It's almost unheard of nowadays to make elixirs from natural ingredients versus synthetic ones. I'm sure our Chancellor would love to learn how you make them." His words lowered her guard for a moment, long enough for Lugos to reach out and grab her neck and squeeze. Noctis and Gladiolus, occupied with their own opponents, were unable to help her as Lugos began to lift her off the ground. Nebula went from attacking to last-resort defense, losing the grip on her falcata to attempt to loosen the fingers curling tighter around her throat. Her eyes jumped around the battlefield, looking on at her comrades fighting for their lives. The programming of the empty armor suits seemed to have been altered to focus on the whole group instead of only Noctis.

"You don't know how long we've been searching for you," Lugos continued. "You've been on our radar for five years now. A Niflheim fugitive, abandoning her country, and for what reason?"

Nebula had started to gasp and kick at him, but being held out at arm's length prevented any contact with the commander. Her vision was blurring; the increasing cut-off from oxygen was making her lose consciousness. Even Prompto, with his long-range advantage, couldn't get a clear shot at Lugos to stop him from choking her. Lugos pulled the medic closer to him and lowered his voice to a whisper, ignoring the the wheezes that struggled to escape his captive's lungs. "The Chancellor can't wait to get you back to Niflheim..." The last word he said to her was nearly inaudible, but even as she slipped into unconsciousness, she could understand what he'd said.

Nebula went limp in Lugos' grip, her breathing almost nonexistent. The commander pursed his lips and cocked his head to the side, a dissatisfied grimace overtaking his face. "And to think the Chancellor felt you had potential... What a waste." Parts of the sky began to rumble. The wind picked up in speed and swirled around the battlefield. On the other side of the fight, Prompto had made it to Cor without much injury - most of them his own doing from rolling around on asphalt. Ignis followed close behind, ducking under the remaining bullets whizzing around their heads.

"Is it Noctis?" the blond asked, staring at his best friend. The prince was still tied up in his own fight against Private Remus, both matching each other clash for clash. He was starting to look worn out, but nothing near the level where he'd need to bring out one of the Archæans to save himself. Prompto shook his head. "He seems alright... I'm gonna go help him." The gunner reloaded his pistol and crouched, readying himself to run toward the other half of his group. One step forward, a lightning bolt shot down from the clouds and struck the ground, forcing Prompto to leap backwards. "Whoa!! What the hell!!" The lightning strikes picked up in frequency, slamming the ground near the still-operating armored husks. Two of them were whipped by the electrified bolts and exploded immediately upon impact. Having knocked Denholm backwards and into the path of an oncoming surge, Gladiolus dove out of its way and pulled Noctis away from his opponent, sensing the Niflheim soldier would be struck down next. Both bodies collapsed when they were hit, the smell of fried flesh taking over the air.

Lugos' gaze darted around him and Nebula, and he grit his teeth. "So this is your doing, huh?" He lowered the medic close to the ground so their eyes were at the same level and he stared into hers, seeing her pupils dilated beyond anything he'd seen before, taking up nearly the entire iris in both
eyes. Mydriasis. He'd heard this might happen if she were on the brink of death. Lugos had his 
orders: capture the Lucian prince and the doctor, and kill anyone who stood in the way that had no 
direct connection with Niflheim or the crystal. Bringing the strategist or bodyguard or anyone within 
the Lucian circle would only prove useful for ten minutes or so; otherwise, imprisoned anyone else 
was pointless. The Chancellor never said anything about bringing harm to the targets, though. A 
smirk formed across the commander's face as he adjusted the grip on his katzbalger. Holding Nebula 
out at full arm's length again, he raised the sword arm and prepared to slice through her shoulder, 
staying far enough away from her major arteries to prevent death.

A lightning bolt was drawn to the metal of Lugos' blade. It traveled into the tip of the blade and 
snaked down into his hand, then entered his body. His form lit up brighter than the lights of 
Lestallum's night life, and by some miracle, his grip around Nebula's throat had loosened mere 
milliseconds before, sparing her from electrical damage. There was no time for Lugos to scream as 
the lightning took host of his body, using it as a pathway to reach the ground. Nebula flew 
backwards, just far enough to avoid contact with the lightning as it entered the ground and spread 
out. The medic wheezed and rolled on the asphalt, gasping desperately for air. Ignis and Clarus 
avoided the last of the bolts and darted toward her, trying to ease her down as oxygen refilled her 
lungs. One glance to the left of her had Clarus biting the insides of his cheeks to calm his nerves. The 
corpse nearby wasn't that of Commander Lugos, but of an unrecognizable human form whose 
muscle had all but melted off the skeleton. His eyes had either evaporated or been seared shut; 
whatever had occurred, he didn't want to know. Lugos had, in fact, screamed for his life as it was 
taken away from him, made evident by his open jaw. None of his uniform survived the burning; if 
any had, he assumed it had become one with the little bit of red and black skin spared from 
liquefying. Clarus covered his nose with the tattered collar of his coat, doing his best to block out the 
horrible stench whipping off of the corpse. There was only one thing that proved the body belonged 
to a Niflheim soldier: his hand had dissolved and become one with the super-heated metal of his 
katzbalger, forever bonding the two. An even briefer glance at the other two bodies showed similar 
results, albeit not as horrific as their leader.

Silence was all that was left on that moonlit night as the clouds dissipated. The battle was over. The 
Prince of Lucis and his circle lived to see another day.

Cor took the opportunity to investigate the armored husks up close. He kicked one of the helmets off 
of its accompanying breastplate and looked inside, finding a small metal box screwed into the back 
of the inner armor. He ripped it off and brought it to eye level to inspect. "So this is how they're 
controlling them..." The king's right hand shook his head in disgust. For months he'd been curious of 
how a nation devoid of magic users could amass such a densely packed army, and more so when the 
invasion was launched on his kingdom. And now, in his hand, he held a part of the answer. Cor 
flipped the device over to investigate it further, remaining cautious at the same time in case it had a 
dangerous hidden feature. Bringing it up to his ear he heard no sound whatsoever, and a slight wave 
of relief washed over him. The Marshal looked up from the device to Clarus and Gladiolus, who had 
made their way over to him.

"Nebula is breathing fine now," Gladiolus assured his superior. "Ignis is tending to her wounds. 
Some minor scrapes and a bullet graze; other than that, she's fine."

"And how is Noctis?"

"Unharmed," Clarus cut in. "Gladiolus did a fine job keeping him safe. Himself and the others, too."
The elder Amicitia looked over Cor's shoulder to the SUV. "Do you think the supplies were 
spared?"

Cor grunted. "I was just about to check that out." His own gaze moved past Clarus to the far side of
the road, where Ignis was helping Nebula to a sitting position. "...But there's something else I need to take care of first." The Marshal stormed past the Amicitia duo and a passing Prompto and approached the strategist and medic, who were getting too caught up in their conversation to notice his heavy footsteps.

"...the first time something like that's ever happened," the medic was telling Ignis and Noctis. "I'm more surprised at how...powerful it was." She didn't want to acknowledge the charred bodies that were littering the side of the road. As a doctor she was used to seeing burn injuries, but never anything on that scale. It made her stomach churn.

Noctis knelt beside her. "You've never had training of any kind?" She shook her head. Noctis tapped his chin, unsure of how to move on from the situation. "Ignis?"

The strategist was just as baffled, having been told she didn't even know she had the ability to utilize magic. "It's unheard of in Niflheim for anyone to be able to use magic. That's why their technology had become so advanced. The only explanation would be a family member that came from outside the empire and settled down with a Niflheim native." He shrugged his shoulders as he bandaged the last of the scrapes on her forearm. "Whatever the case, you now need magical training. I'd be happy to assist you when we have a free moment." Nebula nodded and gave a small smile.

"You want to tell me what the fuck THAT was?" Cor's voice boomed, getting the medic's attention. "You stormed into a battle, let your guard down, nearly got yourself killed, and then summon lightning out of nowhere and fry three soldiers! Do you ever think straight?"

The prince quickly got up. "Cor-"

Nebula followed suit and held a hand up to silence Noctis. "It's alright." She cleared her throat. "Look, what happened back there was a freak-of-nature occurrence. That guy was choking the life out of me. I don't even remember casting that spell." Her gaze moved to the ground, stopping just before the burnt corpse of Commander Lugos. "...I just killed three people." She blinked back tears during her pause. "...We can discuss this later. We should continue to the rest stop. We've already lost a lot of time." Nebula reached down for her sword and tucked it under her arm to carry it back to what remained of the SUV, leaving the Marshal fuming inside and out. He'd looked down at her hand and saw the magic-blocking ring still on her finger, the three diamonds cracked in four different places.

After she returned to the lead car Ignis stood up and joined Gladiolus and Prompto at the Regalia to clean up the inside. Noctis remained beside Cor a little longer, giving him a dirty stare. Cor ignored the prince's attempt at a threat. "What she did was reckless."

"Nebula saved our lives," the prince argued.

"She could've killed you!" Cor maintained. "You heard her yourself: she's never done something like this before. The girl's got no control over her abilities. For all we know, you and the others could've been struck by one of those damn bolts. Then whose smoldered corpse would I be scooping off the side of the road?" A loud huff escaped the Marshal's lips as he ran a hand through his hair and grit his teeth. "Shit..."

It was times like this he regretted ever involving Nebula Ardere in the affairs of Lucian royalty.
When you get down to it, there are times when you just can't ignore what happened in the past. You have to accept your fate no matter where you're from. You can't change the past, and you shouldn't let the past change you.

"...In other news, Accordian president Frons Speculo has called off a sit-in conference with Chancellor Izunia of Niflheim after a sudden health scare. President Speculo was scheduled to host the conference in the Presidential Palace at the end of this week. The President's press executive released a statement saying he suffered an apparent heart attack. He was rushed to the hospital this afternoon, where doctors report him to be in stable condition. He'll be kept under surveillance through at least tomorrow. The conference, which was projected to strengthen the alliance between Niflheim and Accordo, has been rescheduled for sometime next month."

Gladiolus snorted following the political segment of the news report. "What a load of crap." He rolled his eyes. "They're just bowing down to Izunia so they don't end up like Lucis. The President's too full of himself to sympathize with dictators otherwise." Something about the President of Accordo rubbed him the wrong way, though he couldn't put his finger on what did. Noctis, however, knew exactly what it was he despised about the leader.

The prince grumbled at the mention of President Speculo. "He thinks he's king of the world. His head's so far up his ass you can see that shit-eating grin he wears all the time. No different that Izunia and Aldercapt, if you ask me." Noctis crossed his arms and huffed. "And now, we have to rely on him for the safety of my father and our country..." Another sigh. "I'm sure the heart attack thing was just a cover so he wouldn't be seen as a traitor by Izunia."

Prompto would've argued with his friend, stating that the President may have been trying to hide the King of Lucis out of the sincerity in his heart. But when he really thought about it for a moment, he recanted the thought. Frons Speculo was a proud man who refused to show weakness to anyone. He wanted his country to hold the appearance of strength, no matter how screwed up their politics were. "I bet he's having some big party instead," the blond interjected with a chuckle. "You know how those Accordians love celebrating ANYTHING. The shop owner downtown has a baby? Party. Someone passes his test? Party. Kids looses a tooth? You get the idea." He leaned back in his seat, his eyes falling upon what little remained of the SUV's back windshield. He'd been told that the supplies sustained no damage. Good news for them; but until they made it into Accordo, the group was stuck with driving the shell of the vehicle they originally had. Like all the others, he wondered how they'd been tracked so far in the middle of nowhere. From what he saw in the heat of the battle, Cor's eyes had landed on Nebula. Did the Marshal suspect it was her doing? "...How much longer until we get to the rest stop?"

Ignis rolled his neck. "About an hour more. We have to go by Clarus' word, unfortunately. Using GPS is too risky when you're being ruthlessly chased. He thinks that's how the company found us."

A feasible cause. GPS technology was simple technology; something very easy for such a technologically advanced unit like the Niflheim army to hack into. The real question was how either the Regalia's or the SUV's systems were hacked. Having been manufactured in Lucis instead of imported from Niflheim, the opposing country shouldn't have been able to do so at all. "We've
disabled ours and they did the same in their car. We should be safe until we get to Accordo."

In the SUV, Nebula had finished tending to the wounds Ignis had used his emergency treatment on. Her throat still hurt from being choked earlier in the night, and upon undoing her bolero, the doctor noticed some finger-shaped bruising right under her jaw when looking in the rear-view mirror. She dug inside her duffle bag and retrieved a small potion bottle, twisting off the metal cap. It was a clear glass bottle with thick navy liquid inside and a white label, only a serial number written on it. Nebula pulled a dropper out from the side pocket and she dipped it into the liquid, applying pressure to the rubber top to draw in the liquid. She let go of the rubber when the dropper was halfway full and placed the tip in her mouth, then held her breath and drank the contents. The taste was horrendous. She wanted to gag. Nebula quickly followed up with one of the standard potions she kept on her person and the nasty taste dissipated enough for the gagging reflex to calm down.

"Emergency ethers, I see." Her attention was drawn to the front of the vehicle where Cor sat, still facing forward. He hadn't looked at her since they resumed driving to the rest stop. "It's almost like you anticipated using any magic on this trip. And from the look of how much you took, I'd say that stuff's pretty potent."

"A third of a bottle can make a normal person's heart explode. They're made to last. I'm just replenishing the energy I've used up." Nebula met Clarus' glance for a split second in the rear-view mirror and he quickly looked away. She understood why he'd averted his gaze so fast but still found herself annoyed by his action. She hoped they'd reach the rest stop soon. Nebula closed the bottle of ether and placed it back into the duffle bag, and sealed the dropper in a plastic bag. "I may need to use this on the King when I see him." Just mentioning His Majesty made Cor growl. "Get over it, Marshal. I'm going to be taking care of King Regis as soon as we enter Accordo's borders."

"Which makes you solely responsible for his life," he retorted. "If he dies, I'm holding you accountable, along with the rest of Niflheim. You'll stand trials for the death of the king and face lifetime imprisonment."

If she weren't in a moving car, Nebula would've jumped out of her seat. "You're being ridiculous! It's Niflheim's fault he's in this condition in the first place!"

"A country which you hail from-"

"I defected!" At this point Cor still refused to face her. Clarus remained silent, knowing this was a matter Cor had to solve himself, having been the one to involve her in the first place. "You came to me seeking help, Cor, help that I graciously agreed to give. And now you want me to stand trial for a crime I had no part in committing?" Her voice lowered and her breathing calmed as she fell back into the upholstered seat of the car. "...Just take me to the King so I can save his life." Nebula crossed her arms and turned to look out the left window, not wanting either of the men to see her enraged expression or her eyes if they happened to peer through the mirror again.

An hour of silence passed. The members of the royal court in the Regalia had changed the radio station to anything that wasn't the news, exhausted from so many days of traveling and fighting the Niflheim forces. They'd overheard Nebula's yelling, though they couldn't make out what she'd become angry over. They assumed it was another argument with Cor and she was finally standing her ground, and it made them wonder what the Marshal had against her. For all they knew, the two shared a secret past. Or maybe Cor just didn't like her because of where she was from. "I still doubt that's it," Noctis said. "Otherwise Prompto here wouldn't be allowed an inch near me."

"Maybe he's got a soft spot for me," the gunner added. "You know how it is: a poor kid from Niflheim orphaned by street violence runs away after robbing someone so he can get the hell out of town and be safe. I'm just glad someone found me before I croaked out there." Prompto chuckled as
he reminisced, though living through it hadn't been comical in the least. One of Cor's subordinates had discovered a young Prompto in the city limits of Insomnia, sickened from malnourishment and on the verge of dying. He'd been brought to the city's finest hospital and somehow, Noctis had heard about him. The tween prince sneaked out of the palace with Gladiolus by his side to go and see the runaway. They'd nearly given Ignis, then an adviser-in-training, a heart attack when he found the prince's quarters empty. Noctis had stayed in the hospital room until Prompto woke up, and even after that he refused to leave the blond's side. The two quickly formed a bond, and soon Ignis and Gladiolus became friends with the person they learned was named Prompto Argentum. King Regis soon found out about the boy and, after having an extensive ten-month investigation performed on his former life in Niflheim, Prompto was granted asylum in Insomnia. One of Cor's trusted subordinates became his guardian until his eighteenth birthday, and afterward Noctis invited him to live in the palace with himself and the others. The army grew worried when it was learned that he had some firearms on him when he'd escaped from Niflheim, and they were kept locked away from him until tensions started to rise between Lucis and Niflheim. He became a trusted member of the royal court and was allowed to carry his firearms on him in the name of Lucis.

Ignis shrugged his shoulders. "It's not likely, but you could be on to something, Prompto." Looking past the SUV, the strategist could see lights approaching on the right side of the road. "It appears we've arrived." He signaled for a right turn and followed the SUV into the small parking lot of a gas station and trailer park. The trailers were surprisingly large, running more in the RV range, which meant more sleeping space for them. This revelation brought a grin to his face. "We'll be able to sleep comfortably tonight."

Gladiolus stretched his arms out when the Regalia came to a stop. "We've gotten too used to sleeping in tents. I'm glad we won't have to do that again for a while. I think there was a rock stabbing me last time."

"Nah, that was Prompto's foot. He fell asleep with his boots on." The bodyguard's eyes widened and he stared at Prompto, who had hurried to the car's trunk and hid himself in his vest. Noctis laughed when the bodyguard chased the gunner past the car and behind the gas station building.

The strategist sighed. "Will you two quit chasing each other? We've got to unpack!" He shook his head and muttered under his breath, deciding to handle it himself and let them tire themselves out. They deserved a little fun after the intense battle they endured. Noctis helped him unload the trunk and kept an eye on Cor as he, Nebula and Clarus unpacked the SUV's trunk. The Marshal and doctor stayed away from one another, and if anything had to be passed from one to the other they used Clarus to hand it off. After a short while the elder Amicitia excused himself to prepare the night's reservations for them, leaving the Marshal and doctor to work together. In the back of his mind he hoped they'd stay civil.

Nebula tugged on the strap of her duffle bag to steady it. She returned to the trunk to take the remaining luggage out, and as she rounded the corner of the car, she stopped abruptly. Cor, also going for the trunk, halted at the same moment. They glared at each other, azure meeting slate, neither of them wavering. There was silence in the air but everyone knew what was being said between the two. Nebula's fear of the man had evolved into crossness, her upper lip curling in disdain. Cor's eyebrows furrowed, noticing her heightened guard. They reached for the last suitcase at the same time, his hand over hers as they grasped for the handle, and their tempers flared again. At that moment Nebula's gaze wandered to his blazer, nonchalantly studying the fabric it was made of as she did her best to ignore his face. She suddenly noticed a red stain on the shirt underneath, and as she squinted, it appeared to get a little bigger. "Cor..." She slipped her hand out from under his and outstretched it toward his torso. He immediately smacked her hand away and she replied with her own smack to his. "Relax. Let me just see..." Nebula pushed his blazer out of the way and saw pain on the Marshal's face for the first time all night. The source lay in front of her: a hole torn in his shirt.
near his clavicle, and underneath a second hole in his flesh. "Cor! They shot you!"

"It's nothing," he grunted, followed by a hiss, and the man hunched over. Nebula ignored his tone and threw his arm over her shoulders to support his body. "Just...let it be..."

"Shut up," she ordered him. "I'm getting you inside." The doctor turned to Gladiolus, who had ceased chasing Prompto, and waved her free hand to get his attention. He ran over to her when he saw Cor's weakened condition.

"What happened?"

"Bastards shot him. It doesn't look lethal, but if I don't get it out, it could be." Nebula tilted her shoulders and handed her bag off to the bodyguard. "Take this inside for me. Clarus!" Gladiolus ran to get his father, who'd received the keys for the trailers they'd be sharing for the night. He filled Clarus in on the situation and the elder Amicitia ran to the nearer of the two trailers and unlocked the door while Gladiolus brought in the medic's bag. She helped Cor inside and laid him down on one of the beds. "Get him out of that shirt." She stepped aside and took all the necessary tools out of her medical bag while the bodyguards did as they were told. Nebula went from traveling companion to emergency doctor within a second. She threw her hair tails back and pulled on her surgical mask and gloves. Once Cor was nude from the waist up Nebula grabbed her flashlight and inspected his wound. "On a scale of 1-10, what's your pain level?" The Marshall sucked his teeth. "Dammit, Cor, this is not the time!"

He pulled in a breath. "...Nine..."

The doctor leaned in a little closer. "As I thought. The bullet's still in there. I'm gonna have to take it out. Cor..." She backed away and looked up at him, watching him nod when he heard what the situation was. "You want me to sedate you?" He shook his head; that was the last thing he wanted. "Alright. It's going to hurt like a bitch, but..." Nebula pushed down her mask, sweat already accumulating on her forehead. "Gladiolus, go back to everyone and let them know what's happened. I don't want them worrying."

The bodyguard stared at her, wondering if she was making the right call. With his superior in his current condition, he figured she could use his help in treating him. But the more he thought about it, the more Gladiolus realized Nebula didn't want him to see Cor in this state. He'd already had to witness Noctis near death; she didn't want him to live through the pain a second time. With a hesitant nod he exited the trailer, closing the door behind him and biting on his lower lip. He neared his friends, who had quickly gathered near the trailer after hearing Nebula's voice and witnessing the scene. "What happened?" Prompto asked, sounding almost out of breath.

"It's Cor. He got shot during the fight and kept it to himself until now." His comrades all felt a hammer hit their guts.

Noctis grumbled, tightening his fists. "He always does this," the prince complained. "He's so busy worrying about us that he doesn't look out for himself." He closed his eyes and gulped hard, fearing a vision would soon come.

Ignis laid a compassionate hand on Noctis' shoulder, knowing he had to play the role of friend instead of adviser. "He'll make it. He's under the care of one of the world's best doctors. For now, all we can do is wait." He decided the best thing they could do while they waited for Nebula to emerge was take care of themselves, and the quartet went inside the gas station shop to grab some coffee.

In the trailer, Clarus - suited up in a surgical mask and gloves - held Cor down by his shoulders against the mattress, being careful not to touch his injury. Plastic sheeting had been laid underneath
him to ensure a fast clean-up. After listening to his breathing Nebula determined the bullet was nowhere near his heart, aorta or lungs, and could be safely removed. She prepared a needle with anesthetic to relieve some of the pain during the procedure. "The local anesthetic is needed," she'd told him. "You'll be thanking me later." The tip of the needle was shoved into the flesh near the wound and Cor grunted, gritting his teeth. She let it sit for a few minutes to take effect and prepared her instruments. "I'll make a small incision along the hole to make room for the bullet to come out," Nebula explained, "otherwise it'll be difficult to remove. The scar shouldn't be too big." As she mentioned the scarring her eyes fell upon a nearby marred portion of his skin. The skin was a few shades darker than his original, raised in some spots and dipped in the middle. It spanned four inches wide, and even a quick glance at it made her cringe.

"Just get it out." Cor's voice snapped her out of her trance. For once his tone toward her was much less hateful and more desperate, almost like he feared for his own life. The scene was becoming all too familiar for Nebula. She wiped sweat from her forehead on her upper arm, and after giving Clarus an acknowledging nod, she laid the scalpel blade against Cor's chest. His hand immediately grabbed onto the kneeling woman's thigh as she cut a small line going out from the bullet hole. Though her explanation of the procedure had made it sound simple, both of them knew it would be strenuous. They weren't in a sterile hospital environment with IVs stuck in his arm, there wasn't a machine monitoring his pulse and oxygen intake, there were no other surgical staff on hand. There was just her and Clarus in a small trailer, kneeling beside a mattress where she worked saving her patient's life, armed with only the tools and medicine she carried around. Even her house was more equipped to handle this type of situation than the trailer; at least there she could plug him into something to keep tabs on his stats. She had only her skills and luck to rely on, and the more real the scene before her became, the more nervous she was.

To her relief, Nebula found the bullet with ease. It hadn't gone far into Cor's chest, nor had it become wedged between any vital vessels or bones. She only required forceps to take it out. "Hold him down well," she ordered Clarus, signaling that the moment of truth was upon them. Nebula dipped the nose of the forceps into the wound and opened them. "Here we go..." She wiped her forehead again and grasped the bullet, losing it the first time. "Shit." She went for it again, twisting the forceps to get a better hold of the bullet. Cor's hand squeezed her leg and he held back a scream. "Hang on. Just stay with me." The second grip on the bullet was successful and she carefully pulled it out, keeping her hand steady and slow to prevent losing it again. The agony was over when she pulled the metal object from his chest and held it up for everyone to see. All three of them breathed a sigh, Cor in alleviation, and Clarus and Nebula in reassurance. His life was saved. "It's out..." Nebula had to say it out loud to make it more real for herself. She placed the bullet into a nearby plastic cup and laid the forceps down on the plastic lining. "How are you feeling, Marshal?"

His breathing began to even out. "Like I'm not dying anymore," he replied, earning a chuckle from the two hovering over him. He didn't smile back, but his grimace softened.

"Alright. Let's get you closed up." Nebula retrieved a surgical needle and started to unwind a roll of dissolving stitching string. "Clarus, go let the others know he's fine. Thanks for your help."

"Of course," he said to her, and started to remove his protective wear. "Would you like a drink?"
Nebula shook her head and set her focus on stitching up her patient. The elder bodyguard exited the trailer and was met with four worried faces.

Clarus cleared his throat. "The general is alright. Nebula successfully removed the bullet." Their expressions immediately lit up. Prompto cheered a little. "She's finishing him up as we speak."

As the elder Amicitia conversed with the younger members of the royal court outside, Nebula was sewing the last stitches on Cor's injury. By now he'd let go of her leg and had his hands folded on
top of his stomach, regretting having shown her such a vulnerable side of himself. "I'm giving you the same order I gave Noctis after I treated him. You're not to fight, under any circumstances, until this is completely healed. Understand?" The general huffed in response, his normal personality already returning. She paid it no mind as she laid in the last stitch, tied it off and cut the remaining string. "I used the dissolving stitches, so they'll disappear on their own. Drink one of my potions tonight before you go to sleep, and then twice a day for the remainder of the trip to Accordo. It should be fully healed by the time we get there."

The medic took a moment to switch out her bloody gloves for clean ones, then got to work on bandaging the Marshal. She had him sit up slowly and take a few pills to prevent any pain from coming on since the anesthetic wore off. She taped a gauze square over the closed wound and started to wrap bandage around his torso to hold it in place. Nebula had to get in abutting to reach for the bandage roll as it made its way behind him; too close for comfort, in Cor's opinion. His grimace returned when she was close to done with his bandaging. She'd come extremely close to his face, their noses nearly touching. "The wound should heal nicely." Nebula flashed him a small, quick smile, and when she tied off the bandages, he'd had enough.

"Cut the act."

His words threw her for a loop. "What?"

"You heard me." Cor grabbed his blazer and slowly pulled it over his shoulders. "Stop acting like some innocent creature."

"I..." Nebula became confused. "I'm sorry, did I do something wrong? Or did you want that bullet to sink further into your chest and kill you someday?" The doctor began to clean up her mess. "You were dying right in front of us, Cor. I had to save your life-

"Only because you caused this. The soldiers were tracking you. You led them to us and had us all nearly killed."

She couldn't believe he was starting this again. "I told you before to stop being ridiculous. You heard what Clarus said: they tracked the GPS in our cars. It had nothing to do with me, and it was a total coincidence that it happened to be the same soldiers who visited my house." Nebula huffed. "Look, just relax. You just had surgery. The last thing I need right now is for you to pop your stitches and bleed to death in front of me." He hated when she was right. Cor settled down for the moment, allowing her to fix up parts of his bandages she felt weren't secure enough. "You're lucky none of those bullets ran through you," she commented, "otherwise Lucis would be mourning yet another loss." Nebula couldn't help staring at the area where his old scar lay.

"A death you very nearly caused, witch." Her hands stopped in their tracks. "Don't you ever forget that." Her head slowly raised with each of his sentences, and her eyes grew wider. "Let me be clear, Atra: You have a very concise objective. My well-being is your last priority - as you so clearly demonstrated."

Her blood froze. The fingers that so meticulously cleaned and treated the wound on his chest let go of the gauze. Her pupils retracted as she met his eyes, mouth agape. "...I told you to never call me that again," she told him, her tone flat and hard.

Cor leaned down and neared her. "Then tell me which name you'd prefer. We can go by Lamia, or Sorceress, or we can go by your real name: Atra Ardere Interitio. Either one will work when you're tried for my attempted murder."
The Sight in the Mirror, Part 2: First Glance

Chapter Summary

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance: the five stages of grieving. Nebula, otherwise known as Atra, has been trapped between the first and third stages since her departure from Niflheim. But nothing can compare to the self-hatred she lives through for the tragedy that almost came to be nine months ago. She knew the past couldn't be changed; that didn't change how much she wanted it to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Atra Ardere Interitio.

Lamia.

They were two names no one had called her in five years, since she last set foot on Niflheim soil. Both names bothered her greatly; her birth name made her skin crawl, and her title made her blood freeze. She'd been branded a witch by everyone around her. It was information that Cor had known, yet he enlisted her help for his country anyway. It sickened her just to think about it. And to add insult to injury, the marshal had brought up their first meeting over nine months ago. It was a dark day in history for her, one of many she preferred to keep locked away in the deepest parts of her memories.

"My patience with you has worn out," he continued. "You're clinging to the last threads of life, Interitio. At this point, I'm willing to forsake you treating the king just so I can get rid of you." Cor's stare bore into Atra's, slowly cracking her guard, and his hand searched the mattress for his katana. "I can't even remember why I spared your life after that night. You deserve no mercy for what you did." Her eyes were still wide, pupils still small, mouth now closed and tight-lipped.

"Cor..." Her hands reached out to him again. The marshal found his weapon and he drew the blade, slicing into Atra's open palms. She pulled back and looked down at the fresh wounds on her hands, watching the red liquid seep out from between the severed portions of her flesh, then met Cor's eyes. "I'm not a monster..." She reached out to him a third time, blood dripping from the open lines of her skin. Cor threatened her with the katana but she paid it no mind and pushed it out of the way with her knuckles, the blade's edge cutting her skin afresh. Her gaze calmed despite the stinging in her hands. Atra approached Cor, forcing him against the back window of the trailer, and caressed his cheeks with her bloody hands. Her thumbs rubbed along the line of his cheek bones, spreading her blood across his face with the gentlest of touches. The medic's eyes were much softer than minutes before. It was a gaze Cor remembered all too well, the soothing, warm slate stare that he trusted a long time ago. She gave him the same look when they first met; it was almost sad how safe they made him feel, even with the knowledge that she was the infamous Nifeli sorceress. "I regret what I did to you every waking moment of my life. If I could change what I did-" She paused, registering the sharp edge of his katana pressing against her throat. "...I still feel something for you."

He bared his teeth and forced the blade further against her, earning a grunt from the woman. "Don't you dare bring that up." Atra's jaw tightened.
"It hasn't changed. I still think about what could've been. The 'what if' takes over my mind every
time I remember the agreement we made." One hand let go of his face and slid down to the marshal's
injury, hesitantly reaching for the old, vertically slanted scar that defiled his chest. She stretched out
her hand to touch it but pulled back, and curled her fingers in to prevent her blood from staining the
gauze. Her expression wavered in a way that made the marshal apprehensive, and he prepared
himself to act in case she lost control, and averted his gaze. "You're still afraid of me."

"Who wouldn't fear the woman who thrust her sword into your chest?"

Atra shook her head. "That's not me. You know that's not the real me." He didn't want to hear
anymore. "Cor..." He despised the way she said his name in that inviting, almost desperate tone;
having her look at him in the same pleading manner only worsened it on his psyche. The marshal
met her eyes again, and the memory of their mutual attraction to one another flooded back into his
mind. The two hadn't been in love or fallen into it. The majority of the allure shared between the
doctor and the marshal had merely been physical, though there were moments of an emotional
connection he now refused to acknowledge. It was the one thing he kept to himself when it came to
his relationship with Atra; not even the King of Lucis knew he'd been seduced by the witch.

"Anything that drew me closer to you in the past died there that night," Cor affirmed. "Don't try to
salvage the remains of a rotted past. You'll only hurt yourself in the end." His words were harsh, and
he felt he'd finally gotten through to the medic when she backed off, allowing him an ample
breathing space. "Go clean yourself up. We can't have the others seeing you like this...not yet." Atra
flashed him a glare while moving away from him and carefully grabbed her medical equipment, then
walked to the trailer door and left. Cor sheathed his katana and breathed a sigh, thankful to finally
have her away from him. Sweat had gathered around his neck when she'd been within inches of his
face. For the second time in nine months she'd saved his life, but for only the second time in his life,
Cor thought she was going to kill him.

The marshal moved at a slow pace when he pulled the blazer onto his arms and kicked off his shoes.
He laid down on the mattress, and moments later Clarus came into the trailer. "You're looking a lot
better." Cor couldn't tell whether the man was being sincere or sarcastically referring to the look on
his face. He was sure the elder bodyguard had seen Atra's condition upon her abrupt exit of their
trailer. "She's with the others now. Ignis is tending to her wounds."

Cor groaned in response. "How nice." The mere thought of the witch sitting near what may be Lucis' last
hope revolted him. She'd become a huge nuisance, and the revelation that he would soon be rid of
her was the only thing keeping him sane. Remembering the doctor's orders he sat up again, going
slow to keep the stitches in place, and found a pint-sized bottle filled with chartreuse green liquid
waiting for him. He knew she'd left it behind for him despite their clashing attitudes, once more
prioritizing her medical care instincts over everything else. Opening the bottle he quickly realized
she'd picked a strong potion for him to drink, something he could tell right away by the equally
strong scent. He downed it right away, not wanting to savor any of its sour and bitter taste.

"You never did disclose everything regarding how you found out she was the witch," Clarus
commented when he began to clean the mess Atra has left behind. It was a statement he knew would
strike a sensitive cord with the marshal, possibly triggering memories he'd rather bury, but the time
came where he had to entrust the information with another. Cor assumed the brown-eyed bodyguard
was predicting another brush with death he may not survive, and as much as he wanted to forget
about it and get some sleep, he knew Clarus had made a valid point. Resting his katana on his lap,
Cor hunched over and clamped his hands together.

"Clarus...what I'm about to tell you never leaves this room. If the King were to ever learn of that
night's details, he'd surely reconsider my position as his right hand." Clarus nodded in understanding.
Cor rubbed his temples, the memories already causing his body to ache something horrible.

-NINE MONTHS EARLIER-

Pulling his beret back into place, Cor applied more pressure to the gas pedal. The King had insisted that he leave this task to the commanding officers under him, but as head of the royal family guards, he felt this to be a matter of great concern to him. The Empire of Niflheim was growing stronger by the minute, becoming more of a threat to the neighboring countries. They'd already made a move on conquering nearby Tenebrae, which had only been prevented with help from Lucis; but Niflheim still had a grip on the country's monarchy, and quickly put a mental grip on its parliament. Cor and the Lucian generals predicted a standoff between Nilfheim and Lucis would soon come, and his own country's senators were already in talks on commencing a conference with Emperor Aldercapt and Chancellor Ardyn Izunia for the hope of peace. The King had suggested it be held on Lucian soil for his own protection, an idea Cor was completely against. "Majesty," he pleaded with the King the day he suggested it, "holding the conference here is..." He couldn't find a kind way to say it. "It's a stupid idea. You're inviting the enemy onto our territory, something they've had their eye on taking for themselves for nearly a century. If you follow through with that motion, you may as well hand them the crystal, too."

"I'm not suggesting this without concern for our safety," Regis replied from his throne. "I know full well the risk this carries. Astrum and I went through all other possible ideas on how to handle this matter. He agrees with your worries on the matter." He paused to take a breath. "But I want Lucis to be seen as a ray of hope in the world. We must stay strong in anticipation of the encroaching shadows. If we show weakness now, Iedolas and Ardyn will use that to their advantage, as we will be at war. I don't want that for my people." The King rose from his throne and walked down the left stairwell to Cor, and laid a hand on the man's shoulder when he reached the bottom. "I will leave security in your hands, Cor." The family guard looked down to the marble floor, still concerned over the King's decision. "Please trust me. Not as the head of my family's guard, but as my friend."

He trusted Regis with all his heart, but a knot remained in Cor's conscience. It wasn't that he didn't trust his friend's intuition; it was Iedolas that distressed him. Over the course of his dictatorship over Niflheim the emperor had made many controversial decisions, including the desire to put embargos in place on all countries but Accordo, the only nation that still bowed to their power. And then there was the rumor of the Nifeli ruler having every citizen tagged like farm animals. He'd never been a man to say he was afraid of someone, but the growing threat that Niflheim was placing on the world was alarming. So the King's right arm decided to go outside of his country in search of neutral ground he felt Regis wouldn't be opposed to choosing for the conference over their homeland. He'd felt it best to go by himself on the trip and left guarding the King in the hands of Clarus, his closest ally. Cor's first objective was to reunite with their old comrade Cid, Lucis' former master weaponsmith. The older man had settled down in Duscae after decades of fighting alongside the royal court of Lucis, and now managed a gas station and mechanic's shop with his granddaughter Cindy.

The black SUV pulled into the Hammerhead repair station, finding the parking lot empty, to the marshal's relief. Cor turned the vehicle off and got out, walking to the entrance of the service station. A blonde woman had walked through the front door, and upon laying eyes on the middle-aged man, her face lit up. "Well, well," Cindy started, resting a hand on her hip, "there's a face I didn't expect to see."

"A pleasure to see you again, Cindy," he replied, and shook the eager woman's hand. "How's business been for you?"
Cindy spun the wrench she was holding around her finger. "You'd be surprised how many customers we get out here. Car accidents, break downs... It's amazing how reckless people get once they're outside the city." She glanced behind him at the SUV. "Speaking of which, are you in need of some repairs?"

Cor shook his head. "That won't be necessary. I actually came out here to speak with your grandfather."

"Ooh, you just missed him. He headed over to Wiz's a little while ago to repair the freezer. He said it'd take him a while, so if you want to meet him there I'm sure he won't mind." A dark red car pulled into the service station and honked twice. "Looks like I've got another customer. Why don't you stay for dinner after you both come back? I'm sure Paw Paw would love to share stories over a meal."

"I'll consider it on my way back," Cor replied, and turned back to the SUV. Cindy waved to him and headed over to the waiting customer, allowing her grandfather's friend to return to his car and pull out of the station. He drove back onto the road and typed the address of Wiz Chocobo Post. His drive was quick and quiet, thankfully without running into any of the local wildlife - specifically the behemoth Deadeye. The creatures grazed on as he drove by, paying him no mind even when he turned off the main roadway and parked in front of the Chocobo Post. He walked the rest of the way, ignoring the passing glances the various guests gave him. He couldn't tell what went through their minds when he trotted by them; he only hoped none of them knew of his occupation simply with a passing glance. Cor entered the premises, taking note of the smell of oil enveloping the building's air space. It tickled at his throat, causing an uncomfortable sensation in his chest, and he cough.

Two men came running out from the back room, also coughing, the younger of the two fanning smoke away from his face. "You sure THAT was a good idea?"

"Hey! My forte is cars, not refrigerating systems. If ya wanted a fridge mechanic, you should've called the damn number." After another cough the arguing man's attention landed on Cor and he whistled. "How long's it been now? Five, ten years?" He wiped his hands on an already filthy cloth and chuckled as he approached Cor. "I've been waiting to hear from you for some time." He offered to shake the marshal's hand but retracted upon the realization that his skin was still covered in thick oil, and offered his elbow in turn.

Wiz tilted his head in interest. "Friend of yours, Cid?"

"More than a friend. This guy save my ass plenty of times when we were in the army together. Practically owe it to him, too." Cid gestured between the two with his dirty hands. "Wiz, Cor. Cor, Wiz." Cor shook the estate owner's hand after carefully inspecting it for oil. "I guess Cindy told you I'd be here?"

"That's right. There's something I need your help with."

Before he could continue, an anxious yell boomed from outside. "Please help! Someone call the doctor!" Wiz seemed to recognize the voice, Cor assumed, when the grin on his face dropped and he bolted outside. Following after him, Cor saw a woman riding in on one of the rented chocobos cradling a child. "My son was attacked by sabretusks! Someone please help him!" A crowd began to gather as the chocobo closed in on the ranch.

Wiz rushed toward the chocobo and took hold of its reigns. "Clear the way!" he commanded, and motioned for Cor and Cid to help him make a path while he helped the woman and her son off the giant bird. "What happened, Jupiter?"

The mother was out of breath as she answered. "Aurum here decided to ride Toni outside the
designated area. Next thing we knew a herd of sabre tusks were on his tail, and then the chocobo stopped short and he went flying!" Her attention went to the tween in her arms. "I told you to not go too far out there! You never want to listen to me, do you?"

"Mom-" the kid sucked in a scream from the agony- "can you please save the lecture for later?" He shrieked when he was laid on a mat on the ground, feeling the pain ripple through his limbs. "My leg..."

Wiz already had a phone in hand, the number dialed. "Don't worry, kid, the doctor's on her way." It was now a matter of waiting as Wiz pleaded with the medic to get there as soon as possible. "She'll be here in fifteen."

It was a grueling fifteen minute wait for them, and when they saw the woman in purple and black in the distance, the weight on everyone's shoulders lifted a little. Wiz met her halfway down the path and filled her in on the situation. "He says his leg hurts the most. It looks pretty torn up."

"As long as he can still feel and move everything, he should be fine." The woman walked past Cor and glanced briefly at him, then laid her eyes on her patient, kneeling beside him. "Hi, Aurum. I'm Dr. Ardere. I see you had a run in with some sabre tusks. Can you tell me your pain level on a scale of 1-10?" She listened to his response while she began the general examination. She needed just minutes to look over his entire body. "Well the good news is that you'll be walking again in no time, though it looks like you might have broken your tibia. Other than that you just need some stitches."

The mother's face calmed in solace. "Alright, people, time is of the essence. I need to get him to my office immediately. Does anyone have a car?"

Before Cor could get so much as a word in Cid pat the man's shoulder. "You got your driver right here."

"Good. Let's get him in there now. "The doctor unzipped her bolero and tied it around Aurum's thigh. As his mother helped him up, she turned her attention to Cor. "I'm sorry to put you in such an awkward situation," she apologized. "I'll be happy to pay for any inconveniences this would cause you, Mr..."

"Leonis," he replied. "It's alright, so long as we get him patched up." Though annoyed at Cid for volunteering him, he wasn't a cruel man, and knew the life of the injured teen had taken priority over the cleanliness of his SUV.

"Thank you." They made their way to the car, the doctor helping Jupiter get her son into the back, then taking up residence in the passenger seat. Cor got in and turned onto the main street, and followed the directions his front passenger gave him. Every few minutes she'd turn around to check on Aurum, who did his best to fight back the pain. "Hang on, buddy, we're almost there." Turning forward again, she pointed to a dirt path leading up to a large house surrounded by trees. "Turn left here." He followed her directions and pulled into the driveway. Everyone rushed to get the injured tween inside as safely as possible. The doctor ushered them in to the back room, where she began to set up all the needed medical equipment. "Lay him down on the bed," she ordered. "Mr. Leonis, I could use your hand with this. Do you mind?" He nodded and followed her to a supply closet, where she handed him several plastic packages and a flat, fabric-covered board. "Would you please take this back to the room? I'll be there in a bit." Cor went on ahead to the waiting family and placed the equipment on a nearby table. Minutes later the doctor returned, geared up with sterile gloves and her medical bag. "First things first; let's see how bad that bone break is." She gestured for Cor and Jupiter to clear the room while positioning a nearby x-ray machine over the teenager's body and laying the board underneath him. She skipped out of the room and pressed a few buttons, listened for the click, then returned to move the camera out of the way. "While those develop we'll get you
patched up. You can come back in."

Cor and Jupiter returned to the back room. "Will he be alright?" the distraught mother asked, practically biting her nails.

The doctor nodded. "So long as the x-rays don't show anything completely shattered, he'll be able to walk out on crutches." She filled a syringe with harlequin-colored liquid and tapped the needle. "Alright, Aurum. You're gonna feel a little pinch and some burning, but then you'll feel nice. I'm only giving you a little numbing medication, so you won't go to sleep." She stuck the needle into a vein on his arm and pressed down on the syringe lever, injecting the potion mixture into her patient. After a few minutes it took effect, and she started to clean and sew each one of his gashes, paying attention to his leg first. It didn't occur to her until moments later that the man who'd helped her bring the patient in was still standing next to her, half-watching her stitch Aurum's flesh together, half figuring out what to do next. "I'm sorry," she began, "I didn't mean to take up your time. If you'd like to go, you can. Thanks again for your assistance."

"Oh, yes." Cor shook his head in acknowledgement and turned to leave.

"If you're still around tomorrow," she called to him as he made his way out, "I'd like to show my gratitude for helping me...though I'm not sure how yet." Her chuckle was a little tense, almost sounding embarrassed.

He didn't know how to reply to her gesture at first. "...I'll be staying with Cid tonight. If you think of something, just give him a call." Feeling her attention fade away from him Cor left the building and got into the SUV, and backed away from her house.

By the time Cor arrived at the Hammerhead station Cid had returned from his job at Wiz Chocobo Post. He glanced at the dashboard and read the time. 7:46. Still before the dinner Cindy had promised him if he came back that evening; plenty of time to discuss what he came to Duscae for. The elder mechanic saw him pull into the station and waved a hand to get his attention. The King's right arm parked and got out of the car, now able to greet his old friend with a proper handshake and a pat on the arm. "Sorry 'bout the mess earlier," Cid apologized. "I'm not the best at fixin' freezers. Anyway, what brings you all the way out here?"

"It's best we talk about this inside." Cor looked over his shoulders, feeling uneasy about the quiet surrounding them. Cid picked up on his senses and motioned for the marshal to follow him in the house. He gave his granddaughter, who was working on the last call of the day, a few hand signals to tell her he'd be talking with Cor, and she replied with a thumbs-up. Being surrounded by walls and a ceiling calmed Cor's sense, no longer getting the suspicion that strangers could listen in on their conversation. Cid retrieved some mugs and filled them with coffee for the two of them to share. Handing one off to his friend, the mechanic offered him a seat at his table and took the opposite one for himself.

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"It's about Regis, isn't it?"

Cor blinked, taken aback by how easily his expression was read. He folded his hands together and laid them atop the table. "I'm sure you've heard about plans to ignite a peace treaty between Lucis and Niflheim. While the whole idea bothers me I know it's for the best, but His Majesty..." A sigh escaped his pursed lips. "He insists it be held on Lucian territory. And while I trust his judgement, I don't trust that deranged emperor or his chancellor." The blue-eyed man sipped his coffee. "Regis thinks it'll all be fine as long as I make security extremely tight, but knowing Iedolas, he'll dig out a few cracks and slither his way under our forces."

Cid took in every word his friend had to say, and part of him was glad that Cindy hadn't been inside
to hear any of it. "So you came all the way out here to find neutral ground for the peace talks." Cor
nodded. "I had a feeling you weren't here just for a visit. Honestly, I can't blame ya. Rememberin' all
the battles against Niflheim you, Regis, Clarus and myself took part in still give me the creeps when I
think about 'em for too long." The mechanic reached for a long metal box resting against the wall
and opened it, taking out a cigar. He offered the box to Cor, who waved his hand in a 'no thanks'
manner, and laid the box down to prep his cigar for smoking. "I'm assuming he's got no idea why
you're out here."

"I told him I wanted to pay an old friend a visit."

"And he bought it without question?" Cid whistled, impressed. "Must've been pretty busy when you
told him you were going out of town." He lit his cigar and let the taste of the smoke dance in his
mouth before parting his lips, and he watched the vapor swirl around upon release. "There are only
two places I can think of off the top of my head: Cauthess and Lestallum. But knowing Lestallum,
they'll either be entirely against it, or only in it for some pretty hefty compensation. And I heard
Cauthess might be dealing with an Archean problem..." He sat in silence for a few moments,
thinking of a viable solution to the problem. "Only neutral ground left is here, but there aren't any
large hotels or conference halls around. Nearest one's in Lestallum."

"We can deal with Lestallum's conditions," Cor interjected. "So long as it's away from the crystal
and outside of Insomnia. That's all I care about." As he finished his sentence Cindy walked in and
leaned down to kiss her grandfather's cheek.

"Closed up shop for the night. I'm gonna wash up and start dinner."

Cid grinned. "Ooh. What's on the menu tonight, sweet pea?"

"It's a surprise." She disappeared into the kitchen.

Sipping his coffee again, another thought came to Cor's mind. "There was something else I wanted
to ask you. It's about that doctor from earlier..."

The mechanic's head perked up from his mug. "Oh, yeah. That's Nebula Ardere. She moved here a
little over four years ago after getting her medical degree. She's amazing. Excellent skill, nice to all
the patients, and her elixirs are to die for."

"Her elixirs?"

"You're not gonna believe this, but she makes them herself. Every single one, hand-crafted, and they
work so much better than the factory-brand ones. She'll give you a good deal if you're interested."
He took another puff of his cigar. "By the way, how's Aurum doing?"

It took Cor a second to realize he was referring to the injured teenager from earlier. "His injuries
aren't too serious, from what she determined. Last I saw she was putting in some stitches." He lifted
the mug to his lips.

"Good, good." Smoke blew from the mechanic's lips. "I also heard that she's single."

If he'd sucked in any more coffee Cor would've been choking. The little bit of liquid that lay in his
mouth spewed back into the mug while Cid pointed and laughed at his reaction. "Oh, Etro, that
never gets old!"

"Dammit, Cid, you know I hate when you do that!" The marshal bared his teeth at his friend,
annoyed that one of his old habits hadn't vanished with age. Though irked at the commentary from
across the table, Cor couldn't help but think about the future of Lucis and contemplate the threat
Niflheim was proving to be. If things went the way he feared they would, Niflheim and Lucis may be at war, and supplies would be limited due to the empire's vast area of power. An outside supplier would be beneficial to his country. "...How much does she charge for the elixirs?"

Chapter End Notes

At first I didn't think I'd be writing a multi-part chapter, but after just letting my mind take over and watching the story evolve from the original idea, I've just let my brain and fingers take over.

So here's a multi-parter for everyone that takes a deeper look into the truth of the relationship between Cor and Nebula/Atra.

Also, the chapters from here on out are probably going to get longer the further the story goes on. So be prepared for more reading~
The Sight in the Mirror, Part 3: Reflecting Light

Chapter Summary

When you learn to let go of the past, the reflection you see in the mirror can look a lot brighter than you remember.

Cor ended up spending the night at the Hammerhead station, having been offered one of the trailers by Cid. "You'll have to check the prices for yourself," Cid had replied to his friend's question, waiting until after dinner and after Cindy had gone to bed to continue the conversation. "Can't remember them off the top of my head, but I know she's super affordable. And she's made quite the variety of stuff you may find interesting." The more the mechanic talked about her, the more the marshal couldn't figure out if he was speaking out of honesty, or exaggerating the facts to somehow entice him. He had a reputation in their younger years for joking around - a habit which obviously hadn't died - but he knew to be serious when the moment called for it. "Why so curious?"

"You and I both know this armistice with Niflheim won't last," Cor commented as he fiddled with a cube of sugar before dropping it into his coffee. "We may need some...outside assistance, should something happen to our supply line." Cid leaned his head in closer, flicking off some charred crumbs from what remained of his cigar. "I'm sure as a doctor and certified elixir craftsman, Dr. Ardere has connections with larger medical facilities. She probably provides them with huge shipments on a regular basis. This would be a similar case." The marshal took a sip form his mug. "She wouldn't even have to move her practice to Insomnia. It'd actually be better if she stayed outside Insomnia and away from the citadel."

"Sounds like you're predicting an invasion."

Cor shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just keeping all our options open. If an invasion ever came to be, an outside supplier would be beneficial for our fight." He glanced at a clock on the wall and, as he read the time, felt the late night start to get to him.

Cid couldn't help noticing the tired look in his friend's eyes. "Why don't you turn in for the night? Nebula tends to start work early, so you'll need all your rest if you want to negotiate a deal." He let out a yawn and stretched his arms over his head. "Well I'm goin' to turn in for the night. Trailer's all yours when you're ready to call it in." Cid rose from his chair, scratching the back of his neck as he turned for the stairs. "Don't get up too late, or you'll miss Cindy's fabulous breakfast." He waved to his friend and started the climb to the second floor, leaving Cor by himself at the table. The King's right arm stayed seated as he finished his coffee, fiddling with his stirring spoon. He began to question his judgement: if going against the King's wishes was the right thing for his country, whether he was right to leave His Majesty in the hands of Clarus Amicitia without being around, whether the King was right to entrust the safety of himself and his court with Cor. There had been treaty signings before where he'd beefed up security, and they'd gone smoothly. Maybe Regis was right about carrying out the meeting in Insomnia. Maybe the dictator, while parading around behind the veil of a just emperor, would actually be fair in this treaty signing and not provoke any kind of attack on the court. And yet, maybe that hope was but a thread, already frayed and moments from snapping in two.

The treaty signing was on Cor's mind all night, and though sleep came easily to him as he lay in the
trailer's large bedroom, he couldn't calm his thoughts. A gut feeling that refused to go away was sure that Iedolas had something up his sleeve. It was a feeling he would pack into the back of his mind for now, but would surely use when preparing the security detail when the day came. As he drifted into the comforts of unconsciousness another thought came to the marshal's mind. In ten months, after the treaty signing concluded - assuming it concluded without incident - the kingdoms of Lucis and Tenebrae had a wedding to look forward to. Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum and Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret would be wed in the Lucian capital of Insomnia before the courts of both families. Cor was also placed in charge of security detail from the Lucian side, and was working in tandem with Gentiana, the princess' personal guard, to make sure nothing interfered with the marriage ceremony. It was just as high-profile as the treaty signing, if not more. The wedding would bring many important things to the table: joy for the citizens of Lucis and Tenebrae, who've had only tension and misfortune to look forward to with Niflheim's growing power; a strong, stable alliance to both kingdoms; and what Cor felt was most important was the addition of an oracle into the Lucian royal court. Though in possession of the world's last known crystal, Lucis lacked a direct connection to the gods and goddesses to guide them in life. Tenebrae's princess was the youngest oracle in all of history, carrying an ability that could only be passed down by blood, a power no one in the Lucian court possessed, and as far as he knew, no one else in the world. Through the marriage, in exchange for Lucis gaining such a powerful person, the kingdom would grant Tenebrae a permanent partnership in the fight against Niflheim, and Lucis promised to set Tenebrae free.

But the promises would only be guaranteed if the wedding carried on without incident, and that meant the treaty signing would also have to go through without a hitch.

There was another thing to worry about: Lamia, the Niflheim witch whom, Cor assumed, the dictatorship let loose in another plan for world domination. Niflheim paraded her title around with a high sense of danger, like thorns on a delicate rose. But there were never pictures of her, never a detailed description on her physical appearance. The only information anyone knew about Lamia was that the sorceress was female, with eyes near pitch-black, and an echoing voice that spoke in the name of Etro as she murdered her victims. No one who ever saw her lived to tell the tale, to provide authorities with details on her appearance. Niflheim's court swore they were hoping to bring her to justice but no one believed them. For all anyone knew, Lamia could have been a member of one of Insomnia's many tours of the royal palace, hiding in plain sight as the tour guide showed the tourists around the palace. The lack of information and fear of the witch bringing terror upon the Lucian royal family was the reason Cor took extra security measures since hearing of her escape from Niflheim five years earlier, and required all tourists to be screened for any magic-wielding abilities. Unless they provided an ID that was valid or proved they were a member of the court, all who showed even a trace of magical power were required to wear special bracelets that suppressed their mana and prevented any spells from leaving their body. The extra measure had proven successful in keeping peace in the palace, but Cor was still unsatisfied; he wouldn't be happy until the sorceress was caught and dealt with.

He lay the thoughts in the back of his mind when he finally settled in for sleep, and awoke the next morning to a knocking on the door of his trailer. "Breakfast, Mr. Leonis," he heard Cindy call from outside. "You'd better hurry, or else Paw Paw'll eat everything!" He had a feeling the mechanic's appetite hadn't calmed. Cor felt his stomach growl at the mention of food and got himself ready for the day, leaving the trailer fifteen minutes later to join his friend for breakfast. The smell of eggs and sausage immediately hit him, increasing the emptiness he felt in his gut. He went inside and saw Cid already working on a plate of food, and Cindy preparing a plate for the guest. "I tried to get him to wait," the blonde woman complained, "but you know how Paw Paw is. Hates waiting for his food."

"I told him to not sleep in!" Cid playfully argued while he shoveled eggs into his mouth. "You make a lot anyway. There's plenty left for him." The mechanic pointed his fork to the opposite chair, which Cor occupied. "Got a call from Nebula a few minutes before you came in. She was asking for you.
"Was she?" Cor's head perked up as Cindy served him a plate of sausage and eggs. He'd almost forgotten telling her to call Cid's house for him, and didn't expect her to ask for him. "I did tell her to call here if she wanted me. She wants to repay me for using the car to transport her patient." He took in a forkful of food, watching the younger mechanic pour him a mug of coffee, and nodded to her in thanks. "Perhaps this is just what I needed to propose a deal with her."

Cid groaned mid-chew and shook his head. "Come on, Cor. You're gonna use a repayment for that?" He paused to sip his coffee, and wiped any crumbs from his face. "You're already going to ask her about the partnership, so why waste the act of kindness?" Before Cor could argue that he wasn't one for casual dinners with potential allies Cid wagged a finger at him. "Don't give me the 'that's what Reggie would do' excuse. Even he wouldn't turn down the gesture. I'm not sayin' you have to marry her-" Cor almost choked on his eggs- "I'm just telling you to humor her. Leave the business aspect out of this one meal."

Cor sighed. "Alright, fine. But don't think you're setting me up with her by doing this." Cid chuckled, and the sentence caught Cindy's attention.

"Paw Paw!" she exclaimed with a giggle.

"What? She's a nice girl, and Cor needs someone to take care of him-"

"Can we NOT discuss the status of my relationship?" the marshal fumed as he stabbed his fork into the sausage on his plate. The mechanics continued to laugh as they ate breakfast with the marshal, making small talk here and there as time passed, leaving talk of Cor's relationship status alone. It wasn't long before Cid got up from the table to open the repair shop.

"Business calls," he said, "so it's time for Cindy and I to get to work. Let us know how it goes with the lovely doctor." He waved to Cor and Cindy as he headed out the door. "Be seein' ya outside, sweet pea." Cindy waved back, letting him know she'd be in the shop soon, and started to clear the table.

Cor stood from his seat. "I should head out, too." He helped Cindy clear the table and, after hearing her say she'd take care of the dishes, left the building. He got into his SUV and typed in the address to the doctor's house in his GPS. He'd memorized it when he left her house the day before, a habit he'd picked up from his commanding officer when in training to work for the Lucian royalty. Knowing the address would be necessary if the doctor were to become a royal ally. The drive was short, full of off-roading and navigating around large areas of trees, and he nearly missed the house when he approached the dirt path, but a woman and teenager walking out of the house caught his eye. He recognized them from the day before as the people he'd helped transport to the doctor's home. Pulling into the dirt driveway, he turned the car key and shut off the ignition.

Jupiter immediately remembered Cor when she saw him get out of the SUV. "You're the man from yesterday," she commented when coming towards him. "I can't thank you enough for helping us. I don't know what would've happened if you weren't there..."

"It was no trouble," Cor replied. He glanced at Aurum, who was busy balancing himself with a pair of crutches. His injured leg was wrapped in a thick fabric cast. "I assume he did end up breaking a bone?"

The teenager smirked. "Just a fracture. I'll be running again in no time."

"Don't think that means you'll be riding chocobos anytime soon," his mother scolded. "You're not
getting back on one until you've had a proper lesson." Jupiter put her attention back onto the marshal. "Again, thank you." She offered her hand to him and they shook before she returned to her son's side and helped him walk. Cor turned back to the task at hand and approached the front door of the doctor's house. He knocked and heard a muffled "come in", and he entered the premises.

He saw a patient leaving the back room - the exam room, from what he'd taken in the day before - with a grimace on his face and his arm in a sling. The doctor followed behind him, resting a hand on his lower back, and handed him a paper bag. "Let your kids take care of the farming for a while," she ordered him in a calm tone, "you deserved a few weeks of rest." As she looked around the kitchen/dining area her eyes fell on Cor momentarily, and her attention returned to the patient. "Use the pain pills sparingly. Just one'll make you drowsy, and they're strong. Let me know if you need a refill." The patient gave his thanks and waved to the doctor before departing, leaving her and Cor alone. "Mr. Leonis... I didn't think you'd come so early."

"I'm sorry if this is a bad time."

"Oh, no, it's alright. I'm not scheduled to see anyone else today... Unless there's an emergency, of course." She tugged at the hem of her bolero sleeve and smiled. "Please, have a seat." She gestured to one of the chairs at her dining table and took up the opposite one. "I called Cid's place this morning to invite you to dinner. Is there anything I can help you with for now?"

Cor folded his hands on top of the table and cleared his throat. "Dr. Ardere-"

"You can call me Nebula, if you'd like."

"Nebula..." How was he to go about this? He couldn't simply introduce himself as a member of the Lucian royal court and expect her to be cool about it. Maybe bringing up any partnerships she has with other hospitals would be a better route... "I've been told that you are involved with partnerships with some well-known hospitals, where you're a major elixir supplier."

Nebula blinked, confused. "Yes, that's right. My major partnership currently lies with Lestallum University Medical. One of their directors found out about me through a friend and negotiated a contract." She rested her hands on her lap.

"Have you ever been in contract with a military enforcer?"

Her eyes widened, and after a few seconds she shook her head. "I've done my best to stay out of military affairs, Mr. Leonis."

"Please, call me Cor."

"Okay, Cor..." Nebula stood up and began to pace around the table. "Allow me to be honest with you. I'm a Niflheim refugee. I escaped from the country around five years ago and settled my practice down here in Duscae, all to avoid their dictatorship. I've lived the military life without ever enlisting. I don't plan on starting that now, Cor." She sat back down. "If the purpose of your visit today is to recruit me as a military doctor for whatever regime you represent, I'm afraid I can't help you."

He had a feeling she may be resistant. The fact that she was from Niflheim was a shock, and something he may have to take note of for the future. He only hoped she was willing to at least listen as he pleaded his case. "If I may, Nebula," he started, and straightened himself out. Cor knew it was best to just come out with the truth. "My name is Cor Leonis, and I am head of the royal family guards for the Kingdom of Lucis." The loss of color in her face was near instantaneous. "Before you say anything, know that as a man of Lucis, I don't see Niflheim refugees as the enemy." She sucked
in a long breath and sighed; he assumed she thought she'd be beheaded for hailing from the dictatorship. "I left the Crown City in search of aid. You already know of the turmoil between Lucis and Niflheim, and without a doubt, you know what Niflheim is capable of." Nebula nodded. She raised her hand, signaling for him to pause for a moment, and she jumped out of her seat. She hurried to the door and locked it tight, peering out the window for anyone that may be listening. When she felt the coast was clear Nebula drew the blinds to prevent passersby from looking inside and returned to the table, gesturing for the marshal to continue.

"I'm not asking for you to join our army. If you were to form an alliance with Lucis, your only objective would be to provide us with your elixirs. You would remain anonymous, and you would have the full protection of the Lucian guard. You have my word." It was a lot for Nebula to take in. She'd always despised military power, no matter the country, but she had an admiration for the Lucian royal family. King Regis was a just man who always considered the best interest of the people when making decisions for the country. Had she been born in Lucis and not Niflheim, her life may have played out differently...

Nebula heard a sudden knock at her door. She got up and slowly crept to the window to look outside. A man in a white and gold uniform stared at the door, flanked on both sides by Magitek troops. "Shit..." She kept her voice as quiet as possible and brought a finger to her lips when she freed the blinds, telling Cor to remain silent. Niflheim soldiers, she mouthed to make him aware.

"Is this the residence of Dr. Nebula Ardere?" the live soldier outside asked through the door. "We come in peace, and only wish to speak with the doctor. We mean you no harm." He knocked again, harder than the first time. Nebula's mind became frantic as she tried to figure out what to do. Cor saw her panic-stricken face as the third set of knocks came, and an idea came to mind. He slowly got up from his seat and approached the door, much to her dismay, and gestured for her to run to the basement. She was hesitant at first, but his eyes told her to trust him, and she darted for the basement.

Cor drew in a breath and straightened himself out, resting his katana against the wall before opening the door. "Can I help you?" he asked the live soldier, keeping his voice as calm as he could with the enemy this close.

"Good afternoon," the soldier started. "I've come to see Dr. Ardere."

"I'm afraid the doctor's out on business. She left for Lestallum early this morning to help at their universal hospital to assist with treatment of one of her patients. May I ask what business it is you have with her?"

The soldier didn't put any effort into hiding his disappointment. "I've come to buy elixirs from her. Our supply has, unfortunately, run out." He briefly glanced over Cor's shoulder, looking at the door to the back room, before returning his attention to the blue-eyed man. "And who are you?"

"I'm the doctor's assistant. I'd be happy to get you an order sheet to fill out." Not knowing what other options he had, Cor invited the soldiers inside to wait. "Excuse me." He turned to the basement and jogged down the stairs, closing the door on his way down, and quickly found Nebula. She handed him a clip board and a pen, and as he took a step upstairs, shoved a stack of stapled papers under his free arm. Nebula hid again when the basement door opened and Cor rejoined the soldiers. They'd remained seated while waiting for his return. Cor handed the live soldier the items and took up the last available seat.

"Do you know when she'll be back? the soldier asked while filling out the form.

"I'm afraid I can't say. The patient she's treating is in critical condition. She gave an estimate of a week, but even she wasn't sure on it." Cor kept himself relaxed while he watched the pen move
across the paper, momentarily glancing at the Magitek troops who remained standing and motionless.
It had been a long time since Cor saw one so close in person, and the last time he did was in battle
against them alongside his King. He had to keep a leveled head if he wanted to get them out of here
as soon as possible. The silence was painful, having only the sounds of the pen scratching the paper,
and the breathing coming from himself and the Niflheim soldier. After what felt like forever the
soldier handed the clipboard and paper back to him, laying the pen on the table.

"When can we expect our order to be filled?"

"The moment Dr. Ardere comes back, she'll take care of it." The men stood from their chairs and the
Niflheim soldiers headed for the door. "How would you like to pay for your elixirs?"

The soldier looked over his shoulder at Cor and sneered. "Payment will be discussed once the doctor
returns." He bowed his head in acknowledgement and exited the building with his Magitek troops,
leaving Cor and Nebula in peace. He locked the door and waited a few minutes before going to the
basement and letting her know they were safe.

"They shouldn't be coming back for a while." He handed her the clipboard.

Nebula wiped sweat from her forehead. "Thank you," she told him, "but you didn't have to go and
do that." In reality he didn't know what came upon him to play the part of doctor's assistant. As he
searched his mind for a way to explain why he did what he did, he noticed the doctor's hand
outstretched towards him. Looking up at her face, he saw her smiling. "I'll do it. I'll work alongside
Lucis as an elixir supplier." He was surprised she'd changed her mind so quickly, but the change of
heart brought a sense of relief to Cor. As he took her hand in his, he couldn't help but notice how soft
her skin was, and watched the way her fingers moved when their hands separated and she reached
for the stapled paper pack. "As the first order of business, why don't I show you the different things I
can make?" She handed him the paper pack to browse through as she showed him around.

"The mixes I make come in four major categories: potions, antidotes, ethers and elixirs. In each
category I have a large variety of mixtures that can treat specific or general ailments. The antidotes
tend to be unique for treating the reaction, so if anyone's infected by - let's say, a poisonous frog -
you can't use the antidote for that to treat a reaction to poison ivy. I do have a small stock of general
antidotes, but they're hard to make because the ingredients don't always mix well." Nebula pointed to
a shelving unit to her right. "Those are my elixirs. Now, those are pretty powerful, since they're
meant to awaken someone who's gone unconscious or is on the verge of dying. Because they're so
powerful, you usually only need a little. My Phoenix Downs are the only elixir you can take a full
vial of." Her focus shifted to the opposite side of the basement. "Next to the potions are the ethers,
for magic users. Another potent collection over there. You'll want to use a dropper if you take the
liquid form. Everything comes in pill and liquid form, though the liquid tends to act faster." She
invited Cor to sit on the sole stool next to a small work table at the center of the room and she leaned
on the edge, tucking one of her knees in toward her chest.

"Cid was right about you," Cor commented, taking another look around the basement. "You
collection really is something else. And you make all of them by hand?"

Nebula grinned in her nod. "Every last one of them. It's something I learned to do while I studied
medicine. Niflheim depends on factory-made mixes, something I realized wasn't as effective as they
advertised it to be. I managed to find a book with traditional elixir-cooking methods before I fled."
The more he looked around, the more thankful he was to Cid for recommending her. "It doesn't take
as long as most people would assume, so I can get a batch of twenty generic potions done in a
night." She glanced at Cor, and within seconds found herself ready to laugh. "I'm sorry. It's just hard
for me to imagine you in uniform, guarding the King of Lucis. What's it like to live in the citadel?"
She leaned closer to him and propped her chin in her hands, almost as if she'd reverted back to the days of dreaming of being a princess.

Cor scratched at the back of his neck. "Guarding His Majesty is a full-time job that requires focus, precision and a calm, level head. Most of the time things are peaceful, but when the few instances arise where the royal family may be in danger, everything becomes about protecting them..." Nebula became lost in his voice, listening to the deep tone that she found soothing, and soon found her distracted by the broad line his shoulders created.
Chapter Summary

They say those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. But even if your home is forged in steel, should a stone be chucked at the inner self, cracks will begin to emerge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The afternoon melded with the approaching evening as Nebula and Cor began to plan out the details of their agreement. Having been given a pen and paper, Cor jotted down the specs of the contract while Nebula picked out vials of each mixture to let him sample. "Is that beret part of your uniform?"
The doctor suddenly asked, gaining the attention of the man sitting and scribbling down notes.

He had to think for a moment before answering, having forgotten he still had it on. "Yes, the professional uniform. It's reserved for meetings and political events. Outside of that we have the formal uniform for special events and celebrations." He watched Nebula lay the vials across from him on the table as he took off the beret and laid it beside his notes. "I'm rather surprised you don't wear a uniform yourself. What happens if you get blood on your clothes?"

"I have a smock," she replied, "and some throw-away pullovers. If things get messy I use those; otherwise it's not a big deal." The doctor set another group of glass bottles across from Cor and leaned against the edge of the table. "So are you looking for specific mixtures for the army, or would you rather have the more generic stuff?"

"That depends on what you recommend."

Nebula tapped her chin in thought. "Since we're talking about an army here, you may want to go for the generic supply. I'm not sure if any of the troops will have allergic reactions to my mixes, though. Most people are fine when they transition from synthetic ingredients to the pure stuff, but every now and then I get someone who needs something diluted. It really depends on the person." Her hand reached for the vial containing a dark green liquid and she lifted it into the light, swirling its contents while watching the liquid roam inside the glass. "This one's the most diluted potion I make. It has some of the same ingredients as the factory brand to make transitioning easier on the body. I might just start your troops off on these." She set the glass down and took one standing next to it. "How many people am I making a supply for?"

Cor seemed hesitant to say it. He wasn't sure if she was ready to support so many people, even from far off. "Approximately forty thousand." Nebula's grip on an antidote vial loosened when she heard the number and she went white again. Her lips parted, leaving her mouth agape as her head turned to face Cor. "If it's too large a group for you to handle-"

Nebula shook her head. "No, no, it's fine. Just..." She swallowed hard. "Wow. That's a lot of people. I'll have to do some math and reconfigure my ingredient servings." She reached under the table and pulled out a clipboard and pen, and flipped the first clipped paper over to write. "Normally when I'm preparing a batch of potions, one pot can make ten vials. So if I'm making for forty thousand..." Her voice tapered off as the pen moved across her paper. Cor's attention left his work to watch Nebula,
noticing the way her lips made silent words as she worked out her math. After a few minutes, she looked up at him again, her eyebrows scrunching in nervousness. "I'm going to need a bit to figure this out. In the meantime, you can look at the samples, see what you like. If these aren't good just pull another off the shelf."

"Alright." Nebula almost didn't hear the king's right arm reply, shutting all outside distractions out of her mind as she focused on her paper. Cor pulled the vials closer and arranged them according to color, then began to sample the mixtures. The potions were first, and he immediately went for the diluted solution she'd shown him. Opening the vial, he quickly noticed the absence of a smell: something the factory-made potions were modified to leave out in favor of taste, made for easier use on children. The second potion had a slight scent to it, but was strong in comparison to the odorless diluted version. He didn't have to guess how strong the smell of the third would be as the color transitioned from darker to lighter. The antidotes were different. Their scents had vastly varied fragrances, reminding him of flowers and the sweet candies Regis would slip Noctis when the prince as a child. Each of their labels specified what the vial of liquid would treat, and the scent eerily matched the listed ailment. A brief glance across the table showed the doctor still deep in thought, working on her math problem, and Cor left her alone. He stood up from the stool and walked to the shelves housing her potions to inspect the rest of her collection.

The shelving unit reached the ceiling, made of antique cardaium wood with swirls and vines carved decoratively into its walls and drawers. Its shelves were evenly spaced, the vials neatly stacked in rows fourteen across and eight deep. Each level housed a different hue of the mixture, and labels under each row told Cor how concentrated the liquid was. He grabbed a lighter-shaded vial near the top of the unit and examined it at arm's length, shaking the glass to swirl the liquid. It was through holding up the vial to the light that he noticed a warping shape through the lime-shaded liquid resting on top of the shelf, and when he lowered his arm the shape stabilized. At first glance it looked like a box, but as he got closer and leaned up on his toes, Cor was able to make out text on the visible side. *Khudu's Codex of Magic: Spells for Beginner, Intermediate and Expert Mages.* A book, Cor concluded. Curiosity piqued inside him, but before he could inquire about the magic training manual, which appeared almost deliberately hidden from outside view, Nebula's voice caught his attention. "Well it was annoying," she started, "but I've got it figured out. I should be able to make these potions without a problem."

"Good." Cor carefully placed the potion vial back into place, glancing at the book from the corner of his eye one last time before returning to the table. "I've come up with a plan to keep shipping your elixirs under the radar. We'll be using Cid's shop as a cover."

"Is it safe?"

The king's right arm nodded. "Lucis' affiliation with the Hammerhead Station is no secret. Shipments between us and them have been exchanged for years without conflict, and I doubt Niflheim will want to intercept boxes full of car parts." Nebula blinked and tugged at her chin as she imagined the scenario in her head. It seemed fool-proof; the weight of the elixirs closely matched that of car part deliveries. And even if the empire somehow caught wind of the shipments, Cid seemed to be a loyal friend to Cor, and after a moment Nebula nodded. "I've worked out the supply lists for both emergency and non-emergency situations. If it's too much for you to handle-" "I can do it," she intercepted, "I promise you." She had confidence, Cor couldn't deny that. He extended his arm and handed his paper over to her. Nebula took hold of the paper, her fingers momentarily brushing against Cor's, and her mind froze at the second of contact. She pulled her arm in and began to read it, doing her best to ignore whatever spark had come about when her skin met his.
"Compensation will be discussed later with His Majesty," Cor added. "It will be determined based on the cost per vial and labor. Shipping will be covered on our part." Nebula absorbed the information as she sat down, her head rolling around her neck in an effort to loosen it. "Something the matter?"

She grunted when she felt a muscle in her neck tighten. "Just sore. I've had a busy last couple of days. I'll be fine." Nebula offered him a smile and straightened her posture.

"Then you should rest," he replied. "We can discuss more details tomorrow evening."

"Oh. Speaking of tomorrow..." The doctor fixed the crouching position her back had subconsciously taken again. "I was hoping you'd stay for dinner. I still need to repay you for your help yesterday."

"...We'll talk about it tomorrow."

When night had fallen Cor took his leave and returned to the Hammerhead Station. Cid and his granddaughter were busy taking care of their last customer of the day, and the former waved to him when he passed them by. As Cor neared the door to Cid's home he heard his friend's approaching steps behind him. "How'd it go?"

"As soon as I return to Lucis and things are worked out, Regis will determine her pay." Cor shook his head, showing off a faint smirk. "I'll hand it to you, Cid, you were right about this one. She'll be a great asset to the kingdom."

"Hey, don't sweat it!" Cid gave him a hard pat on the back and chuckled. "And what exactly do you mean by 'right about this one'? You act like I've got nothin' but bad ideas up here!" He tapped the side of his hat with the flat end of a wrench.

Having overheard her grandfather's commentary, Cindy skipped over to the men after finishing up with her last customer. "So you're callin' your scheme to set him up with the doctor 'right'? Please, Paw Paw." She rolled her eyes. "Even if he were interested, you know Nebula wouldn't go for it." Her attention went from her grandfather to Cor. "Paw Paw's been trying to set her up with a man since she moved out here. He doesn't seem to recognize when a woman wants to be left alone."

Cid scoffed. "That's not it and you know it!" A huff escaped the mechanic's lips as he followed after his granddaughter inside. "I happen to know the difference between a bothered person and someone who's lonely..." Cor tuned out the rest of Cid's banter, not wanting to live through another attempt to find him a significant other. It wasn't long before the mechanic caught on and ceased his talk of his friend's love life, instead shifting the focus to the reason he'd come all the way out to Duscae. "Turns out Cauthess might be back on the table. Heard on the radio that whatever Archean problem they had was blown out of proportion by the science committee for 'precautionary measures'. Probably thought the extra substance leaking out from their shard would harm the citizens."

The king's guard took a seat at the small dining table, pulling out the same chair from the night before. "That's a relief. Cauthess will be a good back-up if Lestallum falls through."

"How much longer will you be here?"

"At least through tomorrow. I'm meeting with Nebula again tomorrow to see her test-batch for the Lucian supply." Cindy arrived from the kitchen with fresh cups of coffee for everyone, then returned to get plates for dinner. "And...she asked for me to stay for dinner." Before Cid could open his mouth to make a comment, Cor leaned forward, gripping the sides of the table hard. "It will only be an evening of repayment for my assistance and nothing else, so don't get any ideas."
"I wasn't gonna say anything." Cid raised his hands in defense.

The trio enjoyed leftovers from the day before and exchanged conversation relating to Cid's customers for the day and the progress of young Aurum's healing. Calm settled in the air, until Cindy departed for bed with a kiss to her grandfather's cheek. After hearing the door to the upstairs bedroom click shut, Cor felt comfortable enough to disclose the unnerving event from earlier in the day. "I see Iedolas already has his troops combing the area."

The mention of the emperor's name sent a shiver down the graying mechanic's spine. "It started three years ago, after they boasted about their successful takeover of Tenebrae. They must've figured no man's land was the next best place to try and conquer because of its neutrality." By now Cid was reaching for one of his cigars and, though he knew Cor would refuse, offered him one out of politeness. "Did they come by Nebula's place?" Cor nodded. "For some reason they're so fixated on her. Either the Magitek troops demand to search the premises, or the rare times she gets human visitors, they come bugging for a pack of potions." A long sigh escaped his lips. "How's Luna been?"

Cor stirred his coffee absentmindedly, his eyebrows scrunched. "If it weren't for her being an oracle, I'm sure her freedom would be completely restricted. Her guardian's been good with keeping them at arm's length, but there's only so much she can do." A sudden thought came to mind. "Have the Niflheim troops ever tried to seize control over Nebula or her supply?" Cid paused from sipping his coffee to think.

"There was one incident a couple of months back when a commander came to her house. She told me he'd tried to negotiate a deal where she'd serve under Iedolas' command as a field medic or something. They said it was 'in her best interest' to join them while she had the freedom to do so. Obviously a threat." The mechanic flicked some charred crumbs from his cigar and drew in its smoke. "When she denied their offer and sent them on their way, the commander was pretty salty about it. Guess he didn't like taking no for an answer, because..." His gaze diverted to a window across the house.

"What happened?" Cor didn't realize how hard he was gripping the mug's handle.

Cid held his cup in both hands and pressed his lips into a hard line. "The troops came back in the middle of the night and broke into her house. She doesn't remember much, but from the details I could gather, they tried to knock her out, take her to their ship by force. Nebula fought back and paid for it." He stopped to see if Cor really wanted him to describe her injuries in detail, and was able to read the response through his friend's eyes. Cid took a deep breath. "To be honest, I don't know how she survived with the injuries she sustained. They carved her gut open like she was a holiday meat. And somehow... Somehow, she managed to fight them off and make her way here." He needed a moment to collect himself. "To this day, I wonder how that girl's still alive."

The information was a lot to take in. It was becoming evident that Duscae wouldn't be safe for Nebula, especially when her deal with the Lucian army was finalized. Already a prime target for Niflheim, having her reside in the countryside any longer would mean endangering her life. Cid could tell what his friend was thinking, and spoke up before Cor could say anything. "Convincing her to move to Insomnia won't be easy," he started. "Nebula is a peculiar person. She's all smiles on the outside, but take away her patients and job, and you can see a completely different person under that shell. I don't think she came out here just to find freedom from Niflheim, Cor. When I look in her eyes, I see how she's denying herself the right to grow close to other people. It's almost like she's punishing herself for something..."

"For what?" Cor wondered out loud. Cid shrugged his shoulders, knowing next to nothing about the
doctor's life choices. "Well whatever the case, her safety has become a top priority. Nebula Ardere is now affiliated with the Lucian army, and we protect our people using everything in our power." Cor straightened his posture, his grip on the mug loosening.

Cid knew his friend wouldn't back down so easily. "I don't know who's more stubborn: you or Nebula." He couldn't help but smirk at the similarities in their personalities. He wouldn't pressure Cor anymore; if anything sparked between the two of them, it would happen on its own. When he decided to turn in for the night, Cid ceased his steps to the second floor momentarily. The mechanic questioned if he was right in leaving out the fact that when he and Cindy found Nebula bleeding outside their doorstep, the graying man had run off to her estate to piece together what had happened, and found five uniformed soldiers dead inside the house.

Cor spent his morning preparing what he would say to the medic. She was as stubborn as himself, from what he determined by Cid's little story, she'd say anything to seclude herself in the middle of nowhere. He was sure she would've settled out in the desert between Lestallum and Altissia if the land held any kind of support for an extended stay. He needed a plan. His mind wandered back to his younger days, when he'd began to settle into working for the royal family's guard. His younger brother Nyx had become interested in following Cor's path to serve the royal family and enlisted in training. The then adolescent Ulric brother had grown a chip on his shoulder, one Cor had to personally deal with alongside Nyx's commanding officer. Being headstrong was a trait infamous to the Leonis bloodline, which the younger had quickly adopted, so Cor felt he had the strength to persuade Nebula.

He arrived at the doctor's home in late afternoon, choosing to walk in the nice weather rather than drive through the uneven dirt roads. She insisted on treating him to dinner, so a walk helped build an appetite for whatever she planned to serve. As he neared the estate Cor saw some people leaving and the doctor standing in the doorway waving as they departed. Her eyes fell onto the approaching man and she looked away for a second, almost like she had something up her sleeve. "Hello again," she said when he neared the front door. "I'm happy to report the first batch of potions are finished. They're cooling downstairs."

"Is this a bad time?"

Nebula shook her head. "No, you're right on time. I just finished my last appointment." She motioned for Cor to follow her inside, where the smell of soup immediately hit him. "Dinner's still cooking, so we have time to talk about the contract." Passing by the table, Cor quickly noticed bowls and silverware arranged over a tablecloth, a bottle of wine standing in the center of the setup. She led him to the basement and pointed to a group of glass bottles huddled on a shelf in the back. "I was able to increase the output from ten to forty-five potions. As for the antidotes, I got it up to twenty from five. You can take this set back to Insomnia so the king can see." Through her smiling exterior, Cor could see the toll such an order had taken on the doctor. Dark circles formed under her eyes, and red veins were visible on the sclera. She'd probably stayed up all night preparing the mixtures, he assumed, and a hint of guilt surfaced in him.

He walked over to the stash of potions and picked one up. It still held a hint of warmth from being cooked, its dark green hue shimmering with flecks of lime floating inside. The antidotes stacked next to the green vials were carefully labeled - most for the treatment of general poisons, and a few made for specific ailments. There were one-hundred and thirty vials in total, something Cor didn't expect the doctor to be able to make in a single night. "This is impressive," he commented, unable to completely hold back his amazement.

Nebula smiled at his satisfaction. "I'll try to make some more tomorrow." Her attention suddenly
shifted to the door at the top of the stairs, where the faint sound of popping caught her ear. "Oh! I'll be right back!" She bolted up the stairs and into the kitchen, the door swinging when she ran by. Cor set the glass bottles down and turned to follow the doctor upstairs. When his stride carried him to the middle of the room he saw the old magic book in his line of sight. It had been moved, now lying on her work table, turned open to a page more than halfway through. His curiosity piqued again, and this time he couldn't help himself. Cor shifted toward the table and looked down at the open manual, his eyes following the track of sentences. It was the section with instructions on higher-level spells, and the page she'd left open detailed how to attempt a Life spell. Though not a user of magic, even he knew the consequences that came with using a Life spell on someone. It required the mage to use their own life force as an energy source to revive someone. The open section brought about questions he wanted answers to, and as he reached to turn the page, he heard Nebula call for him.

"Dinner's ready!" her voice echoed through the open door.

Cor took one last look at the book before returning to the main level. He wondered for a moment why a Niflheim native would have such a book in her possession. But the more he thought about it, the more he decided it was for her medical practice. It was a matter he'd ask her about once she was in a safer environment, he decided, and watched the doctor set bowls filled with stew in front of their respective chairs. "Sorry for running off like that," Nebula apologized, "I heard the pot boiling over. Almost had to deal with a big mess." She skipped back to the sink and washed her hands, flicking water droplets from her fingers as she grabbed a nearby towel. "Is red wine okay?"

"Yes, thank you." The king's guard rinsed his hands before taking a seat, taking in the sweet scent of the meat in his bowl. He extended a hand out to take the wine bottle, to which Nebula had the same idea, and their hands touched. Their eyes met and Nebula averted her gaze in embarrassment, retracting her hand. Cor pulled the bottle in toward himself and removed the cork, then filled his and the doctor's glasses. "It smells delicious." He handed one of the glasses back to her.

"Stew is my specialty. I figured I should make the best to thank you for your help."

"I only drove your patient over here," Cor lifted his fork.

Nebula, about to take a sip of her wine, paused. "You saved his leg. If it weren't for you, he might've faced months of painful rehabilitation." She stopped talking and took a bite of her dinner.

Cor joined her in the meal, and found the flavors as amazing as her elixir crafting. The flavors danced in his mouth and down his throat with each forkful. A glimpse above his plate revealed more of Nebula's satisfaction of her success in pleasing him, and for a split second, the image of her standing with a stomach torn in two flashed in his eyes. "Nebula..." he started, laying his fork on the table. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

"Yes?" She looked up from her bowl.

He folded his hands on the table top. "I think you should move closer to Insomnia." Her smile waned. "Cid told me about an incident involving you that happened a few months ago. If you're going to be partnered with the Crownguard, you need a safer environment to work in. Niflheim's activity in Duscae is quickly becoming problematic. That became clear when they-"

"I'm not going anywhere," Cor's words halted. "I understand your concern, Mr. Leonis, but trust me when I say that me being anywhere near Insomnia is a bad idea."

He'd expected her to turn down his offer, but not with such a strange reasoning. Perhaps this was the distant mannerism Cid had told him about. "Your Niflheim heritage isn't a problem with us. We already have one refugee protected under our rule-"
"I can protect myself." She denied him her meeting gaze, keeping her eyes fixed on the wine in her glass. "I can provide assistance to your country as a silent supplier, but moving isn't an option for me." Nebula could sense his growing confusion and subsequent annoyance with her refusal.

"Nebula, please," he pleaded. Cor wasn't ready to let go of such a valuable asset to Lucis' survival. He stood up from his seat, pressing both hands on the table's surface. "Niflheim is growing stronger every day. And every day we do nothing allows their empire to seize control over another nation."

She rose from her chair. "I'm not getting involved in your war."

"They almost killed you! Do you want to give them the opportunity to try a second time?"

That was the line which struck a cord in her. Nebula bit her bottom lip hard, infuriated that he'd bring up that dark night in her life. Eyes frantically darting around the room, the doctor pushed her chair out and left the table. "Goodnight, Mr. Leonis." She started for the hallway leading to her bedroom. Cor couldn't believe her. She was willing to risk facing death another time just to be alone. And for what? She was worse than his brother. Growing annoyed with her adamant tongue Cor grabbed her wrist when she tried to walk past him and yanked her back into the kitchen. A yelp escaped her mouth when she was pulled in the opposite direction and she stumbled to find her footing. Nebula was ready to curse his name the moment he released her arm, but when her body turned and collided into his, for some reason, she became lost for words. Her furrowed brow relaxed when she finally looked Cor in the eyes, wondering why this man she'd met only two days before was so desperate to keep her, a Niflheim native, safe from harm. The strange spark that emerged in the few moments of skin-to-skin contact between them surfaced again. Neither could understand it, but it urged their bodies, already so close, to move even closer, and the two gave into the spark, bringing their lips together.

Chapter End Notes

So guys... I watched Uncovered FFXV on Wednesday night and DAMN! I cried 3 or 4 times! Then another when I managed to secure my pre-order for the ultimate collector's edition!

Now that we know a TINY bit more about what the story's about (thanks also to the anime), I think this story will definitely play out as AU from the beginning, and may merge slightly with the actual story line via speculation. I'm glad to finally hear a voice for Cor and Luna.

So from this point on the story will get a little darker, to coincide with FFXV.
Chapter Summary

Once you cast the first stone, nothing will ever be the same again.

Chapter Notes

The events of the previous night were a huge blur to the waking doctor. She could only remember what happened in stills, momentary pictures she was able to pull from her half-aware mind. As she tried to piece together exactly what happened, the answer came when she looked down at herself and the figure laying next to her. Cor was still fast asleep, laying on his stomach, and neither of them had clothing on. Only her bed sheets and quilt covered their bodies. Nebula shielded her eyes from the intense rays of sunlight blaring through the cracks in the blinds, the light telling her it was the next morning. Her eyes wandered back to the man sleeping next to her, lips slightly parted, and when her gaze moved down his form she saw a collection of scratches on his back. Her eyes widened and she gasped, her cheeks immediately flushing red. Until that moment she hadn't realized how crazy the night before had been. The stills from her mind came together and formed a clearer memory, to which the doctor's embarrassment rose higher. "Wow..." she whispered, now remembering the night without trouble.

After Cor had pulled her back and she collided into him, Nebula was ready to curse him out and forget about their contract. But something in his eyes left her lost for words, and before they understood what was happening the two were making out in her kitchen, dinner and anger quickly forgotten. From there the marshal's hands roamed her body, found the zipper to her bolero...and the remaining evidence of their night littered the floor of her bedroom. Nebula never imagined herself anywhere close to this type of situation, and was just as shocked to think of Cor, a hard-headed, stoic man, being involved with a woman so intimately. It was a decision fueled by alcohol and two butting heads, she knew. At the same time, when she thought hard about it, the doctor had no regrets with her - their - decision. All that raw emotion poured into their debate was translated into something else once the bedroom door shut, and gave her a sense of understanding why he wanted her protected.

And for the first time since fleeing from Niflheim, Nebula questioned if isolation was right for her.

Cor began to stir and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was Nebula staring down at him, balanced on her right arm and leaning toward him. Her hair had been undone and hung loose, draping over her bare shoulders and glowing in the peeking sunlight. "Morning."

"Morning..." She didn't know how he'd react to remembering what they'd done. "I..." What was she supposed to say to the man who she'd gone from arguing with the night before to sleeping with? Nebula bit on her bottom lip, a bad habit to attempt to deal with stress, but reassurance washed over her when Cor reached a hand up and caressed her cheek. She leaned her head into it and laid her hand on top of his.

"Your stubborn nature reminds me of my brother," he told her. "But I have to say, persuading you to see things my way is much easier." Did he just crack a joke? His words, paired with the slightest of smirks, made her blush again.

"Is that a grin you're wearing?" Nebula was genuinely surprised, thinking the no-nonsense military
man was incapable of showing such an expression. His reply made her smile, and when he started to sit up, she noticed the faint grunts of pain echo from his throat. "Sorry about your back. I think I dug a little too deep."

He shook his head. "It's nothing I can't handle." Cor pulled an arm across his body and stretched out his muscles. "Am I keeping you from your patients?"

"It's my weekend off. I can sleep in if I want to." A yawn escaped her lips. "But what about breakfast instead? I'll make us some eggs." Nebula rolled out of bed, halting when a sore spot in her back jolted, an indication of the previous night's rough activity. She rose from the mattress and bent over to put on the undergarments she found laying close by on the floor, and upon finding Cor's button-down shirt tangled with the straps of her bra, she decided to wear it. The marshal watched her fasten the buttons through each hole, catching a glimpse of the nasty scar on her stomach given by the Niflheim troops. He hoped she'd reconsider her decision and settle closer to Lucis.

Cor took his time with getting dressed. His back still stung from Nebula's nails raking into his skin, and he hissed each time he rolled out his shoulders. He felt it best to leave his T-shirt off until she had a moment to treat the gashes properly, and fastened the belt on his pants before leaving the bedroom. Nebula was already deep into cooking breakfast. The scent of eggs and toast filled the room, accompanied by the crackling noise over the stove and the soft tune the doctor hummed. Her hair had been pulled back into a loose bun, allowing him to see the numerous red marks on her neck, and it shook when she looked over her shoulder. "Right on time, as usual. Hope you like them scrambled." She divided the pan's contents between two plates and handed him one, motioning her chin for him to sit down. She joined him at the table moments later, staring down at the eggs. "Listen, I know you're just looking out for me, but I'm still unsure about moving closer to Insomnia. You already know I'm a prime target for the Niflheim empire, and I don't want to bring that potential danger with me if I leave here."

The marshal looked up at her from his plate, relieved at her calm statement on the matter. "I understand any fears you may have. Though Lucis and Niflheim are not yet at war, we're already preparing for a battle." He set down the fork in his hand. "You probably know this by now, but the province of Tenebrae was about to declare independence from Niflheim when the latter seized full control over it. Their princess, the oracle, is the betrothed to Lucis' prince, and is trapped in the country's borders. She, too, is a magnet for danger on the empire's part. But we're prepared to do whatever is necessary to ensure her freedom, and you're no exception." Cor continued to eat his meal. "In a sense, you're now a part of the Lucian kingdom."

Nebula stopped mid-forkful and glanced up at Cor, thinking for a second she'd misheard him. "Cor..." If she were to leave Duscae, those still living in the countryside wouldn't be without a doctor; neighboring Cauthess had a great hospital and many private practices. The city was only six miles away - a short drive. Nebula was affiliated with Cauthess' hospital and already had a contract with them, so getting her patients the medicine they needed wouldn't be a problem. The nearest city outside Lucis was Gurges, the capital of neighboring Solheim, and the latter held a strong alliance with the former. Should her partnership with the Lucian army be approved by the king, she would be granted asylum by their government, and living in Gurges would come soon after. She'd leave behind all the people she knew; it'd be like fleeing the empire all over again. She didn't realize how far she'd been reaching over the table until Cor's hand laid on top of hers, and the fear in her mind began to settle. With a sigh, the doctor finally gave in. "When do I leave?"

Cor lowered his head in alleviation. His fingers momentarily curled around her hand. "As soon as His Majesty gives the word." He let go of her hand and returned to his half-finished plate. "You'll most likely reside in Gurges. We'll talk to the President about what we can do."
It felt more real when Cor said it. She imagined her new life in the Solheim capital, working on shipments for the Lucian army and treating patients in the city's busiest hospital. Nebula smiled, but it faded when the dark thoughts in her mind invaded the happy scenario, twisting the images of helping people into bloodied bodies laying on the ground, creating circles around her. She bit hard on her bottom lip and tugged on the hem of the shirt draped over her form. "Something wrong?" The doctor snapped out of her nightmare and her attention returned to the real world, where Cor looked on with worried blue eyes.

"I'm alright. Just..." Her shoulders relaxed. "Uhh... About last night..." She hadn't thought about what happened between them until that moment, and the question of what - if anything - was to become of it took over all invasive mental objects. Her cheeks flushed at the mere contemplation of pursuing a relationship with the man sitting across from her. He seemed to pick up on what she was hinting at, and he cleared his throat when he thought about it himself. As head of the royal family guards and a commanding force in Lucis' Kingsglaive, Cor had little time to even think about being in a relationship with another person. His loyalty remained with the royal family, and he'd done his best to shut out all outside distractions. But after the previous night's 'activity', the marshal began to doubt himself. His job didn't allow much time to devote to another individual, and the thought had never crossed his mind until the woman on the other side of the table had stripped him of his clothing. He stared at her, picking at her eggs while wearing his shirt, and found himself enjoying the sight.

The awkward silence ended when her phone rang. Nebula shot out of her chair and trotted over to answer it, laying the receiver against her ear. "Dr. Ardere," she said to the person on the line. She only heard a few words before her entire face went red. "Oh... Yes, he's here. I'll get him for you." Nebula turned around and beckoned for Cor to come, pointing to the phone. The marshal bared his teeth as he stood, a lump forming in his throat when he figured out who had called.

"Hello, Cid."

Loud laughter was heard on the other end of the line. "I knew you'd come around, you lady-killer."

Cor stayed in Duscae longer than he originally planned, due in part to his affair with Nebula. After bringing up the previous night both of them were at a crossroads with how they viewed their relationship, but the doctor and marshal came to a mutual agreement to keep things the same as it had been before. Though when he left her home, neither party could resist those extended moments of contact when they shook hands, and the two were caught up in another deep, long kiss. Cid didn't bother his friend when he returned to Hammerhead Station, and when dinner time came they only discussed business and the impending royal wedding. "How long is it until the big day?" the mechanic asked over their after-dinner coffee, a tradition the two shared from their days in partnership under King Regis.

"Nine and a half months. His Majesty's been in contact with the King and Queen of Tenebrae to start planning the reception. He actually wanted to extend an invitation to you and Cindy."

"Really, now?" Cid was genuinely surprised at the gesture. It'd been years since he lived in the limelight of royal service, and to hear of an invitation to the world's biggest wedding took him off guard. "I'd be happy to go, but isn't it supposed to come from the groom-to-be?"

Cor rolled his eyes. "Noctis' mind is nowhere near planning the wedding. He just wants to get it over with. If it were really up to him, he'd take Luna and elope; or better - not get married at all." It was no secret to the world that the impending marriage of Prince Noctis and Princess Luna was a grand political scheme to strengthen bonds and ensure Tenebrae's freedom. Even in the modern day, it was rare for anyone in the upper class or of higher status to wed simply out of love. Marriage was a
business used to form alliances and gain power. "If you even bring up the words 'wedding' or 'marriage' in front of him he'll change the subject or shut down." A heavy sigh escaped his lips, and his eyes wandered to the sugar packets placed at the center of the small table.

"Sounds like he doesn't know how to handle romantic emotions," Cid said after a sip of his coffee. "Cut the kid a little slack. He's preparing to go through the biggest change in his life." He reached for his cigar tin. "Think of it this way: you have a friend from childhood you'd hang out with a lot. She's been your friend for - I don't know - sixteen or so years. And suddenly, you find out that the two of you are supposed to get married in front of the entire world. How would you feel?"

"Probably like shit, but it's business." Cor finally decided to add some sugar to his drink and reached for a packet. "It wouldn't be so bad if his father wasn't so worried. He's just started to notice the change that Noctis went through when he was fourteen. Astrum and I are at a loss for how to help them." He stirred in the white powder, watching it swirl and dissolve into the coffee.

"He's still transitioning from his teenage years. He's probably just started to realize he might actually feel something more for Luna than he can't process." Talking about love and relationships was starting to annoy Cor, the elder man noticed, so he felt it was time to change the subject. "So you were able to convince her to move. Can't say I won't miss having her here."

Cor set his mug down after sipping some coffee and cleared his throat. "But she'll be safe from Niflheim's clutches. Gurges is well fortified to withstand an attack from the empire. And they've handled refugees before, so her heritage isn't a problem."

Cid lit his fresh cigar and sucked in, tasting the flavors from its smoke. Translucent wisps left his mouth when he spoke. "Will you ever bring her to Insomnia?" The marshal shrugged his shoulders. "She's going to be an outside supplier. I don't see a need to bring her to the capital."

"Well you're going to need a date for the wedding!" Cid exclaimed with a laugh, earning an annoyed grunt from his friend.

"You make me glad I'm returning home tomorrow."

A short while later Cid and Cor turned in for the night, the latter returning to his trailer. He needed all the sleep he could get to prepare for the drive back to Insomnia. He would stop at Nebula's home briefly to pick up the remainder of the army's first supply, then turn east and leave Duscae. If everything went according to plan, Nebula would be packing and heading to Solheim in a matter of a few weeks. Cor kicked off his boots and settled into bed, closing his eyes and hoping that sleep came easy.

His eyes shot open. Everything around him was dark, telling him it was the middle of the night. Cor groaned at the realization that he was awake so late. He turned on his side and grabbed at the pillow in an effort to get more comfortable. His eyes began to close again, and as sleep welcomed him once again, a slowly growing whirring noise interrupted his trance. It was soon followed by thuds on the ground, just loud enough to alert him. The only things he knew to make such a sound when they hit the ground were Niflheim's Magitek troops. Cor shot out of bed and dashed to the trailer window, where he saw the silhouette of an airship above a boulder, and human shapes gathering next to the large rock. A bang of thunder took over the sky. The storm rolling in would provide cover for the airship and troops. He didn't have to ask himself why they'd come to Duscae so heavily armed. Frantic, he quickly put on his shoes and went for his katana.

It began to rain outside. The wind picked up. Weather reports over the radio had forecasted an
approaching storm for the middle of the night, one that could cause minor landscape damage and power outages. Cor ignored the water droplets falling from the sky and took on a mindset of stealth, tracking the Magitek infantry's movements. Their footsteps lead in the direction of Nebula's house, he knew from the start, and his mind formulated plans and back-up plans to get the doctor out before the soldiers could. He used the remaining time to scan the troops for any human leaders. He had a hunch that the troops were sent in after his encounter with the human soldiers who requested an audience with Nebula, and used the vague memory of the man's face to hunt. There were no humans in the swarm of robots, to his anger, no one to stop the command of the troops. The armored husks were none the wiser to his presence, leading him straight to the doctor's estate. Cor ducked into the trees surrounding her home and searched the perimeter for an open window to sneak into. He didn't want to break one open for fear of attracting the Magiteks to his location. Crouching behind the back of the house he spotted an open window leading to the basement, just wide enough for his shoulders to fit through, and forced himself in feet first. He hit the floor with an echoing thud and immediately slid the window shut. His eyes squinted, doing his best to make out the shape of the stairs in pitch black, and tripped over the stool's leg when he ran for it.

On the main floor, Cor kept his footsteps light as he neared the bedroom. He stopped at the door and knocked. "Nebula!" he yelled in a whisper before turning the knob and pushing the door open. She was still in her bed, back facing the door and motionless. "Nebula, wake up!" The footsteps outside were getting louder. He couldn't wait for her to hear him. Cor hopped into the room and shook the woman until she woke. She was dazed, wondering why the man she would soon be contracted to was in her room again. "You have to get up," he told her. "You're in danger. Niflheim troops are outside."

"Wha-" Before she could get out a thought out they heard glass breaking in the kitchen. An armored hand scrambled to unlock the front door. Eyes wide and fully aware, Nebula put on her boots and reached under her bed, pulling out a falcata. Cor had no time to question why the woman kept a sword under her mattress as the front door was smashed through by a robot soldier. They were finding a way in. She didn't ask how he got into her home; she only followed his lead and ducked when the glass of her bedroom window exploded, armor landing on the opposite side of her room. There was barely any time for the doctor to grab her bolero as the robotic arm squirmed on the ground, searching for human flesh to grab on. Nebula almost screamed, sucking the fear back in and turning it into a focused mindset to fight with. The severed arm seemed to hone in on her location and lunged at her, hand opened wide to grab the doctor. Nebula yelped and swung her sword like a bat, and knocked the arm into the mirror on her dresser. Glass flew everywhere and the arm fell like a lifeless bird, ceasing all movement. There was no time to celebrate as a Magitek soldier attempted to enter the bedroom through the broken window. "We've got to get out of here!"

"And go where?" Cor yelled over the growing sound of wind and thunder outside. Nebula grabbed his wrist and pulled the marshal into the kitchen, where he pushed her behind him and deflected an oncoming attack from another armored husk. He cursed in time with another crack of thunder and swiped his blade upward, splitting the soldier in half. Half-frozen, Cor yanked Nebula's arm to snap her out of her trance. She returned to reality and took over leading, motioning for the back treatment room. They ran to the back of the house, Nebula flinching when more troops marched inside. He picked up a faint clicking noise and shoved the doctor ahead of him into the room, and immediately after she pulled him behind the wall, bullets were fired. The metal flew into the room and left their marks on the other side, breaking more windows. They ducked under the barrage as it penetrated the walls. When the bullets stopped they didn't hesitate to jump out through the remains of the window. Nebula's leg got caught on the window pane and she hit the wet grass hard, pebbles cutting scratches into her arms. Cor helped her up and they began to run, only to skid to a stop when several of the Magitek troops blocked their path to escape. "Shit... Looks like we'll have to fight our way through." He looked over his shoulder to Nebula, drawing his katana again. "I hope you're ready."
Nebula swallowed hard and got into a readied stance, nodding. They didn't waste a second in breaking through the wall of armored husks. Cor acted as the main force, using his strength advantage to push one of the soldiers out of line. They retaliated with katzbalgers and crossbows, working in intricate formations to keep the humans contained. Nebula took responsibility for the soldiers to the left, Cor taking the ones on the right. The doctor launched herself forward and sliced off one of the troops' legs, making it collapse into two others. One of the falling soldiers retaliated, firing an arrow from its crossbow aimed at her torso. Nebula deflected it and swung her arm downward, destroying the crossbow and front half of the Magitek soldier. Another swiped its sword across and she ducked, spinning her body to sweep out its legs, and she stabbed through the chest and its core computer drive. Sparks flew from the drone when she pulled her falcata free and backed away. Yet another armored husk shot arrows at her. Nebula leaned out of the way at the last possible second, one of the arrowheads grazing her cheek. She fell into a back flip and kicked at the drone's head, twisting it off. The wet ground was slick and provided less leverage, however, and the doctor lost her balance, falling halfway into the opening she'd created. The troops took advantage of her position in the muddy ground and aimed their crossbows down at her. She rolled out of the way of each shot, fighting against the mud's pull to avoid the artillery while cutting their legs at the ankles. The soldiers collapsed on top of her, the blade of her sword thrusting through their breastplates and dismantling the operating system inside.

It was a slight relief to Cor that the doctor could hold her own in battle. It allowed him to focus on widening the path she'd made for their escape. His mind was racing a mile a minute as he slashed his katana left and right, splitting the Magitek troops apart when they prepared to strike. But for every three drones he and Nebula destroyed, nine more would appear. He wondered how many more there were when he stabbed another drone through its head, cutting a curve through its primary wiring. A third struck him in his side with the butt of its crossbow, knocking him into the range of a waiting soldier's katzbalger. Cor used the spinning momentum given by the hit to his torso to ram his katana through its body and slice off its arm. As the metal body part lobbed off he aimed his next strike to dismantle its main system, but an oncoming soldier intercepted his attack and blocked his arm, sending the marshal flying into a boulder.

"Cor!" Nebula yelled over the thunder roaring in the sky. She was too focused on his safety to noticed the Magitek troop firing an arrow at her, and realized what had happened when the arrowhead penetrated her shoulder, exiting out the other side. Her eyes squeezed tight as agony coursed through her, and she nearly lost her grip on her sword. More troops neared her. She frantically reached for the arrow and broke off the tail, then readied herself to rip out what remained. One of the endless drones ran toward her, katzbalger aimed for a paralyzing strike, and she ducked out of its path. She collided with another soldier and used all the strength in her legs to kick its weapon aside, tearing the arrow out of her shoulder at the same time. Blood loss would begin immediately, she knew, and the doctor pulled a small green vial from her pocket. She broke it in the hand of her injured arm and watched the green liquid inside dissipate into a gas, which was absorbed by her injury. The skin and torn muscle sewed themselves together before her eyes. Able to use her arm again, Nebula turned on heel in the mud and ran for Cor. She threw an emergency potion to him and he caught it, cracking it in his hand to heal the surface wound on his leg. For a moment it seemed they were gaining the upper hand, but another wave of soldiers appeared and before they had a chance to do anything, guns were drawn and bullets were fired.

The rain of bullets served more as a distraction than an attack, allowing the Magitek troops armed with swords and crossbows to retaliate. It was near impossible to dodge both the bullets and arrows, and the two humans were struck by the artillery. They hit the muddy ground hard, still doing their best to fight back, but the drones gained the upper hand and ran in mid-fire. The soldiers ran toward Cor and Nebula as they tried to recover from the firearms and knocked their swords from their hands, restraining their arms behind their backs. They struggled against the armored husks, who led them
away from Nebula's house and into the middle of a field, where several men in armor and uniform stood at attention. "Well hello again," the man in the middle said over the rain, signaling for the soldiers to bring their captives to their knees. One soldier restraining each person kicked the backs of their legs, forcing them down with pained grunts. Their faces were grabbed and forced up to look at the infantry's leaders. The speaking soldier turned his attention to Nebula. "Dr. Ardere, it's a pleasure to finally meet you in person. Tell me, how are your patients in Lestallum doing?"

"Like you'd care to know," she spat, and shook her face free from the drone's grasp. "I find it pretty pathetic that the emperor doesn't know how to take 'no' for an answer. Just like a toddler-" Her voice ceased when one of the human soldiers' boots collided with her gut. Nebula coughed violently and tasted bile.

"You may want to reconsider how you speak of His Radiance," the lead soldier warned, sweeping his soaked hair back into place. "And I must add that you're pretty pathetic yourself for hiding behind the man running Lucis' royal security." He turned his focus to the general. "Cor Leonis, is it? Marshal of the Kingsglaive? I must extend my gratitude to you, for coming all the way out here instead of forcing us to raid your country and search the hard way."

"What does the Imperial Army want with a simple country doctor?" He silently took notice of the Magitek troops aiming their guns at his and Nebula's heads.

The lead soldier began to pace in front of them. "The same thing Lucis seeks, Marshal: the best crafted elixirs on the planet. Though Niflheim does hold precedence over Lucis, considering it is the doctor's native country. Is it not, Doctor?" He smiled at Nebula, who bared her teeth in rage.

"Besides, you wouldn't want to be in alliance with such a high-profile criminal, would you?"

"Criminal?" Nebula scoffed. "Iedolas' the criminal! Look at the tyrannical politics he's placed on your people! It's a crime to just be out on the streets after a certain time!" She snarled when the Magitek soldier holding her left arm twisted it in an effort to silence her. "...I can see it in your eyes, Commander. You're scared of him, too." A grin, twisted from the rage growing in her, crawled onto her incensed expression. "Face it: if you didn't hold a position in the military that promised security over fear, you'd be running away alongside the rest of us refugees. In a sense, you're worse than the emperor."

"You dare to speak of His Radiance in such a manner?"

Nebula leaned forward as far as she could, the grin flipping into a deep frown, and whispered, "Fuck the emperor. I hope Etro makes him choke on his own blood when she reaps his poor excuse of a soul."

The commander was normally a level-headed man, but the charge in front of him had caused much annoyance in the battle to get her to where she knelt before him. He was a man loyal to his emperor; stars would shine in his eyes at the very mention of Iedolas' name. To hear someone of low class - lower than dirt, he felt - talk about the man he worshiped in such a way enraged him, and he lost his cool. The commander pulled his foot back and thrust it into her temple, his snarling barely evident over the crackling sky. The hit knocked her head back and she fell unconscious in the Magitek troops' hold. They released her and her body dropped into the mud. Cor's breathing became heavy at the sight of Nebula unconscious on the ground, and before he could even blink, one of the drones followed its commander's order and fired several bullets into her knees. The commander tapped her face with the muddy bottom of his boot to check and see if she was conscious, and smiled deviously when the doctor lay limp, ignoring the blood that began to drip from her temple. It was then Cor's turn to lose his cool as he struggled to free himself from the Magitek soldiers' firm hold on his shoulders and arms, ignoring the gun barrels aimed at his head. His eyes were fixed on Nebula,
Lucis' biggest hope in turning the tides in the decades-long battle against Niflheim. He couldn't let the empire take away this opportunity.

"You'll do your best to calm yourself, Marshal," the commander's voice boomed. He raised his hand, which was immediately followed by the Magitek troops cocking their firearms. He flicked a finger and one fired, shooting a bullet through Cor's thigh. The marshal grit his teeth upon feeling the metal penetrate his flesh, burning instantly. It shocked through his entire left leg and into his stomach, and he hunched over as far as the troops restraining him would allow. His breath hitched every time another spasm surged from the wound. The commander looked down at him with scorn. "What a shame. You were regarded so highly in Lucis. If you had just stayed there and guarded the royal family like normal instead of leaving the safety of home to scrape the earth for some crumb of hope, you wouldn't be in this position right now, would you?" He got on one knee in front of Cor and tilted his head down. "You fucked up big time, Cor Leonis. If it were my decision, we'd bring you back to Niflheim and have you tortured before the court as entertainment during dinner. But alas, I have a higher power to obey." The commander stood again and turned his back to Cor. "Bring the girl to the ship. If she wakes up for some reason knock her out. Just keep her alive. His Radiance needs her knowledge." He casually waved a hand as a Magitek soldier hoisted Nebula and threw her over its shoulder, her limbs dangling helplessly. Waving his hand again, the armored husks forced Cor to stand, yanking his arms tighter to straighten his back.

"What shall we do with the marshal, sir?" one of the commander's human subordinates asked.

The commander shrugged his shoulders. "Lord Aldercapt only wanted the doctor. Just kill him and meet me back at the ship." His subordinate nodded and drew his katzbalger. The commander started to walk away, leading a small faction of his robotic infantry and two of the human soldiers with him, including the drone that carried Nebula. Cor could only watch them move further away in the rain, stealing Lucis' hopes in the process. The marshal never once feared death. As the mastermind behind the royal family guards he knew his life could be whisked away in an instant if it meant protecting the king and his family. If he was going to die right now he would die with dignity and honor, knowing his death occurred because he wanted to protect his country. Cor closed his eyes.

A scream forced them open again. The subordinate in front of him was mouth agape, gasping for air, and the marshal's gaze fell upon the reason behind his agony. A large icicle, close to the size of a large tree branch, skewered the Niflheim soldier through his gut. "W...wh..." He could barely form a word, blood pouring from his wound and mouth. He began to gargle his own blood and choke. Wheezes managed to free themselves, and before he could fall to a knee, a second spire ran through his skull. He fell forward, eyes rolling into the back of his head, and more blood poured out from his body. Cor and the other soldiers forgot to breathe for a moment. Their gazes landed on the group of soldiers that had walked away. They'd become nothing more than a pile of scrap metal littering the open field, and the two human soldiers that had gone along with their commander... They weren't people anymore. Cor had to force himself to look away, but the image was already imprinted on his mind. One of the soldiers barely had a face anymore; it had been seared off, his sword rammed through his neck. The other was twitching on the ground several feet away, electrical sparks dancing on and off his form. A bolt of lightning came down from the sky and struck him, and the man ceased all movement. In the mess of debris and bodies Cor looked back at the scene, and noticed two figures still standing. One shivered and cowered, backing away from the other as it lifted an arm and pointed its palm toward it.

"Crimina terrae huic et corruas..." a voice echoed in the storm. The voice sounded eerily like Nebula's but carried an ethereal presence in it. The threatening silhouette ignored the cowering one and turned for Cor and the Magitek troops surrounding him. One of the surviving human subordinates sensed the heightened level of danger and ordered the drones to turn their guns to the approaching figure. They changed their arm and waited. The silhouette came close enough to be
identified, and Cor's mouth fell open. Nebula was somehow standing, faint green smoke seeping into her knees and body slouched. Her eyes were strange: black, no longer gray, and lost. Her posture straightened and she blinked, observing every soldier and weapon ready to attack her. "Non est enim misericordia Etro," her voice boomed. Realization dawned on Cor of what was going on, and the Niflheim commander's shaky voice confirmed his suspicion.

"...Lamia..." He couldn't believe it. The country doctor his emperor had sent him to retrieve was the Niflheim witch who'd escaped the empire five years before. "B-but... But why? Why would His Radiance want the sorceress?" He didn't want to try and make sense of it. The mission objective changed. "Fire, damn it! Blast her to bits!" Cor was freed from the Magitek troops' grasp as their focus shifted to neutralizing the witch. Flashes took over the landscape as they fired their guns at Nebula, but every bullet was met with an ice particle that froze it on sight. Frost accumulated on her clothes and pushed forward. A Blizzara spell, Cor noted before shielding himself. The wall of ice and snow froze the insides of the Magitek troops, and icicles exploded from their bodies, dismantling them. The last two human subordinates dashed toward the sorceress, swords drawn and aimed at vital organs. Nebula bared her teeth and clawed upward at the air, and water on the ground solidified around the soldiers' legs. They did their best to break free from the icebergs clamping them in place, but before even a chip could be broken off raindrops spun around their heads and gathered into a ball. Nebula's raised hands beckoned for the spheres of water to condense and force themselves down the soldiers' throats, and the men drowned where they stood. The doctor looked over her shoulder to the commander, who'd collapsed to his hands and knees and prayed to the gods for forgiveness. She marched slowly toward him. He found a crossbow laying nearby and picked it up with his shaky hands. An arrow was fired at the woman, who deflected it with a sheet of ice, and she wrapped his body in an aero spell. The commander was lost for words, and soon after air when Nebula squeezed her hand closed and forced the man before her to suffocate. His ribs cracked and punctured every internal organ, blood bubbling from his throat.

Nebula raised her hand and the commander into the air. She tilted her head to the side, the corner of her mouth turning up. "In altera vita non erit pax vobis," she said to him, and closed her hand tight. The bones in the commander's body crunched and blood spewed from his mouth like a geyser, mixing with the rain as it poured down on her. Nebula dropped the Niflheim soldier's body and turned around, her eyes landing on Cor. She took a step toward him and he shuffled backwards. "Vis ad ipsam?" she asked him, waiting for an answer.

"Nebula... Lamia..." He was unsure what to call her. He cursed himself for allowing the witch to seduce him, and now had some sort of understanding as to why she kept a book on magic hidden in her basement. Cor found his katana nearby and grasped it, pointing the blade at the doctor. Their attraction, their contract...everything was done for. He had to find a way to escape, to get back to the car and outrun her. Cor turned on his heel and darted in the direction of Coernix Station, only to skid to a stop when lightning struck the ground in front of him. Its electricity danced through the currents provided by the wet ground and surrounded him. He knew if he took one step in any direction he'd be fried by the electricity beneath, and glared back at Nebula. There was only one thing left he could try, and the mere thought of it made him hate himself. He'd have to reason with her. "Nebula... Nebula, listen to me. I'm not one of those Niflheim soldiers. I serve Lucis, the ones trying to end this war. You don't want-" He couldn't finish his sentence before the doctor lunged at him with a sword she'd found. He stumbled out of the way, his thigh still scorching from the gunshot wound, and found his footing again on a safe portion of the land. The marshal and the doctor exchanged blow after blow, blades clashing and sparking when they rubbed against one another. For a moment it seemed he was losing the fight, until he noticed an opening in her stance. Nebula swiped her found sword upward and Cor sidestepped, using his momentum to twist and disarm her. He knocked his skull into hers and she stumbled backward while holding her face, and he tripped her. Cor stood over the woman and pointed his katana at her, chest rising and falling fast. "If I had known I was making
a deal with a witch I would've never done it. Damn my desperation for leaving my mind so clouded..." She remained still under him, eyes unwavering. Not seeing any fear in her eyes sent a chill down his spine, given the position she was in. To think she'd come off as so kind and caring... It pained him to think of Nebula as he had before, to feel her lips against his when their bodies were intertwined. She had to be killed, there was no questioning that fact. It was for the best: for his safety, and the safety of the world. Cor swung his arm back.

His chest suddenly felt warm, and breathing became difficult. Cor gasped and tasted iron. His eyes widened. Looking down, he saw the tip of a katzbalger embedded in the left side of his chest, Nebula's hand wrapped around its hilt. He lost his grip on the katana and dropped it. Cor fell to a knee, then the other, and struggled to hold himself up with his arms. Each beat of his heart became more strained as he realized that the sword had pierced his lung, and probably his heart. Why she'd chosen to kill him with a weapon instead of magic was a mystery, and he fell onto his back. Arms spread wide, Cor found moving strenuous, and the vision in the corners of his eyes was hazing. He could only look up at the doctor, her eyes - black and soulless voids - staring back at him. Breathing was tiresome, and the last thought he could register was how sleepy he suddenly felt.

In the Lucian capital city of Insomnia, a pained scream erupted from Noctis' bedchamber. He awoke violently and threw off his bed sheets. A cold sweat had taken over his body. He jumped off the mattress and ran for the window, panting heavily, and stared at the glass. His reflection was faint, but from what he could make out his eyes were blood red. His hands tightened into fists and he sunk to the floor on his knees. Tears welled in his eyes. He prayed that the image of Cor dying was only a nightmare and not him seeing his father's guardian leaving the world to be with Etro.

Chapter End Notes

Time-skip for the smut because I'm a piece of shit prude lol I didn't feel like writing it out (and it takes me a long while to anyway). BUT if people would really like to know the dirty details of what happened in the bedroom, let me know and I MAY just reward your curiosity ;D

Also, LONG chapter. Longer than all the past ones. Not sure if future chapters will be this long, too, but we'll see where my fingers bring me when they get written.
Chapter Summary

Free your mind from false beliefs
You can be the commander in chief
You can hide your true motives
To dismantle and destroy
Now you finally have the codes
I have given you the code

~Muse, The Globalist

Chapter Notes

I know it's a bit confusing when I go between the original character's real name and alias. Just to clarify for everyone: her alias is Nebula Ardere, and it's used when she's in the presence of Noctis & co. Her real name is Atra Ardere Interitio - which is used when she's alone with Cor and/or Sectis; and Lamia is the title Neflheim gave her when she was branded a witch.

Anyway, back to the present time!

"After that," Cor concluded, "I woke up in Miss Interitio's care. She informed me that I'd been out for a week. Her blade did, indeed, kill me, but she brought me back to life. I secured and interrogated the sorceress, and she didn't hesitate to lay everything out. She revealed her real name and gave me all the information I asked for." His trip into the memory from nine months ago still gave him chills, but it was an event Clarus needed to know about. The marshal's hands were knitted together, forearms resting on his knees in his hunched position where he sat on the mattress. A bead of sweat rolled down the side of his head. It only seemed like yesterday that he was sitting for coffee with Cid, discussing the plan to move the doctor to Gurges. And now he was going to take the very witch who'd stolen his life to see his king. There was no telling when her next trance would be, how long it would last, or if the king was in good hands under her care.

The tale was a lot for the king's bodyguard to take in. He'd heard many twisted stories in his day, and had even been the teller of some of them, but none left him on the edge of his seat like Cor's had. "No wonder you looked a fright when you returned to the palace," he commented, and Cor nodded. "But there are still details I'm in the dark about. Do you mind me asking some questions?"

"Go ahead."

Clarus cleared his throat. "Why did you let her live?"

It was the question he'd dreaded being asked. "I was prepared to kill Atra. She even seemed ready to
accept that it had to happen. But if I killed Miss Interitio, I knew it would mean a future where, if Niflheim had attacked in the same fashion they did, our chances of surviving the ordeal would be nearly zero. Something about the way she makes her elixirs is powerful, almost magical, I might say. And if Niflheim was willing to attempt a kidnapping to get their hands on her mixtures, her work has some kind of value." Cor felt the aching from his gunshot wound alleviate, yet another sign of the witch's expertise in healing.

The graying bodyguard hated to admit it, but Cor was right. The supply of potions, antidotes, ethers and elixirs the doctor provided had made the escape from Lucis to Altissia easier on their bodies. And if it weren't for the phoenix downs she made, King Regis' first death would've been his last. It was because of her that many people met their premature deaths, but it was also out of her hard work and dedication that many more people lived. Atra Ardere Interitio was an enigma of polarity. But as right as Cor was in keeping her alive, Clarus had to be sure that his friend kept a distance between himself and the witch. "When do you plan to tell His Highness who she really is?"

Another questioned that burned inside. "I had planned to when we left Lestallum, but Noctis' insistence on her joining us to Altissia put that on hold. I'm still working on that matter."

"So in short, you have no idea when."

Cor groaned. It was usually difficult when it came to Noctis. The prince was a stubborn individual, more so than his father, and teenage hormones that left a sliver of rebellion in him made for careful planning for his conversations with the younger Caelum. Having Ignis there helped somewhat, but at this point the prince's advisor was on the same level as the prince himself. He didn't even want to think of how Gladiolus would react - who'd be known as the bodyguard who allowed his charge to hang out with a witch - and Prompto would completely lose it. Cor needed time to find the right combination of words to inform the younger men of who Nebula Ardere really was. "After she treats the king and he proves to be in good health, I'll make sure Miss Interitio is contained. That's when I'll inform them." Neither of them liked the plan, but with no other ideas, it was the only thing they had going for them.

"One more. Do you still feel something for her?"

He was done playing Q&A and ignored Clarus' final question. The marshal felt the time getting to him, though Atra had warned of the potion's drowsying effects. Telling his story had made him forget about it, and when he yawned Cor winced, the healing wound slightly stretched by his expanding chest. Clarus got up from his chair and made his way to the back of the trailer. "We should rest. It's still a long drive to Cape Caem, and at least another day by boat to Accordo." It was one of the longest days they'd had since escaping from Insomnia, and if they planned on getting any closer to reclaiming the crystal they needed all the sleep they could get. As the men settled in Atra returned to their trailer. Her eyes met Cor's in an awkward side glance. Stethoscope hanging around her neck, she set down her medical bag and huffed out loud.

"Mr. Leonis," she greeted him in a flat tone, still stinging from their exchanged words earlier. "You're looking better than before. Your color has returned to normal." He replied when a grunt as he laid down, tucking an arm behind his head. "Has the potion helped at all?"

"...Yes..." He wasn't in the mood to talk, but he knew she wouldn't leave him alone until he answered.

"Good." Atra removed the stethoscope from her neck and placed it on the counter above her bag. "I took the liberty of renting my own trailer for the night. Having me in your presence wouldn't be good for your recovery." Cor rolled to his side, facing the small window next to him, and Atra took the hint. "I'll let Clarus know..." She started for the back of the trailer.
"Try to control your murderous tendencies this time," he warned her. Atra's brow furrowed and she scoffed. Even as he lay injured his tongue remained sharp as ever. Such seemed to be the way of Lucian men. She wondered what she ever found so attractive in the blue-eyed man as she stormed to the back and pushed the dividing curtain out of her way. Cor listened to her whispering, taking note of the sour tone in her voice when his name came up. A minute later she marched toward the door and grabbed her duffle bag, paying the marshal no mind when she left the trailer. The door slammed behind her.

Nebula hadn't slept much. Dealing with Cor's attitude had given her a headache that persisted throughout the night, making sleep difficult to reach. She didn't take any potions for fear of making herself drowsy and repeating the murder she'd committed in Lestallum. Her hands burned from the lacerations Cor gave her, and added on to the stress she found herself unable to rest for more than five hours. It was something she was used to; with her schedule, sleep took a back seat so she could work on her immense orders of elixirs and treat her patients. Some would ask if she suffered from insomnia. For all Nebula knew she did, but she never bothered to do anything about it.

When she woke the next morning the sun hadn't risen yet. The time on a clock hanging above the trailer's small stove told her it was before six. She rolled to a sitting position and stared down at her bandaged hands, treated by an insistent Ignis. Noctis' group were worried about Cor's attitude toward her, and questioned her multiple times on anything else he may have done to her. She'd brushed off their inquiries, though when Prompto happened to comment that it was almost like she and Cor had endured a bad break-up the doctor froze for a moment. Her stiff shoulders didn't go unnoticed, and she bolted out the door when he pushed the subject further.

She knew she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep, and got up from bed to start a pot of coffee for herself. The sun started to creep over the horizon ten minutes later. Caffeine helped the doctor feel more awake. She practically lived off of it, always having a cup nearby when she knew she was in for a long night of work. Glancing out the window she took in the rising star, and decided to step outside to watch it. When she left the confines of her trailer she noticed Ignis coming outside from the one he shared with the prince, and he happened to look her way. "Morning," he said to her.

She nodded to him. "You came out in time to see the sun rise. It's nice."

"How are your hands?"

"They're minor wounds. They'll heal by the time we reach Altissia." There was an absence of emotion in her voice, something Ignis felt was caused more by the marshal than lack of sleep.

"I apologize if our questions made you feel uncomfortable last night." Her gaze moved from the sun to the ground as she focused on the steadily growing shadows made by some rocks. "If we had known earlier I wouldn't have-"

"Really, it's alright," she snapped, not wanting to think of Cor. But every time she blinked all she could see was his face: the hard line his lips made when he pressed them together; the way his skin creased when his eyebrows scrunched; the way his throat moved when he spoke to her; and his eyes, blue like the ocean, watching her work. A light breeze hugged her, reminding her of the night she and Cor became one, remembering the grip of his slightly calloused hands on her hips and back. Nebula bit her bottom lip. "...I just wish it could've been different between us."

"Come have some breakfast with us," Ignis suggested, wanting to take her mind off the subject. "I'm making Lucian-style pancakes." Food sounded like a good idea, and Nebula followed after the advisor to his trailer. He held the door open for her and she stepped inside, hearing the voices of the gunner and bodyguard complain.
"Come on, Noct," Gladiolus huffed. "Cor said to be up at the crack of dawn. Time to start the show." The prince batted the elder's hand away and whined. "Don't make me jump on you." He received no answer, and only managed to see Noctis roll to his side.

Gladiolus exchanged glances with Prompto. "Alright, he asked for it..." Both men positioned themselves at both corners of the mattress. "Ready, Gladio?"

"One... Two..."

The prince hissed. "Alright," he yawned in a complaint, "I'm up. Just don't crush me."

The bodyguard knelt next to his friend and pat his back. "Eyes open." He stayed in place, glaring until the prince reluctantly opened his right eye, then the left.

"There we go." Prompto's attention was drawn to the entrance, where he saw Nebula at the top of the stairs. "Morning," he waved, seeing Ignis join her. "We got him up."

"Yeah. Only took us twenty minutes," Gladiolus sneered playfully, to which Noctis rolled his eyes as he threw his feet off the side of the bed. Noctis wasn't a morning person, a fact his friends had known for years. They had enough trouble trying to wake him up at ten in the morning so he wouldn't be late for any meetings or classes. So to attempt waking the possibly narcoleptic prince at sunrise took lots of patience.

Ignis made his way to the kitchenette to start breakfast. "Taking orders now. How many?" Gladiolus held both hands up, showing a number that made Nebula's eyes grow to saucers. Prompto requested a few less, and Noctis the same as him. The advisor looked over his shoulder to the doctor. "How many pancakes would you like?"

"Five is good," she replied.

Gladiolus whistled. "Doc's got an appetite. I like it."

The five of them sat down for breakfast soon after, which was quick to keep the marshal from waiting long. He wasn't mentioned once during the meal, much to Nebula's relief, and she was filled in on how the remainder of their journey would go. The smile on her face left for a moment as she pictured the end of the line. In only days she would be treating the King of Lucis, and from there her connection with Noctis and his court would be severed. The Shadow Agreement would be long forgotten. She'd return to her life in Duscae...or be carted off to a prison cell, if Cor got his way. Either way, the doctor knew her time with her new friends was limited, and she wanted to get the most out of the trip as possible. "What's Altissia like?"

Noctis looked up from his plate. "Believe me when I say it's something you'd never see anywhere else. The entire city is built on top of water. The streets look like they were built out of glass... And then there are the canals. You have to travel by boat to get through most of the city."

"It's the best place in all of Accordo to see the sunset," Prompto added. "And there's this really nice waterfall near the Presidential palace. Hopefully we can see it when we go there."

"You mean we'll be staying in his estate?"

Ignis' head leaned sideways. "Perhaps. I was told His Majesty was settled in a safe house somewhere within the city, but should his recovery be speedy, we may be moved into the President's estate..." Nebula let their idle conversation take over her mind. Anything was better than thinking about leaving their company.
The royal retinue departed within the hour. The keys to the trailers were turned in and both cars were packed and refilled with gas. Clarus wrapped the blown-out back window with transparent plastic, which rippled violently as the wind hit it during the drive. Nebula's headache, already persisting from the night before, pounded in her skull as she rode in the back of the SUV. She rubbed her temples, her frown deepening when her fingertip ran over the small scar from the infamous incident in Duscae. Cor and Clarus seemed bothered by the noise as well, though they did a much better job of hiding it. The former rested his head against his window and closed his eyes, hand occasionally roaming to the healing wound on his chest. Its placement near the other mark brought about a sarcastic smirk. He still couldn't believe she'd saved his life twice. Looking through the passenger mirror he glanced at the doctor sitting behind him. Her cringing features had relaxed as she fell asleep. "That headache isn't a good sign," he told Clarus.

"Hmm?"

"Nebula..." He wondered why he still used her alias. "...Atra has these stages that she goes through before losing control and submitting to whatever mindset we call 'Lamia'. Headaches are usually an indicator that it'll start again soon."

Clarus raised an eyebrow. "You mean we actually have a warning?" He momentarily looked to the Regalia following behind them. "What about what happened last night?"

Cor frowned. "Atra's personality will change under two circumstances, one of which being if her life is in danger. If there's an outside threat to her, like the Niflheim soldiers, something in her head will click and Lamia takes over."

"And what's the other circumstance?"

"I'm not too sure about the second yet, but her headaches have something to do with it. Something in her brain is probably being triggered." The marshal looked down at his folded hands, grasping the katana resting between his knees. "There's...one other thing. When she and I..." His voice trailed off, not wanting to mention their little affair. "I noticed a scar on the back of her neck, and it looks like there's something underneath the skin." Just mentioning it gave him a clear picture of the slight bump under the doctor's hair line.

Clarus' grip on the steering wheel tightened upon hearing the disturbing discovery. He was beginning to see why Cor suspected her of being the key to Nilfheim finding them. "...That's sick. I knew Iedolas was a madman, but chipping all of his citizens?" As bizarre as the idea was, it made sense for a person like Iedolas Aldercapt to have the people of Niflheim tagged like livestock. A computer chip, embedded just under the skin, would allow Iedolas' regime to constantly check up on all its citizens, and make sure they wouldn't fall out of line. The empire's science department developed the Magitek force, so having a system to track - and possibly punish - its people wasn't as farfetched as some would think. "What about removing it?"

Cor shook his head. "We don't know what it's attached to. For all we know the chips could be rigged to self-destruct." He dug in his blazer pocket and pulled out the circular device he'd retrieved, bringing it to eye level. "The sooner we get her out of our hair, the better."

The vehicles were on schedule to arrive at Cape Caem by early afternoon; from there, the rest of the journey would carry on by boat. The royal quartet couldn't wait to get to the ferry. Noctis was desperate to finally see his father again, whom he'd assumed was dead until Cor told him the news. The safe house was the first destination on their list, the marshal said back in Lestallum, and they'd have an escort to get there. Once his father was taken care of the prince's next agenda was to reunite with Luna. And from there, they'd work with President Speculo to formulate a plan on seizing Lucis' crystal. "We'll be at the port soon," Ignis informed his friends. The President made special
arrangements for the Lucian royals; they would ride across the Altum Magma Sea aboard a private boat equipped to carry the Regalia, knowing full well how important the car was to the prince. It would be stored in the Presidential Palace until the time came when the King was well enough to leave Altissia and could settle in one of Accordo's land-based cities.

The SUV in front suddenly came to a halt. Growing worried, Ignis immediately pulled over and got out of the car. "Something wrong, Clarus?" he asked the driver, who quickly shushed the younger man and pointed up ahead. The port was another turn down the road, and at the parking lot, the elder Amicitia had seen a bulky metal shape. The rest of the quartet exited the Regalia and ran up to the SUV.

"Dad, what's up?" Gladiolus asked, staying close to Noctis. Following his father's finger, he too spotted the metal shape. Squinting, the younger bodyguard's mouth curled downward. "Dammit... Magitek troops."

Nebula, still in the back seat, woke up from her nap at the sound of worried voices. "What's going on?" She didn't need to be informed of the situation as her gaze settled in front of her and she saw the airship. "No... No, that's impossible!" Clarus and Cor glanced to the back seat at the doctor, who met both pairs of eyes. "What? Don't think they're at our doorstep because of me!" Looking past the men again she focused on the airship. "Wait...something's off."

"She's right," Cor added as he got out of the car. "Airships used for ambushes are much larger, usually carrying fifty or more Magitek drones. This one couldn't carry more than ten people."

"So why such a small carrier?" Prompto asked out loud. "If we could just get a better vantage point..."

Noctis laid a hand on Prompto's shoulder and motioned his chin toward the cliff above them. "I could warp up there and see what's going on." He looked at Cor, waiting for acknowledgement. The marshal nodded and Noctis took a few steps back. Nebula watched the prince's body begin to develop a translucent blue glow, which concentrated on his right hand for a moment. Before her eyes could register it the prince vanished in a periwinkle haze. She had to follow the others' gazes to the top of the cliff, where he waved down to his comrades and flashed them a thumbs-up.

"Wow..." Nebula blinked. It was the first time she'd seen the prince ever perform such a feat. She wondered if it had anything to do with the Lucian crystal.

Several stories higher than his friends, Noctis was able to clearly see the horizon. He could see the Altum Magma Sea, the birds flying over it, and the Caem ferry port to Accordo. The prince crouched down and readied a weapon from his Armiger arsenal in case anything went wrong. Down at the port's parking lot, the small airship was unguarded - another strange occurrence. Three figures stood out from the plain wood of the docks, standing near the entrance of the ferry terminal. Two of the forms were encased in armor from head to toe, duller than the combat drones he fought on a regular basis, with rectangular heads. They stood at either side of a man in a hat and black coat, burgundy tendrils visible from under the hat... "What in the world..." Noctis bared his teeth and gripped the rocky surface beneath his hand. He had to return to everyone and tell them. The prince warped back to ground level, the anger still evident on his face. They waited for his word. "...Two Magitek troops...and...Chancellor Izunia..."

All jaws dropped. "No way..." the blond whispered.

"That's impossible!" Gladiolus had to keep himself from yelling. "What the hell's the chancellor of Niflheim doing out here?" The last time anyone from the Lucian court had seen Chancellor Ardyn Izunia was at the treaty signing nearly a month before, standing alongside Emperor Aldercapt shortly
before all hell broke loose.

Cor growled under his breath. He turned to Nebula and reached for the hilt of his katana. "He knew we were coming. But why bring so few defenses?"

The prince's bodyguard and advisor were side by side, both with crossed arms. Ignis pushed on the rim of his glasses. "Being accompanied by such a small troop is usually reserved for casual visits."

He tapped his foot on the ground, deep in thought. "This could be my imagination, but maybe he just wants to talk."

"Right," Nebula sneered, "the chancellor of a dictatorship just 'wants to talk' with the Prince of Lucis while blocking his only route to safety." She didn't like the feel of their situation.

They had a lot to consider. For all they knew, the chancellor's appearance at the port was a ploy to draw Noctis in and prepare for a strike. But many factors didn't add up. Had it been even a small ambush, the chancellor would've been accompanied by the newer model Magitek troops, not the old models that were now used for policing and crowd control. The rectangular-headed models were obsolete compared to the green armor-faced drones. And even then, two old-model robotic soldiers weren't much of a threat to a group of seven skilled fighters. Cor considered their options. They could either sneak up to the chancellor and catch him off guard, or walk in like normal and see what the current ruler of Niflheim had to say for himself. The latter seemed like a safer option, and he didn't like that.

Ignis turned his attention from Cor to Noctis, who'd thought through the same plans Cor had. The three seemed to be in agreement of what would be done. "I suppose we should just drive in, then," he said in a reluctant tone. If anything went wrong he hoped they'd be able to handle whatever trouble came their way. Everyone piled back into their cars and continued the drive to Caem port. The usual daytime guards were operating the gates for the parking lot and allowed the seven of them access. They parked close to the terminal entrance, and when they got out of the car Cor and the bodyguards formed a triangle around Noctis. Ignis, Nebula and Prompto filled in the gaps between the main forces, all ready to draw their weapons if needed. Prompto took position at the back of the group; his quick reflexes and sharpshooting skills would prove useful if a strike from behind happened.

Nebula kept her eyes on the man between the armored soldiers. He'd taken a seat on a bench outside the terminal and crossed one leg over the other, face buried in a magazine. A grin lay on his face, white teeth illuminated by his tan skin, his chin lined with bristles of hair growing in. He appeared to pay the approaching visitors no mind and continued to ignore their aggressive stance the closer they got. His bodyguards stood at attention and only switched to a combative stance when Noctis and his group were feet away. Noctis' shield reacted by laying their hands on their weapons.

"Must you really be so stiff?" were the first words to leave the Chancellor's mouth. He set his magazine aside and shifted his focus to the prince in the middle of the pack. "Been a long time, Highness. How are you doing this fine afternoon?"

Noctis was ready to snap and go for Izunia's neck, but a firm hand on his arm kept him in place. Ignis shook his head, telling the prince to remain calm. Cor, stationed at the front of the human shield, stood up straight. Ardyn signaled for his guards to lower their guns as he stood from his seat, handing one of them his magazine. Feeling the tension in the air grow thick, Ignis cleared his throat. "...To what do we owe the honor of meeting you in such an unconventional location, Chancellor?"

he asked.

"Can't enjoy the sights with you?" The Niflheim leader laid a hand on his hat and tipped his head in greeting to everyone. "Highness... Marshal... Lords Amicitia... Sir Scientia... Sir Argentum..." His
gaze stopped on Nebula, who felt uncomfortable vibes fly out from his amber eyes. "...Doctor. I wanted to applaud you all for making it as far as you have."

"And what a congratulatory committee you've brought with you," Cor commented. "Let's cut to the chase: how did you know we were coming here?"

The chancellor started to pace in front of them. "You forget how good Niflheim is with technology. We have our ways of finding people." Ardyn stopped in front of Cor, hands folded behind his back and grinning. "But I haven't come to capture you and send you off to Niflheim. My job is to handle politics, not military command."

His words left them little reassurance. Prompto was still on high alert at the back of the group, but his eyes would occasionally wander to where Ardyn stood as he listened to their conversation. "What are you talking about?" Noctis demanded.

"I've come merely to offer you a deal, Highness-

"I'm not making any deals so long as you have my kingdom's crystal!" His eyes flashed violet.

Ardyn held his hands up defensively. "Please, Highness, hear me out. This offer is coming directly from the old man himself." Exchanging looks, Clarus let Prompto know it was alright for him to lower his guard, and the blond returned his gun to its holster. Nebula also received a reassuring glance and sheathed her sword, but kept her hand on the hilt. "Lord Aldercapt wishes to split the crystal evenly between Nflheim and Lucis."

"Not gonna happen."

"Then he wishes to enlist your help in finding a new one. Or better yet, create one."

"But there are no more crystals left in the world. The Lucian crystal is the last of its kind." He was growing annoyed with the man standing before him.

The chancellor rested a hand on his hip. "If your wish is to have your crystal back, Highness, you'll reconsider. You don't seem to have a choice in the matter." He turned his back to the group and paced again. "Help Niflheim, and I will guide you to the crystal. In fact..." He looked over his shoulder to Noctis. "...Only I can guide you." Facing the group again, Ardyn tipped his hat to everyone. "I must take my leave now. Politics demands my immediate presence at the palace. Consider my offer, dear Prince; it's the best one you'll get. Until next time, Highness..." The chancellor's troops began to march to the left of the group, flanking Ardyn on either side as they walked back to their airship.

"That was...strange," Prompto said, utterly confused by the chancellor's choice of words. "Why would he even suggest you help him create a new crystal? That's not even possible."

"Chancellor Izunia is a peculiar man," Clarus commented. "He has been since he came to power. One can never tell if he's lying or not." Glancing down at his watch, he read the time. "The ferry will be departing in twenty-five minutes. We should prepare our things."

"Yeah. Let's get the car ready." Gladiolus pat Ignis' back and trotted with him to the Regalia. Nebula turned to follow the elder Amicitia back to the SUV, but a whistle from the other side of the lot caught her attention. Nebula turned her torso and saw Ardyn beckoning for her to come over to him, and the look on his face made her skin crawl.

Prompto picked up on her bad vibe. "What's he want?"
"I'm not sure..." Seeing her stay in place the chancellor rolled his eyes and put more emphasis on his gesture. Glancing back at Cor and Clarus, Nebula swallowed hard. "...I'll be right back," she told the gunner, and slowly walked toward the Niflheim airship. Cor kept her in his peripheral vision.

The annoyance on the chancellor's face disappeared when the doctor finally walked his way. "Ah, Doctor. Thank you for taking time to speak with me?"

"What do you want?"

"Ah, ah." He wagged a finger in her face. "Patience, my dear. I'm sure you're aware that many of Niflheim's commanding officers have been vanishing, yes?" He lowered his voice to a whisper and watched her eyes widen, though he couldn't tell if it was from horror or fear. "I know many of them have been sent to offer you a position as head field medic, but they haven't reported back. Do you have any idea where they might be?"

Her blood froze. Nebula gulped and shook her head. "...No, I don't. Haven't seen any troops in a long time."

Ardyn sighed. "Oh well. General Glauca will be disappointed to hear that. In any case, the offer still stands for you to rejoin your home country. My lord has expressed high interest in your capabilities and would love for you to become a part of his court."

"I respectfully decline," Nebula turned away from him.

"Oh, and one more thing, Dr. Ardere." He stepped close to the doctor and whispered something in her ear, leaving her wide-eyed and mouth agape. As she tried to make sense of his message the chancellor took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. "Until we meet again, my dear." Ardyn turned and walked back to his airship, leaving the doctor stunned as the large metal vehicle slowly ascended into the air.

Gladiolus ran up to Nebula and tapped her shoulder, breaking her trance. "You okay?"

Nebula rubbed her head. "Yeah... He just tried to recruit me, is all." The bodyguard put an arm around her as they walked back to their vehicles, noticing the way she massaged circles into her temples. She had developed another headache.
Open Waters Bring No Calm

Chapter Notes

Don't know if anyone noticed that little hint I gave at the end of The Globalist with Ardyn (in reference to the game's full trailer).

So at this point the story will definitely have a slight alternate universe theme to it. Many things like the characters' powers and the general story plot will be on par with FFXV canon (and probably Kingsglaive), but there will be a lot of minor - and some moderate, and a few major - details that'll diverge from what's canon.

More good news: I just graduated from college (which is why I've been MIA)!! And Sony KILLED it at E3!!

Nebula watched the ferry workers from afar as they secured the Regalia into place on the ship's deck. Thick straps and metal crossbars were used to hold the vehicle still in the ship's cargo storage space. Ignis double-checked all the straps before giving the captain the okay. A head count of the passengers was taken, and once Gladiolus and Clarus checked the perimeter for any lingering Niflheim soldiers, the crew began the departure process. The anchor was drawn in, the bridge raised, and the ferry's horn was blown. One of the crew members gathered all the passengers and led them to the three suites reserved for them. The doctor's suite was on at the end of the second level, past the dining hall and after Cor and Clarus' suite - a placement that was perfectly planned to keep her away from the prince and his friends. She didn't let her annoyance on the matter show on her face as the crewman brought her belongings into the suite and laid the luggage beside her bed. As she stepped inside the crewman began to speak. "Dinner will be served in two hours," he started. "The marshal took the liberty of giving a list of meals for everyone for the duration of the trip; I hope that's alright with you. Someone will escort you and the other passengers to the dining hall when dinner is served." He motioned his hand in the direction of the suite's bathroom. "You have your own personal bathroom, shower included. If you need anything you can call for someone over the phone on your nightstand. The line's encrypted so you won't have to worry about and possibility of the empire eavesdropping. We should arrive at the shores of Accordo at approximately nine tomorrow night." He watched her expression, the doctor taking in all the information as she sat on the edge of the mattress. "Do you have any questions, ma'am?"

"Why dock at night?" It was a stupid question, she was sure of it; they all knew the answer. The crewman didn't scoff at her inquiry, which Nebula showed gratitude for in her faint smile. "The nation of Accordo is unaware of His Highness' arrival, ma'am. Many precautions were taken to ensure your escort into the country would be as swift and quiet as possible. Aside from the President, his cabinet and the Presidential Guard, no one knows that the Prince of Lucis will be coming to Accordo." And what he didn't have to say rang the loudest in the room. Every precaution being taken - their arrival to Accordo long after sunset, the absence of other passengers aside from those in the Lucian royal court, the encrypted phone lines - was to ensure no information got out and somehow made its way to Emperor Aldercapt's waiting ears. The less they made their presence known to the world, the better. "Will there be anything else?"

"No, thank you," she replied, her mind already elsewhere. The crewman nodded his head and took
his leave, and closed the metal door behind him. It creaked as he pulled it shut, and when the tumbler for the lock sank into the frame's pocket with a click the doctor hunched over and held her head in her hands. The pulses dancing between her brain and skull were becoming more painful. Unable to deal with it any longer Nebula rushed to her duffle bag and dug inside of the side pocket in search of her potion pills. She shook one out of the bottle and forced it down in a hard swallow, not bothering to search for any water glasses nearby. In an instant the pain began to subside. She was cautious this time around, only taking one pill to reduce the drowsying effects. As the medication's effect continued to take hold she settled on the floor beside the mattress and pulled her bag close. She reached inside and wormed her arm between the folded clothing, looking for one of her textbooks, and pulled it free from its confines. The magic codex sat between her hands, the worn taupe cover's lettering beginning to fade. Bringing the textbook with her may have been a bad decision - if she wasn't careful with how she studied it, her cover could be blown. But there were many physicians - some of which she associated in Lestallum's main hospital - who owned countless copies of books regarding magic and the mages who cast spells, and Nebula was sure the doctors treating His Majesty brought their own stash with them to the safe house. They were essential for determining the proper treatment of over-exhaustion and what kind of elixir or ether to use on a patient. Nebula laid the textbook on her thighs and rested her back against the mattress behind her, and turned to the chapter she left off at.

A knock on her metal door caught her attention. "Come in." She listened to the handle's crank turn, her focus still on the codex.

"Hey." The visitor's tone made her eyes widen in surprise, and she turned to see Noctis stepping inside. Nebula shifted the textbook to the floor and leaned forward to stand, but the prince hummed at her and shook his head, wanting her to stop. The prince rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze bouncing around the room. For a split second Nebula wondered if Cor had decided to screw their plan and reveal the truth to him; her nerves calmed when he knelt next to her. "Are...are you feeling alright?" Her head tilted sideways. "You were pretty upset last night, and Prompto egging you on like that didn't help." It never occurred to her that Noctis would ever worry about her well-being; not that she considered him to be a bitter person. Before she could register his movement Noctis held his hands out to Nebula. "Can I see your hands?"

"Oh..." She'd nearly forgotten about the lines Cor cut into her skin. Nebula pulled the bandages from her hands and offered them to Noctis palms-up. The prince took her left hand first and examined the faded line now barely visible, blending in with the already existing creases above and below. Satisfied with the healing rate he moved his attention to her right hand, finding himself equally content with the results. "I knew they'd heal before we got to Altissia. My stuff works fast."

Noctis nodded at her statement. "I'm glad. You had us worried." He paused, biting his lip as he avoided eye contact for as long as possible. "Nebula... You know we care about your safety."

Confusion mounted in her gaze again. "I know, and I care about the safety of you and your comrades."

"If you're ever feeling...threatened..." His hands lowered. He almost seemed reluctant to have this conversation.

Nebula's brow furrowed. "Noctis, why would I feel threatened by yo-"

"Stop denying it." The volume in his voice raised, his tone growing serious as his fingers curled around the doctor's hands. "You don't have to try and hide anything from us. If Cor makes you feel uncomfortable, I can take care of it. I'll make sure he doesn't hurt you again."

Nebula tore her hands from Noctis' grasp and stood up, walking to the other side of the room. "No
"That's not an excuse for him to abuse you like that," he reached for her shoulder only to be met with her hand pushing his away. She gave him a side glance, lips pressed tight in a sharp line.

"Like I said, you wouldn't understand. You've only had to associate yourself with those of nobility or higher." Nebula sat on her bed, folding her hands in her lap. "The common man isn't on par with one who guards the royal family of Lucis, even if she's the doctor who will treat the King." She reached for her magic textbook and turned to the last page she'd read.

He couldn't make sense of her defense. He'd seen his marshal swear at her, point a sword in her face. He'd watched Ignis treat the cuts Cor left in her hands - after she'd saved his life. "You're a doctor, a smart woman who made it on her own in the medical field in Duscae. How could you let his behavior slide so easily?"

His words dug deep. She knew he was right, but she couldn't bring herself to say it out loud. Turning her head in Noctis' direction, she huffed. "I may be a successful doctor, but no matter what anyone says, I'm still a person born of the Nifelheim empire. It's in my blood; there's no changing that, and there's no changing the hatred for anyone from that nation." Noctis' lips parted to protest. "Trust me when I say that Cor's actions towards me are justified. He's only doing what he feels will protect the crown." Done arguing, Nebula returned her full attention to the magic codex. Her silence told Noctis she was finished with the discussion, and he turned for the door.

He stopped as he reached for the door handle. "I don't know the details of whatever relationship you and Cor shared," he commented, "but regardless of what happened, I can't allow his disgusting treatment of you to go on." Nebula dug her nails into her legs to fight against her own anger as Noctis took his leave, knowing he spoke just as much truth as the crewman.

She remained in her suite for much of the evening, preferring the solitude of the room to the possibility of another hard-hitting lecture from a member of the Lucian royal court. It allowed her time to catch up on her reading, and she chose to focus on the codex chapters relating to healing magic. Nebula had made many attempts to practice magic on her occasional day off from patients, but always found herself unable to properly channel her energy. As she sat reading, she recalled one instance where she tried to freeze a glass of water. Blizzard was one of the more basic spells, and she found it to be a good starting point. As she channeled what she read to be her mana into the water to cool it, the force stopped itself in her fingertips and Nebula nearly caused frostbite damage in her skin. She was able to heal from the affliction, but the irritation set in her mind. A mage unable to properly control their magic was the equivalent of a surgeon who lacked precision in his cut. She'd devoted five years to studying the magic arts, and the most she could manage to create was a small breeze; everything done under the state of Lamia was deemed irrelevant.

Once again buried in her book she almost didn't hear the knock at her door. Nebula closed the textbook and laid it on her bed, then stood and walked toward the door to answer. Pulling it open her lips parted in surprise when, instead of a crewman standing in a ready position, she saw Clarus. "It's dinner time, Miss Ardere," he said to her. "A crewman had come to my suite to inform me and was about to fetch you, but I insisted on coming myself."

Nebula had nothing against Gladiolus' father, but him coming to her door instead of the crewman made her shoulders tense. "Did Noctis speak with you?"

"No, but the look on his face told me everything. This conflict between you and Cor has him on edge." He stepped aside to allow the doctor to exit her room.
"I don't want to upset anyone." She came out of the suite and closed the door, and the two started to wander down the ship's deck. "He wanted to get involved and discipline the marshal; I only told him what Cor would've. Might as well do it now before our time together comes to an end." Nebula glanced out to sea, her eyes following a small orange boat speeding alongside the ferry. The Accordian sigil was painted on the side, signifying their naval guard. It was a heavy reminder of the danger that was doing what it could to track them down. Her gaze left the boat and searched the open waters for anything that could serve as a sign of hope for her quickly impending doom. It was met only by water, as she expected with an empty heart; she didn't even know what she hoped to find in the water.

Clarus halted mid-step and turned to face the water. Nebula raised an eyebrow and stopped beside him, following his eyes out onto the same patch of water she'd just stared at. They remained quiet and listened to the gently blowing wind. The sun was already setting in the early evening hours, a phenomenon the doctor took notice of as the days rolled by. Night came quicker each passing day over the last few years. She remembered times when it would be eight in the evening on summer nights and the sun hadn't set yet; now, during the same time of year it was six-thirty when sunset came. The doctor had heard stories from her neighbors in Duscae about possible causes for the extending nights, most having to do with the almighty Archaeans being unhappy with the war Nifelheim brought about. Most believed the war's end was the answer to normal days returning, and deep down a small part of her hoped it was true.

"Do you love him?"

Her head whipped in the elder bodyguard's direction when she heard his question. She didn't answer. "Cor told me about the relationship you two shared. He spared few details about your encounter." Her cheeks flushed and she turned away. "I asked him the same question but he refused to answer."

Nebula shook her head. "Does it really matter at this point?"

"What matters to me is the safety of His Highness and the people of Lucis. As head of the royal family's guard, Cor must be protected just as much as he'd protect the King. If your intentions are to be with him then I must know that his life won't be in danger. Then again..." Clarus narrowed his eyes and looked down at her. "You can barely control your 'other side'."

"You know all the answers, yet you ask questions anyway. You must enjoy the mental torture this puts on me." After another moment of silence she continued. "I have no interest in your marshal, romantic or otherwise." Nebula let go of the railing and continued to walk toward the dining hall before Clarus could ask any more questions.

In the dining hall Nebula and Clarus were greeted by the waiting group with glances and nods in their direction. The doctor momentarily met the prince's eyes in an awkward stare. He was still annoyed from their earlier conversation, and though Cor knew nothing about the words spoken between the two, seeing the vexed stare Noctis gave her brought a sense of relief to him. Prompto provided a distraction for the doctor and gestured to the seat between him and Gladiolus, playfully patting the upholstery as he offered her a smile. His grin, lopsided from the food gathered inside his mouth, relaxed the tension in the air and Nebula sat down next to him. "We were wondering when you two were gonna show."

"Well if you'd just waited five more minutes instead of drooling onto your plate..." Gladiolus rolled his eyes.

"It's alright. We didn't want to keep anyone waiting," Nebula replied. The smell of the grilled meat lying on her plate told her all she needed to, and unable to fight off the sudden hunger she felt, she dug into her meal. The vegetables were devoured first, and if Ignis hadn't stopped him Noctis
would've gladly offered up his. "I see the picky eating stage of life never left you."

The prince grunted. "As soon as we've got the crystal back I'm outlawing vegetables."

"Oh, come now, Highness," Ignis chuckled. "I don't think your father would agree to that agenda. They're good for you."

"They're disgusting." He pushed the asparagus to the far end of his plate.

Prompto gently nudged Nebula's arm with his elbow. "Maybe we should have the doctor weigh in on this one. What's the call, doc?"

"I have to agree with them, Highness. Eating your vegetables will help your decision-making in all your future meetings. Lucis can't have you falling asleep when you're addressing the public." A chuckle left her mouth, and Prompto and Gladiolus soon joined in her laughter. Ignis only smiled and nudged the asparagus Noctis had pushed away back with the rest of the prince's food. Grumbling under his breath, he stabbed his fork into one of the stalks and gave it a dirty look before placing it in his mouth. Reluctance immediately set in when he bit down and got a full taste of its flavor.

"Yup. Definitely making them illegal." Cor rolled his eyes while everyone else laughed, continuing to eat his meal in silence. "What about you, Nebula?"

The doctor looked up from her plate when her name was called. "Hmm?"

Noctis set down his fork. "You could use some help in learning to properly cast magic, right?"

Nebula's smile faded at the mention of magic. "Oh... Yeah, you're right. I've read some books on how it works but never thought I'd need training." She paused to sip from her glass. "I hadn't really thought about it since last night."

"We've got a day before we dock at Accordo," Ignis cut in. "I could show you the basics of casting after dinner."

"That would be nice," she replied. At the same moment her eyes met Cor's, and she could see the disgust flowing in the crevices of his irises. Her grin returned, much to his annoyance, and she continued to eat her meal.

At dinner's end Nebula walked alongside Ignis to the ferry's stern, the latter feeling the abundance of space to be ideal for practicing magic. The others sat on a nearby bench, Cor treading a few steps away in case anything went wrong. "Casting magic is all about drawing energy from the earth and mixing it with your own to get the desired effect. The key to accomplishing that is control over one's own mana. If you can control that flow of energy, you'll be able to do something like this." Ignis raised his right hand to eye level, and in seconds a flame flickered to life in his palm. After a second he closed his hand to snuff out the flame and shook out the smoke that collected in his grasp. "To be safe we'll stick with a small fire spell; blizzard and lightning magic aren't suited for open water. Now, hold your hand like mine." He repeated his previous motion and Nebula mimicked his stance, holding her hand palm-up in front of her. "Close your eyes." She glanced at him, skeptical for a moment, then did as he told her to.

With her eyes closed, Nebula could feel her nerves calming. She hadn't tried casting a spell blind before; it lifted all the pressure she put on herself. Her relaxation was evident to Ignis. "Search out the earth's natural energy." Her stance still tensed, the advisor pushed on her lower back and tapped on the sides of her legs to loosen her muscles. "Since your goal is to create fire, you'll want to seek out the warmest energy you can find. If you can find that energy, you can create fire." It made sense
on paper, but a small swirl of doubt began to surface on her face. "Don't think about it. Just let your mind flow." Nebula took his words to heart and did her best to calm her nerves, and after a few deep breaths, all worry was back to zero. She felt a rise in temperature around her forearm and wind spun into her hand. It grew warmer, and soon was hot to the touch. Opening her eyes, Nebula saw smoke rising from a small flame in her palm, and her mouth fell open in a wide grin.

"Noct!" Gladiolus yelled. Everyone's attention rushed to the bench. Noctis, who had been talking to Prompto mere seconds before, was hunched over in his seat, clutching at his chest and wheezing. Prompto was beside his friend, on his knees as he attempted to help him gain control over his body. He helped the prince into Gladiolus' arms and beckoned for Nebula to come to them. She went into full doctor mode, closing her hand to put out the flame before she ran over to the prince, and laid her eyes on the bodyguard. "He started complaining about his joints hurting, and then...this!"

"Let's get him to the sick bay," she ordered, and turned to his father. "Go into my suite and get my medical bag. Meet us downstairs!" Nebula ran beside Gladiolus and the prince while Cor and Prompto ran ahead of them to open any doors or clear the path of ferry personnel. In mid-run Nebula took Noctis' wrist in her hands and laid her fingers on his vein, counting silently in her head. "His pulse is rising. What the hell could've-" Before she could finish her statement a flash of light caught her off guard and she sidestepped to avoid a weapon materializing from crystal that appeared out of thin air. She crashed into the wall and groaned. Ignis came to her aid but she shook off the impact and continued after Gladiolus, who made it into the sick bay. Clarus met them there and handed Nebula her medical bag as the bodyguard laid Noctis on the exam table. Noctis cried out, agony taking over every fiber of his being. "What the hell was that out there?"

"Oh, no..." While Gladiolus and Cor held down Noctis' flailing limbs to keep him from injuring himself, Ignis peeled one of the prince's eyes open to inspect his irises. "He's gone silver!"

"What?" Nebula had no understanding of his code, and could only assume based on the fragments of crystal floating around him that his affliction had something to do with magic. "Get an elixir and syringe out of the bag!" Prompto was quick to retrieve the items she called for and handed them to Nebula. Quickly throwing on a pair of gloves she tore the syringe's packaging and removed any air inside of it, then poked the needle through the elixir vial's cap and drained out the blue liquid. "Hold his arm steady." Clarus took one of Noctis' arms as Gladiolus adjusted his grip on the other. Nebula tapped the syringe and stuck the needle into the prince's arm, pumping the liquid into his system. She took note of how pale he'd suddenly become and, for good measure, delivered a small shot of potion afterward. His convulsing started to wane, and six minutes later, the prince was motionless. His breathing remained heavy as Nebula pulled her stethoscope from the bag and listened to his heart. "It's still a little high." She opened one of his eyes and flashed a light from side to side to watch his pupil react. Her patient stable, Nebula took a step back and huffed. "Bring him back to his room."

Ignis took care of undressing the prince while Prompto acted as Nebula's assistant in the examination. She had him set up an IV drip for fluids and showed him how to properly place it into his vein. His heart rate had improved, alleviating any extra stress on the group. "He'll be alright," she began after finishing the exam. "He's pretty pale and probably dehydrated, but he'll pull through." Nebula pulled off her gloves and threw them into a nearby trash bin. "Now will someone tell me what the hell that was? A sword appeared out of thin air!"

"It's the crystal." Gladiolus settled himself on the edge of Noctis' bed and folded his hands together. "You already know that the only people capable of utilizing the crystal's powers are those born into
the Caelum bloodline. From puberty until death, Noctis and his predecessors are bonded with the crystal, and can channel its energy to do incredible things. You witnessed it when Noct warped to scout the area earlier." His head lowered. "But the link runs deep. What you just saw was Noct's body reacting to an attack on the crystal. It's a defense system, and when it feels threatened, the crystal will flood energy into whoever's linked to it and force their bodies into overdrive. It can cause violent reactions as the body tries to defend itself from the crystal's overflow. It's why Noct's always falling asleep; just being connected to the crystal drains his energy." He looked over his shoulder to the sleeping prince, whose color was starting to return.

Nebula had Prompto towel off Noctis, who'd become drenched in sweat as his body fought. Crystallized fragments still swirled around the prince's body, their numbers slowly diminishing as his condition improved."Reactions to overflow from the crystal are common, unfortunately," Ignis added, "but they've never been this bad. He'll unconsciously draw energy from the crystal to help his body heal if he's sick or injured." His attention flew to the door when Cor walked in, his gaze settled on the comatose prince. "He's alright now. Nebula stabilized him."

Cor grunted. "That type of rebound from the crystal can only mean something's happened to it."

"His eyes changed color..."

"That's another crystal thing," Prompto explained. "If something happens and the crystal gives him energy, his eyes change color."

Nebula checked Noctis' pulse again. "If this is happening to him, then who knows what kind of reaction the King must've had." The realization dawned on everyone in the room. "And if he's as weak as Cor said he was, then he might be-

"He's not." Cor cut her off and leaned against the wall next to the door, tucking his katana between his crossed arms. "I just got off the phone with Nyx. His Majesty suffered a similar reaction around the same time as Noctis. The doctors at the safe house stabilized him. We still have time to get there, but it'll have to be sooner than nine tomorrow night. Clarus is working on arrangements to have us at Accordo's shores by seven. Everyone should be ready to head to the safe house by then." He glanced at Nebula, and for once his eyes didn't show any malice. He appeared ready to let her save the lives of the Lucian royals. But he'd given her that look before, and it always returned to his usual hardened stance, so she took his sincerity with a grain of salt.

Nebula stayed in the quartet's room for the remainder of the night to keep an eye on Noctis. She checked his IV bag and pulse every ten minutes, and as the crystal fragments still floating around him neared zero, she gave him a small extra dose of elixir to help his body recover from the crystal's kickback. To her surprise Cor didn't argue over her staying near the prince, though she didn't lean on the moment too much. Her own headache resurfaced, but she did her best to will it away. As the other members of their group fell asleep and she felt Noctis would be okay without her for a moment, Nebula stepped out of the room to stretch her legs. The sky was drenched in dark shades of blue and purple, few clouds blocking the stars and moon, and out in the distance she could pick up faint lights lining the horizon. Accordo was less than a day away, and with that, the final chapter of her journey with the Lucian royal circle. Nebula sighed.

"That's the second time you've saved his life." She jumped in her skin at the sound of Cor's voice. Used to her reaction he didn't respond to it and stood next to her, leaning his hands on the guard rail.

His extended silence and refusal to look at her gave the doctor a strange vibe, like he wanted to tell her something but didn't want to. "If this is your way of saying thank you," she started, "then I should say I only did what I was trained to do. It's a shame I won't be around much longer to keep doing that, though."
She knew just how to get to him. "While I would offer a contract renewal," the marshal replied, "your benefits are outmatched four-to-one by your more dangerous traits. I doubt His Majesty will want to have you lurking in our numbers."

"You could be wrong. He could be in need of any resources he can get. Giving up an elixir supply like mine could be detrimental to the Lucian forces."

"The people of Lucis are proud and strong. We don't need handouts from a sorceress." Venom danced on his tongue as he spoke. "Our agreement ends in twenty-six hours. Once you've completed your final task, you'll be in chains."

Nebula turned to look at Cor, her nonchalant smile exchanged for a grimace. "Then I shouldn't make it easy on you, huh? If these are my last hours of freedom I should enjoy them how I see fit."

He wanted to draw his sword against her so badly. "Remember that you're under my radar, Miss Ardere. You may have the prince on your side, but I have everyone else on mine." Cor's presence loomed over the doctor, and at the same time, one of the crewmen patrolling the ferry took in every word of their conversation.
In an undisclosed location in the Accordian capital of Altissia, five members of the Lucian king's guard are left scrambling to repair what was destroyed. With their king still hospitalized and their government in tatters, it's up to the members of Kingsglaive to hold everyone together as they wait for the crucial piece of their plan to arrive and put their worries to rest.

Decided to go a different route with this chapter. Since Kingsglaive will be tied in with the story, I figured it was time to take a small break from Noctis' entourage and focus on some other important characters in Final Fantasy XV.

I'll also be updating minor details in the story such as names and details, so if you see one name one day and another the next second, don't worry - you're not hallucinating.

"Status update. What's the King's condition?"

A brief moment of silence took over the present parties, the quiet only broken by footsteps treading across the marble floor and machines beeping. "Heart rate and pulse are stable. O2 level has dropped to 94 percent. Patient is still unconscious. Last signs of responsiveness were eleven hours ago."

Murmurs spread between the nine people in the makeshift hospital room. Three Lucian doctors, one from Altissia, and five Accordian nurses were on hand for King Regis Lucis Caelum's round-the-clock care. Even at three in the morning everyone was scrambling about, forsaking sleep for the treatment of the King. Though they were the best in their field in their respective countries, the team of medical professionals had battled a persistent poison in the King's body which none of them could identify. It kept his wounds from fully healing, brought on severe episodes of pneumonia, and left him too weak to relay any sort of message to his son. The clotting agent one of the nurses administered hours ago had worn off, leaving some of his many open wounds to bleed again. The nurses were quick to stop the bleeding with gauze, but so long as poison remained in his system, everyone knew he wouldn't fully recover.

The head Lucian doctor had the responsibility of reporting every hour to what could be saved of Lucis' security and government. Leadership was temporarily left in the hands of Regis' advisor, Astrum Virtus, who was also recovering from a serious injury gained from the invasion. His second-in-command was Pluvia Venenum, one of the last known surviving senators who managed to escape the crown city. The last members of the surviving Lucian group were the King's personal security force, known to outsiders only as Kingsglaive. With Cor and Clarus away assisting the prince, the five members were left with the ultimate responsibility of protecting His Majesty and what little government remained, and deciding on their nation's next plan of action.

The doctor pushed the room's double doors open and saluted a waiting guard. "His Majesty is stable.
for the moment," she began. "His reaction to the crystal resembled an epileptic seizure and lasted about four minutes, at which time the hue of his irises changed from blue to silver. We injected an emergency elixir into his IV toward the end of the overflow to treat the drop in his pulse." Her voice halted for a moment, her eyes lowering to the floor. "But he's weak. His Majesty can't keep fighting all his afflictions with the poison roaming in his system. Our antidotes have had little to no effect, and at this rate...he may not make it to see Prince Noctis' arrival."

The doctor's grim words were difficult to take in, but knowing the truth of the King's status was for the better. "Thank you," he said to the doctor, who saluted him again and returned to the King's room. The guard rubbed at his chin as he began to play scenarios in his mind. If the Shadow Agreement's emergency supply didn't reach them soon, the King wouldn't last very long. Already fearing the worst, Libertus Ostium turned down the hall and walked toward the conference room. Six forms surrounding the center table turned their focus to the returning guard, the two not in uniform standing. "He won't last much longer. Doctor says he could go before the prince makes it here." The people in regular clothes settled in their chairs again, the senator holding her head in her hands, and the King's advisor rubbing his chin with his good hand.

"I sent a message to General Leonis earlier this evening," Nyx Ulric told everyone as their gazes fell onto him. Serving as the link between the safe house and Prince Noctis' entourage, maintaining contact was his responsibility. He was the the youngest member of the Kingsglaive and the adopted brother of Cor Leonis, a man raised in the art of guardianship, so his service to the royal family was highly revered. "He said the prince was taken over by a similar force. That could only mean Nifelheim is doing something to the crystal."

"How is His Highness?" asked Senator Venenum.

Nyx crossed his arms and leaned against a support beam connected to the wall. "He's alright. The doctor from the Shadow Agreement was there to stabilize and monitor his condition." He shook his head. "We could really use that doctor right about now..."

The Kingsglaive commander stood from his seat and cleared his throat. "Cor is working on speeding up their arrival. I spoke with the captain of their ferry and urged him to get them here before nightfall today. We'll just have to do what we can to keep His Majesty alive until then." Drautos huffed. Keeping the King alive had become an increasingly difficult task. The aging monarch already had the crystal working against him, feeding off of his life force to function; using the crystal's power to heal his injuries when the poison in his body fought against it tortured him, and it had gone on in cycles for three weeks. If he had to deal with one more day of the cycle of agony, Drautos knew the doctor's prediction would come to light. Having the Duscaen doctor and her special elixirs at their location was their only hope of finally curing the ruler and getting him on the path to recovery.

"We've already used up the last of the emergency supply from Duscae to treat everyone's injuries," Crowe Altius explained. She was the head mage of the Kingsglaive guard, the best in her field, and tried her best in the beginning of their escape from Insomnia to keep the King alive. It was thanks to her he still had a beating heart, but whatever poison was coursing through his veins prevented her healing magic from taking care of her monarch's wounds. Under Drautos' orders she'd rationed the elixirs they had to make sure the King was left an ample supply, but even that couldn't prevent the supply from running low, and the last of their personal stock was used up following the King's reaction to the crystal. "I sent out a request for more elixirs to the President of Accordo. He said it won't arrive until tomorrow morning."

"That's too late!" Luche Lazarus slammed his hands on the table top. "Doesn't he know we're in desperate need of supplies?"
"We are, but so are his own people. The Accordian army has been on high alert since the invasion; most of the country's supply has been placed on reserve for the military and in case of an emergency. The President is giving us all he can spare." Drautos looked over all the papers scattered on top of the table. They'd been working on a plan to retake Insomnia from Idola's grasp. Astrum knew the city's newly established Nifelheim guard would be on round-the-clock patrol around the perimeter. The Lucians would come back at any moment to reclaim the city, but that was the easy part of their plan. Getting the crystal back before any more damage - or whatever was happening to it - could be done to it was of prime importance. Nobody knew where it was being held or what was being done to it, and with the power it possessed, the Emperor himself would see to its absolute protection from his enemies.

Astrum grunted as he stood up. He hissed when pain surged through his broken arm. Crowe helped him stand and steadied him. "I must consult with the President. If we're ever going to retrieve the crown city and our crystal, we'll need as many allies and soldiers as possible. I'll arrange a meeting with the King and Queen of Solheim." The mention of their most trusted allies stung just as deep. It was the original intention of Kingsglaive to bring His Majesty and the royal court to Solheim if an invasion ever occurred, but Nifelheim was six steps ahead of them, and blocked both direct and detoured paths to the country. Accordo had been a last resort.

"I'll escort him," Luche said to the rest of the group. "You should come, too, Senator." She nodded and got out of her seat, taking the advisor's good arm and putting it around her neck to help him walk. Luche ran for the door and held it open for the government officials, then followed them out and turned right.

Drautos watched the door close behind his subordinate. As if reading his mind Crowe headed for the room's exit. "I'll see if there's some way I can help the doctors."

The commander nodded. "Nyx." The young soldier pushed himself off the column at his superior's call. "I think you should check on the princess. I'm sure she's worried sick about her fiance." Nyx sighed. The Tenebraen princess had been placed under his care since her arrival to Altissia four days earlier. She and her guard Gentiana Surgens somehow made it to the Accordian capital with only a few scrapes and bruises, much to the shock and relief of the Lucians in hiding. But they were the only ones who knew of her survival; with Nifelheim's hold on Tenebrae tightened and communication with the outside world cut off, there was no way for Luna to contact her parents and let them know she was still alive. The province's king and queen were left to wonder what became of their only daughter until someone could find a way to speak with them without raising the empire's suspicion and having the entire royal family suffer a fate similar to that of the Lucians. She was a mess of anxiety, having no word from her fiance other than what the Kingsglaive would tell her. Her meals from the past three days were left mostly intact on her plate, and as much as Gentiana did to comfort her, not hearing a word from her family or Noctis - and the added news of his sudden reaction to the crystal - had her pacing in her suite for hours.

Nyx rubbed the back of his neck. Princess Lunafreya had been in a very sour mood since hearing of Noctis' condition and had asked to be left alone. Gentiana followed her every word without question, so the young guardian knew he'd hear it from the black-haired woman the moment he knocked on their door. But his own worries over the whole situation began to stir, and he felt in need of a distraction. Weighing his options he decided to go for the lesser of the two evils and tapped the side of his fist against the wood pillar. He drew in a deep breath and slapped both of his cheeks, then left the conference room and turned down the hall for the princess' suite. He started to regret his decision with every step he took. Luna wasn't a bad or ungrateful person. She was full of kindness and knew how to hold her own. The real problem lied in her stubborn nature. Much like Noctis she was a hard-headed individual who hated not getting her way, and hated sitting around and doing nothing even more. She was impatient, didn't like taking no for an answer and was willing to overstep a boundary
or two if it meant doing what was right - a perfect match for her husband-to-be. Nyx knew she'd try to pull something on him so she could possibly go for the encrypted phone line and try to reach her fiance. He didn't know why he'd been put in charge of her care. Halting his footsteps, he stared at the large pair of mahogany doors to the princess' suite. He drew in another breath and sighed, then knocked on the door twice. As he expected it was Gentiana who answered, opening the door only a few inches wide and poking her head out. "Is there an update?"

"No, I..." He averted his gaze, finding meeting the guardian's green eyes intimidating for some reason. She gave him a strange, almost monster-like vibe he couldn't describe. "The commander wanted me to check on the princess, see how she's doing."

"She's the same as she was from the last check-in." Her flat tone sent shivers down Nyx's spine, which she noticed immediately, and she sighed. "Look, Luna doesn't want to leave the room unless Noctis is here to see her. That's all she wants right now."

As Gentiana stepped back to close the door, a voice echoed from behind her. "It's alright. You can let him in." Luna's voice was soft, lacking any of the annoyance she'd had when first coming into the safe house. The black haired woman stepped aside and opened the door all the way, allowing Nyx to enter the room. He saw Luna sitting on the couch near the window, open book in hand, her gaze fixed elsewhere. Nyx approached the princess and bowed to her. "Mr. Ulric."

"Your Highness. I'm sorry to disturb you at such a late hour-"

"No need to apologize. I wouldn't have been sleeping anyway." Luna looked out the window at the party cloudy night sky. "I can't without knowing if he's alright."

Nyx perked his head up. "There's a doctor with them who's taking care of the prince. She's the best in her field - probably better than the ones we have here, which is why he's bringing her to us." Luna remained silent. "She, along with Prompto, Gladiolus and Ignis will keep him safe. Clarus and the general, too." The princess glanced at him, allowing Nyx to read her expression. Dark circles had formed under her eyes and the veins in her sclera were prominent. If she'd gotten any sleep at all, it'd been minimal, four hours at best. "I know it's annoying to sit around and do nothing while the others are out there fighting, but we can still come up with a plan to set things right. The first thing we need to do is reclaim Insomnia."

"May I offer you my opinion?" Nyx nodded and gestured his hand to the couch, to which Luna slid over and offered him a seat. The guard sat down next to her and rested his hands in his lap. "If we go after the city first we'll be highly outmatched. Our numbers have dwindled significantly since Lucis was invaded, and even more so since contact with Tenebrae died." She licked at her lips, a habit that came about when she was nervous. "We'll all die, too, if we march to Insomnia and battle for its possession - even IF we manage to gain the full support of President Accordo."

"Negotiations for assistance will be underway shortly. Sir Virtus and Senator Venenum just left to-"

"What?" Luna shot up from her seat and dropped her book. "I should be there! They're going to make a terrible decision!" The princess rushed to the door, Gentiana following behind her and placing a cloak over her shoulders.

Nyx ran to the door. "Wait, Your Highness. Astrum hasn't even secured an audience yet!" Half-listening Luna stormed down the hall to the conference room and barged inside, capturing the immediate attention of Drautos. The Kingsglaive leader's eyes landed on his subordinate, who could only shrug at the princess' actions.

Drautos cleared his throat and bowed to Luna. "Your Highness-"
"Going for Insomnia first will kill everyone." Luna's fists were tight and shaking as they hung at her sides. "I know the advisor and senator have gone to discuss that matter with the President. And I'm telling you, it's a bad idea."

Drautos placed his arms behind his back. "I understand your concerns, Highness, and we're making sure we have the numbers to ensure our victory in the battle for the capital. The President has already offered us asylum here. He's proven to be a great help in our time of struggle, and, should his army combine with ours, we'll easily outnumber the Empire's forces."

Luna stepped further into the room and leaned her hands on the table, examining the papers splayed out. Lines and arrows were drawn out across several maps of cities and portions of the world, along with markers indicating troops and air fleets. A large circle was drawn around Insomnia on the map of Lucis in red. "Numbers won't help us," she finally said as she pushed one of the maps aside. Her eyes fell upon a list in Drautos' handwriting, naming every possible alliance they had and what resources could be used from said ally. "Nothing will match the power of the crystal," she told him. "We'll only be successful in our efforts to restore order if it's ours again. But so long as Nifelheim has it in their possession, they'll be unstoppable."

"That's only if they can figure out how to use it-"

"It's not a matter of 'if' anymore, Commander. We both saw what happened to His Majesty, and the same happened to Noctis. The fact that something's happened to the crystal can mean one of two things." Luna raised her hand and began to count on her fingers. "One: Iedolas Aldercapt is trying to figure out how to use the crystal. He knows he can't utilize its power without being connected to it, so he's having it examined and experimented on to figure out ways he can use it. The more he experiments on it, the worse it will make Noctis and the King until they can't take it anymore."

The commander looked down at the table. "What's the other circumstance?"

"Worse. Much worse." Luna swallowed hard. Sensing her frustration, Gentiana walked to the buffet sitting against the adjacent wall and poured the princess a glass of water for her. Luna gladly took the glass from her assistant and sipped the water. "Iedolas is a cunning ruler, but he's also impatient. At some point in the experimentation he'll grow restless in the efforts to override the crystal's connection to the Lucian royal bloodline. And should his frustration go beyond what he can mask..." Her fingers curled in. "He may very well destroy the crystal."

"Destroy it?" Nyx, standing at attention beside the door, rushed forward and stopped next to the Tenebraen princess. "But that would-"

"Leave us completely vulnerable," Drautos finished, baring his teeth. He hadn't considered ledolas going as far as destroying the crystal. It was the reason Lucis was as powerful as it had proven before the invasion. The nation owned the last existing crystal in the world. Nifelheim had a terrible reputation with stealing - and eventually destroying - crystals; the destruction of their own was the most painful to witness. It fell apart due to the stupidity of the emperor merely ten years into his reign, who thought he could siphon its energy for various experiments involving human enhancement. The Nifelheim crystal worked differently from Lucis, and when the emperor ordered his chief scientist to take more from crystal than the holy rock could handle, it cracked and exploded in a burst of light. Lucis learned from Nifelheim's mistake and did all they could to use their crystal's powers sparingly, but as tensions between the two countries mounted, King Regis was forced to use the stone to defend his country. And without the crystal, there was no hope of Lucis ever being seen as the royal family's home again. Drautos glanced up at the princess, who'd shifted the papers on the table to pull up a map of Nifelheim. "Do you have an idea on where they might be holding it?"

Luna looked to Gentiana, who answered for the both of them. "We think it could be somewhere
either in or beneath the Imperial Palace. Iedolas wouldn't parade the crystal around to his people; there are many in its large lower class who would love to get their hands on it. Even those in the upper class would have a hard time seeing it in person. If it's being experimented on like Luna thinks, then the only ones in contact with it in Nifelheim would be Iedolas himself or his scientists." Her eyes darted to Nyx, then the window. "Then again, it's just an assumption. The royals of Nifelheim operate in secret and have never been seeing leaving their palace. Nobody knows the layout."

"We might have a trump card." The three looked at Nyx, who walked around the circular table and picked up a paper hidden under one of the maps. "Cor kept the Shadow Agreement under wraps as much as he could when the deal was first created, but..." He scratched his head. "I couldn't help eavesdropping on some of the details. The doctor from the agreement is from Nifelheim." Eyes widened all across the room, though Drautos was already in on the secret. "She renounced her affiliation with them and pledged loyalty to us. Cor cleared her before His Majesty signed their contract."

"And what does this doctor claim to know?" Gentiana asked.

Nyx shrugged. "She's a lower class citizen, so she can only speculate. But having someone from the inside is better than going in blind. She can guide us into Nifelheim. I'm sure the kids there have secret areas to meet up in; she might know about a few."

"That's a big 'might'," Luna added, "but like you said, it's better than nothing. Would she be willing to fight?"

"Until about a week ago, she remained out of the combat scene. But on her journey with Prince Noctis she's proven to be a capable warrior. She may even be on par with you, Highness." Drautos couldn't hide the corners of his mouth curling upward. "Having a doctor and warrior in one person will be a great advantage on our part."

At the climax of the discussion Crowe returned to the conference room. Luna's presence startled her for a moment, but she quickly gathered herself and bowed to the royal. "Commander. He had another reaction."

Luna was the first person to run out of the conference room and dash to the King's treatment room. The others followed close behind her and pushed through the doors to his room, where the doctors and nurses were scrambling around the King's bed, some holding down his limbs while another pumped an elixir into his IV, and the others monitored his vitals. Crowe grabbed a set of scrubs and threw them on as she rushed to help the physicians stabilize him. "What are his stats?"

"He's crashing!" one of the nurses yelled. "It's much worse than the first one." It was painful for them to watch the King of Lucis convulse in his battered state. His eyes were shut tight, and when one of the nurses separated his eyelids to check his pupils for a response, the silver color was back in his irises. "It's definitely the crystal again."

"But it's been six minutes! What kind of damage will that do to his brain?" Nobody spoke up, instead placing all their attention on the ailing king. Luna refused to leave the room, as did Gentiana, who sat her princess in a chair in the corner of the room. Another elixir was fed into his IV, and after another minute the seizure calmed. His vitals returned to a somewhat normal state, and though his body was now relaxed, the stats were below where they reached after his first attack.

Drautos turned to Nyx. "Go call Cor and find out if it happened to Noctis again. And get the ship's captain on the phone. I want them here by 5pm tonight!" Nyx saluted his commander and ran out of the room. Drautos' composure began to come apart as he tapped his foot on the floor in apprehension. For the first time since her arrival to Altissia, Luna appeared much calmer than any of
the Kingsglaive members; but she knew she'd fall apart the second Nyx returned and gave his report on Noctis' condition. She brought her hand to her face and rolled her thumb between her teeth at the thought of her fiance in agony.

Gentiana laid her hand on Luna's shoulder. "Perhaps you'll feel a little better if you get some sleep." Luna looked up at her bodyguard and parted her lips to protest. "Please, Luna." She caressed the princess' cheek. "If Noctis sees you in such a state he'll feel so awful about making you worry. Sleep a little. It will help both of you."

Eventually Luna nodded and stood up. "Alright..." She let Gentiana wrap an arm around her waist and nodded to the Kingsglaive commander before being escorted out. "Let Gentiana know when you hear back from Cor."

"Will do," Drautos replied. He sat in Luna's chair and crossed his arms, knowing it would be a while before he had the chance to get some sleep of his own.
A Shred of Hope

After Nyx went to check on Princess Lunafreya, Libertus decided to keep himself occupied with another patrol of the safe house's perimeter. It was the only task left for taking, and if he were able to share his honest opinion with Commander Drautos, the Kingsglaive guard would've told him of his distrust of the President's men. Lucis and Accordo weren't exactly allies. The two nations had their fair share of difference, ranging from leadership tactics to taxes, even down to how each country handled other problems in the world in accordance with their own standards. Accordo was one of the three more powerful nations in the world that never carried a crystal, and instead relied on the marketing industry to attain a high status among the other nations. Their stock market, though erratic from time to time, remained high, and the high volume of shipments they exported brought in even more money. It allowed most people to live comfortable lives, and even those who struggled to make money found stable jobs in the market. But no matter how much their economy seemed to thrive, Libertus was all too aware of Accordo's darker side. Their rates of senseless crimes - from robberies to shootings - was the highest throughout all of Eos, and much of the money the economy spent went toward funding senseless projects. Their terms of alliance also raised red flags. For years Accordo refused to end trade relations with Nifelheim, even when sanctions were brought against the totalitarian nation. President Speculo made frequent visits to Nifelheim to meet with Emperor Aldercapt, and as much as Lucis and the other countries urged him to enforce an embargo against Nifelheim, the money that came in always made the President turn a blind eye.

Libertus wondered what would come about from Sir Virtus and Senator Venenum asking for assistance in the war against Nifelheim. President Speculo swore on more than one occasion that his nation was a neutral party in the war. But if he were truly neutral, King Regis once argued, then support to Iedolas would've stopped long before tensions between Nifelheim and Lucis escalated. So when His Majesty had Kingsglaive bring him and his surviving court to Accordo instead of Solheim, the guardians were apprehensive. They only agreed to the King's request when their passage to Solheim was completely blocked. It was a decision made out of desperation, everyone knew, and they reluctantly sought refuge in Accordo. President Speculo welcomed the Lucians with open arms and a smile, a smile everyone took with a grain of salt. The one move the President had made in their favor was calling off a meeting with Iedolas Aldercapt, a meeting which would've brought the emperor into Accordo's borders and put the surviving Lucians at great risk of being found. The Kingsglaive was given a major percentage of control over the actions of the President's secret guard, though he had complete control over final decisions made in regards to his troops. It had become a game of tactics and alliances, as the Kingsglaive saw it, which was why Drautos made sure all Accordian servicemen remained as close to the King as the outermost perimeter of the safe house.

He reached the outer perimeter in fifteen minutes and saluted a soldier standing at attention. "How has patrol been?"

"Quiet, for the most part," the soldier told him. "The men at all the other stations have also reported no activity on their posts. The only potential alert came ten minutes ago. Station three reported seeing a mysterious shadow, but it just turned out to be a squirrel digging." Libertus nodded at the report. "There is one other thing, Captain."

"Go ahead."

The soldier cleared his throat and lowered his firearm. "President Speculo has grown a little annoyed about the Prince's arrival time being moved up. He has four meeting schedule through the afternoon that overlap with His Highness making it to shore." He could see the growing irritation on Libertus' face. "My commanding officer explained the necessity of an earlier arrival to him, and though he
agree it was the correct decision, it still bothers him."

"Well I'm sorry it's disturbed the President so much that he couldn't deliver his complaint to my commander," Libertus replied, "but he did offer us sanctuary here. And while we're grateful for the help your country has offered us, it's in the best interest of Lucis that our schedule be moved up without any hindrances." The foot soldier shook his head in agreement, a nervous gleam dancing in his eyes. "How was Sir Virtus' departure?"

"Smooth. The President's secret guard provided a van and secondary escort to make sure it remains that way. Mr. Lazarus informed us they would return in a few hours' time and would call upon said return to the manor."

"Good." His earpiece buzzed and Libertus held up a finger. "Excuse me." The perimeter guard saluted the King's soldier and returned to his post. "This is Ostium."

"Libertus." He immediately recognized Nyx's voice. "Come back to the conference room. The King's gone downhill again."

His eyes widened at the news. "Will do."

"I'm about to call Cor and find out what's going on on their end. Ulric out." The line cut and Libertus quickly looked over his shoulder to the perimeter guard.

"Let me know the second you find out they're heading back." He didn't wait for the soldier's response and turned up the cobblestone path to the five-floor mansion. He hobbled in his run, still recovering from an injury acquired from the escape from Insomnia, but still hurried to the top floor. He climbed up the stairs and trekked to the conference room. Catching his breath, he pushed open the doors and was met with a worried grimace. "Commander."

"I see Nyx has informed you of the situation. We'll know about the Prince's condition shortly."

"How is His Majesty?"

Drautos let himself fall back into one of the chairs. "Stable. For now. His body can't keep up with everything. Sooner or later he'll give in, and the Prince is bound to see his light leave this world." Libertus, still recovering from his mad dash into the mansion, took the chair next to the commander and pulled another close to prop up his bad leg. "I have Nyx getting me in contact with the ferry's captain again so we can speed up their arrival. We can't wait any longer than 5pm tonight."

"Five? Can they make it that soon?"

He shrugged. "They'll have to if Noctis wants to see his father alive." The phone in the conference room rang and Drautos stood to answer it. "This is Drautos."

"Commander Drautos," the voice on the other end of the line said to him. "I understand the circumstance has changed."

"Yes, Captain. It's worsened on our end. I fear he won't make it to the end of tomorrow night. We need the 'cargo' as soon as possible." He fell silent for a moment, unsure of what else to say. It was a rarity for Drautos to be at a loss for words; the only other time it happened was three weeks before as they escaped Ledolas' clutches and the King lay dying in Cor's arms. He didn't want to think of that ever happening again, and as the possibility of it coming true a second time loomed, it made the commander nervous about the war's outcome.

"If I may, Commander." The ferry captain's voice broke his horrifying trance. "I've already told your
subordinate, but the 'cargo' requested to speak with the commander personally. Mr. Leonis has cleared her for the conversation. She's ready to talk whenever you are."

Drautos nodded as Libertus leaned in closer to listen in, and both heard Nyx walk into the room, wiping sweat from his brow. "Put her on."

Silence inhabited the encrypted line for seven long seconds. Drautos glanced at Nyx, who shifted impatiently from one foot to the other. The subordinate returned the gaze, his expression hinting at some shred of hope lingering in the person about to speak with him. The sound of breathing took up the other line, followed by a throat clearing, and Drautos prepared himself. "Good morning, Commander Drautos."

His fingers were tapping against the table. "Good morning. And how may I refer to you, miss?"

"Dr. Ardere is fine. Or Nebula. Please tell me the condition of His Majesty."

He somehow didn't expect their trump card to be so straightforward. Looking at Nyx again, the young Kingsglaive guard encouraged him to continue the conversation. "The King is in poor health, as you know. He's still recovering from traumatic injuries sustained during our escape from Lucis. He suffered two severe reactions to the crystal, and both of them resembled epileptic seizures-"

"His eyes. Were they silver?"

Drautos was taken aback. "Yes. They remained that way for the duration of both episodes. Every now and then he also suffers from tremors when unconscious; we assume they're the result of the poison still in his system." He waited for a response from Nebula. When she didn't say anything he continued speaking. "He can't keep fighting, Doctor. We're lucky he made it through the night. I don't think he'll last another."

She stayed silent for a moment. "I'll need to speak with one of the doctors treating him as soon as possible."

"I'll put you in contact with them. But first, please tell me about the Prince's condition. How is he doing?"

Nebula paused again, but Drautos could tell this pause was different from the last. Eventually she continued. "The second reaction to the crystal was worse. He seized in a similar fashion for more than six minutes and his eyes were also silver. It took three of my elixirs to treat him. I'm deciding whether or not to sedate him until we arrive in Altissia." Her voice ceased a third time. "Hold on. Ignis would like to speak with you." Drautos listened to the phone being handed over, her voice replaced by a deeper one.

"Commander."

"Lord Scientia. How's it looking in terms of arrival?"

Ignis sighed. "The ferry captain is doing all he can to get us there faster. But we'll be cutting it close."

"How's security looking?" the commander overheard Gladiolus asked from afar.

"Tight. We have two perimeters outside of the mansion and us inside. All Kingsglaive members are on His Majesty's floor. President Speculo has graciously loaned us some of his men to-"

Gladiolus groaned in obvious dissatisfaction. "I don't trust 'em as far as I can throw a Flan."
"I don't either, but we need all the manpower we can get until the situation improves."

Ignis took over the conversation again. "How's the princess?"

The mention of Lunafreya made Drautos huff. He beckoned for Nyx to come closer and take the phone from him, and his subordinate took the receiver from him. "This is Ulric. Her Highness is stressed beyond comforting. She's barely eaten in the past four days and only left her room to see the King once since her arrival. She's going downhill fast."

"Any word from the Archaens?"

"No, not since she got here. Gentiana is doing all she can to look after her, but until the Prince is here..." His voice trailed off.

Possession of the phone shifted back to Nebula, told to them by the difference in voice pitch. "I'd like to talk to the Princess."

"Wh-" Nyx's mouth fell open. "Hold on." He laid his hand over the bottom of the receiver and lowered his voice. "Commander, she wants to talk to Luna."

Libertus shook his head. "We can't let her. Princess Fleuret is already in shambles-"

"As a doctor," Nebula's voice echoed from the phone, "it's my job to inform the family of my patients on their status of health. I can't speak with the King, so Noctis' fiance is the next of kin. She has to know how he is."

The Kingsglaive commander held his chin, his gaze staring into space as he thought of what to do. Would she be able to handle whatever news the doctor had regarding her fiance? Looking on to his subordinates, they both nodded in agreement, and Drautos gave Nyx the signal of approval. "Very well. We'll have her here in a minute." Nyx handed Drautos the phone and rushed out of the room to get the Princess. They heard heels clicking on the wooden floor within a minute and Luna almost tripped when she ran into the conference room, Gentiana saving her from meeting the floor. "Your Highness, someone wants to talk to you." Drautos handed her the phone and straightened his posture, ready to shut down the conversation if it proved too much for Luna to handle.

Luna laid the receiver against her ear. "Hello?"

"Your Highness," Nebula began, "my name is Dr. Ardere. Your fiance brought me with him on his journey and now I'm taking care of him." Luna's lower lips started to tremble. She reached her free hand out to Gentiana, who held her in case the strength left her legs. "I understand you're worried about Noctis, and you have every right to be. He's a stubborn person who won't budge when he doesn't like something." A small giggle was heard on the other end of the line. "You don't know how hard it was for me to get him to eat his vegetables last night."

Luna laughed a little and squeezed Gentiana's hand. "He certainly hates eating his greens."

"Right now, Noctis is unconscious. The second reaction to the crystal took a toll on his body. I'm sure he won't wake up until around noon, but I have given serious consideration to sedating him until we arrive in Accordo. If the attacks get worse..." She didn't finish her sentence. "I already have consent to follow through from his friends and Marshal Leonis, but yours is the one that matters most. As his fiance your say overrides everyone else's. If you don't want me to do it, I won't."

The princess found herself getting weak in the knees. Gentiana quickly pulled a chair out for her and helped Luna sit, then walked to the nearby bar to get her some water. "What are the benefits and risks?"
Nebula breathed in deep. "If we do sedate Noctis, he shouldn't have any more seizure-like reactions
to the crystal. I'd give him a light sedative which he can fully recover from by the time we make it to
shore. It'll be like he's asleep." She allowed Luna a moment to take in the information. "If we don't
sedate him, we risk the possibility of Noctis feeling another reaction to the crystal. You've seen how
the King is barely hanging on; I don't want your fiance to get close to that point."

The receivers worn by the Kingsglaive members allowed them to tap in on the encrypted phone line
and listen to the full conversation between the doctor and princess. They looked at each other and
weighed both side of the situation. Luna shared a glance with her personal guard, whose eyes told
her she'd support any decision the princess made. Turning to Drautos, she could see the unease in his
expression, and felt his worry without him saying a word. "Okay. If you think it's the right thing to
do, if it'll save his life, put him under." Luna's knuckles went white as she held back a tear
threatening to drip from her eye.

"Thank you, Your Highness. Can you please put the Commander back on?"

"Of course." Luna handed the phone back to Drautos.

"Are you sure this method of treatment is the best, Doctor?"

"With the factors in play, I think so. Sedation will take the strain off of his body as he tries to fight
against the overflow. And since the decision has been made to sedate the Prince... I'd like to do the
same with the King until we get there." She could already sense the doubt lingering in the
commander. "He's even weaker than Noctis, Commander. We have to take the stress of battling
these ailments off of him." Gentiana served Drautos a glass of water, which he willingly took and
gulped down. "You said it yourself: he won't last to the end of the new night. We need to let his
body heal without weighing him down."

"I agree with you," he replied. "But my concern is that in his current state, should he recover..." He
didn't want to finish the thought that was on everyone's minds.

Nebula caught on quick. "It'll only be until I can extract the poison from his body."

"How long will that take?"

"I'll have to identify the poison first. Then it's just a matter of finding the best way to remove it." A
mumbling was heard in the background. "I have to take care of His Highness. I'll leave you with
Marshal Leonis." The phone was handed over to the marshal.

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Dark circles hung under her eyes. Nebula rubbed them as they threatened to close on her and forced
herself to stand. Prompto offered her a shoulder to lean on as they walked along the deck to the
quartet's shared suite. At 4:30 in the morning the doctor usually found some sort of sleep; but with
Noctis in distress, sleep would have to come later. The blond took her medical bag from her grasp to
alleviate her own stress. They stopped in front of the door to suite and Nebula slapped her cheeks to
wake herself. Going inside, they were both grateful to find Gladiolus handing them each a cup of
coffee. "Thank you," Nebula told him, and immediately drank the caffeinated liquid. The effects hit
her fast and she found herself full of strength again. "Okay, let's get to work."

Prompto didn't have to wait for Nebula to tell him what to do. He put on a pair of gloves and handed
another to the doctor before setting up the tools he knew she'd need. "Where's the sedative?"

"Inner zipper pocket, plastic bag. Be careful when taking it out." Prompto followed her instructions
carefully and passed over the plastic bag, skimming over the red lettering on the bottle's label.
"Check his IV bag in the meantime." He pushed the tray of tools over to Nebula and moved to the other side of Noctis' bed. The prince remained still with the exception of a few pained moans. Prompto pat his friend's hair and checked the line stuck into his arm, following the plastic tube up to the bag hanging nearby.

"Looks like he'll need a new bag soon."

"Go ahead and grab one from the sick bay. I can take it from here." The gunner jumped to his feet and skipped out the door. Nebula took another sip of her coffee and rolled out her shoulders as she settled next to the prince. She unwrapped a fresh needle and stuck the metal tip into the rubber bottle top, drawing out the liquid until it reached the halfway mark of the syringe vial. Resealing the bottle she flicked the needle tip to make sure it was secure, and stuck the tip into the crook of the prince's left arm. A small whimper escaped his throat as she pushed the liquid into him. "He should be able to get some rest until we reach Accordo."

Gladiolus took the seat Prompto sat in. "You should get some rest too, Doc. Your face looks ready to cave in."

She pulled off her gloves and shrugged. "Sleep deprivation comes with the job. You know how it is." He shrugged in response, knowing she was right. "And I think it's a little too late for me to sleep now that there's caffeine in me. I'll take a nap later."

"That goes for all of us. For once Noct'll get his way and sleep in." Gladiolus chuckled and crossed his arms. His smile faded as he looked down at his charge, his face showing pain. "I wonder what Ledolas is doing to the crystal."

"Etro only knows. Must be something awful if it's effecting Noctis and the King so violently." She capped and disposed of the used needle. "Has he ever had reactions like this before?"

The bodyguard leaned back in his chair. "Not like this. The crystal would react if he ever got sick and helped him filter out the viruses, but that only made his eyes change color. Never silver, though." He scratched at his chin. "Other than that and an accident from when he was a kid, the crystal's only response to Noctis is through combat. He uses its powers to summon weapons and warp all over the place."

Nebula got up and paced to the far side of the room as she sipped her coffee. "Are the royals bonded with the crystal from birth?"

The crystal's bonds with the royals was a sensitive subject. "Well, yeah..."

"You're uncomfortable with the subject." His eyes flashed to her. "It's alright if you'd rather not talk about it." She watched the few remaining crystalline fragments vanish from Noctis' skin and clothing. "I just hope it's not too much stress on his body." Watching the relaxed expression on his unconscious face made her suddenly feel bad about snapping at him earlier. She knew he was just looking out for her. Glancing at the clock over the door Nebula felt a yawn escape her lips.

Prompto returned with Ignis as she yawned. "Sounds like someone's tired," Prompto said as he walked over to Noctis' old IV bag. "You should go lie down."

"That sounds like a relaxing idea." Another yawn followed her sentence. "But I think I should stay in case something happens."

Ignis laid a hand on her shoulder. "Sleep, Nebula. We'll get you if anything changes." The others gave similar encouragement to the doctor until she gave in to their request, and she left their suite.
Closing the door behind her, she wasn’t surprised to see Clarus waiting for her departure.

"Clarus."

"Knowledge of the crystal is none of your concern," he said to her. "As a physician, I understand your need for information to properly care for your patients. But information pertaining to the royal family's connection to the crystal is classified, even to a doctor personally brought along by the Prince of Lucis."

Nebula started to walk away from Clarus. "It's funny how I hear Cor's words leaving your mouth."

"The Marshal is occupied with travel adjustments. My words are not out of malice, Miss Ardere, but they are a warning. Stay out of matters you have no business in." Seeing her stop in place, he offered his arm to her. "I'll be happy to escort you back to your room." Nebula's hands were tightened into fists at her sides as she held in the exasperation combined with over-exhaustion of the trip. Her head felt heavy, and as much as she wanted to storm off, she felt her body quitting on her. Reluctance set in with the debility as she took Clarus' arm in her hand and walked alongside him across the ship's deck.

Gladiolus had taken the first shift in watching Noctis after his sedation. He was just as tired as everyone else, but powered through into the morning hours. He finally tagged out at nine in the morning, with Ignis taking over. The bodyguard decided to check up on the doctor, who looked ready to collapse when he last saw her. He was surprised to find her awake and practicing her magic-casting on deck. He sat on a nearby bench next to Cor, who silently watched the doctor practice.

Everything remained quiet as Ignis' shift ended around 3:30 in the afternoon and Prompto took over. The strategist used his free time to join Nebula and continued coaching her while Gladiolus took a small nap. He was impressed by the doctor's quick improvement in her magic control. The faint flicker she made in her palm the night before had grown to a sizeable flame she was able to maintain control over. "Impressive," he commented. "You're a fast learner."

"I try my best," she replied, to which Cor rolled his eyes.

At 4:15 the captain announced the beginning of the docking process. Everyone was instructed to pack their belongings and hand them to the crew member who helped them into their suites. Nebula hurried to the quartet's suite after he bags were packed and removed Noctis' IV, then gave him the medicine to wake him from his sedation. "He'll be a bit groggy at first," she warned, "but he'll be fine."

"So no different than normal," Prompto said, earning laughs from his friends and the doctor.

"Yes, exactly." She turned her head and caught a glimpse of the quickly approaching horizon through the open door, lights turning on and illuminating the quickly growing land mass. "Wow."

The gunner walked out of the room with her and leaned against the railing. "Beautiful, right? Just wait 'til we're inside the city."

A grin grew on her face, her anticipation growing faster by the second. "I can't wait." The two then heard groaning and, looking back into the suite, saw Noctis rolling around on his bed.

"Well look who's getting up." Prompto pushed off the railing and went back into the suite. As Nebula turned to follow him an arm intercepted her path. Cor stared down at her with unreadable eyes.
"Miss Ardere, a word." He beckoned for her to follow him as he walked away from the prince's room. They stopped at the back of the ship, out of the way of all the crew members preparing to dock. Cor was silent, staring out at the open water, leaving the doctor on edge.

"Is this where you remind me that my fairy tale is coming to an end?" she asked, following his gaze out to the sea. "Too bad. I didn't even have the experience of dancing at a ball and being romanced."

Her commentary was always so sour when it came to being alone with him. "On the contrary, I pulled you aside to offer my thanks." Nebula raised an eyebrow and turned to him, mouth agape. "As annoying and tiresome babysitting you has been this past week, you've done everything in your power to keep Noctis safe from harm. When the invasion was taking place, I'd never seen such fear in the boy's eyes." His stare drew down to the wooden floor of the deck. "But you've helped his friends restore hope that Insomnia can be rebuilt."

She took a step away from him. "Why are you suddenly being so nice to me?" The marshal turned his head and laid his eyes on her, and for the first time since they met, she could see an honest man hiding in the blue irises.

"I suppose seeing my prince near death, and knowing my king is in a similar state, brings out the fearful side in me. You've given me some reassurance that the Caelum bloodline will at least survive to see another day in Altissia." She couldn't believe what she was hearing, and didn't know whether to smile and shake his hand, or scowl at his attempt for temporary peace.

"You make it sound like this is the last nice thing you'll ever say to me."

"No. My last act of gratitude will come after you save His Majesty's life. After that, everything changes."

The two turned at the sound of footsteps and saw Clarus waiting at the end of one of the passageways. "Marshal, Miss Ardere. We've arrived."
Finally in Accordo, Noctis and his entourage head to the King's safe house in Altissia. But the signs are discouraging, and Nebula only has a short time to save the King's life with everyone else begging at her feet.

At 4:18pm the crew members began the docking process. The workers scrambled to their posts: ten men on land and on the ferry secured the bow to its docking station, the cleaning team started to tidy up the suites used during the trip, and six helped carry the royal entourage's belongings into the Accordian National Terminal. Still a little groggy, Noctis was reluctant to get off the ship without his father's Regalia right beside him, but the captain reassured the prince he'd see the car again at the safe house. The team of seven were met in the terminal by a small task force all dressed in suits and sunglasses. It was then that Nebula realized that with the exception of themselves and the suited men and women, the terminal was completely empty. She looked around in awe at the structure of the facility, noting it sleek metal design and various large monitors displaying videos and advertisements. "Wow..."

One of the task force members stepped forward and bowed to the group. "Your Highness, distinguished guests. Allow me to welcome you to Accordo. Please present your weapons so we may inspect them." Prompto cocked his head to the side. "Orders from the President, just to rule out any threats to security." Cor undid the clasp securing his katana's sheath to his belt loop and handed it over. Clarus and Nebula presented their arms and laid them in the force members' hand, and the lead guard patiently waited for the prince to summon everyone else's. Noctis closed his eyes and focused his energy, drawing on the crystal's power to bring out their arms. Prompto's gun appeared first, breaking free from its crystal casing and landed gently in one of the officers' waiting hands. Ignis' daggers came next, then Gladiolus' great sword, and finally his own dragoon lance. The crystals remained floating around him until the lead officer nodded to the prince in satisfaction. "Thank you for your cooperation." The weapons were returned. "Please take note that as esteemed guests of President Speculo, he has asked that you not draw your weapons while in the capital. He'd like to maintain a sense of calm in the city for the duration of your stay." Everyone nodded and the lead guard turned on heel, and started for the entrance to the terminal. "Your Regalia will be delivered separate of our party to the safe house in downtown Altissia to keep suspicions low. The King's car is too well-known to take directly; it must be shipped through a secret passageway to ensure its safety." The prince shook his head at the mention of a secret path, knowing the drama of Accordo was just beginning. "You will be divided into two of our vehicles on the drive to the safe house. Please plan out your groups now; you won't be able to change your minds until we reach our destination." As they got closer to the main entrance the task force turned left and marched to what looked like a closet door. "This way, please. We'll be leaving through the basement."

"If it's not an intrusive question," the prince started, "how were you able to shut down the busiest and most elaborately designed ferry terminal in all of Accordo?"

Another of the security guards answered his question. "This hub is currently undergoing renovations. All human traffic has been diverted to the next terminal twenty minutes away." The basement door was opened and everyone formed a single file line to walk down the narrow stairwell. Dim construction lamps provided little light for them to see ahead of them. Three long flights behind them,
they saw two black SUVs parked sideways. A last ferry crewman loaded the Lucians' luggage into the trunk of the last vehicle and shut the trunk, then saluted the task force members and returned to the ship. "We have to move. Time is of the essence." Noctis caught on immediately and ran for the nearest SUV. Prompto darted after him, and Gladiolus and Ignis walked to car in a similar rush. Cor and Nebula somehow knew they'd be in the same car again, much to their disdain, and Clarus hoped their time inside a vehicle would be much different than the last.

To his relief the marshal and doctor kept their cool when they found their seats in the following SUV. Nebula sat in the last row next to Clarus and behind Cor so the middle-aged man wouldn't have to look at her. Three of the five agents occupied their car while the other two stayed with the Prince and his friends. The doctor played with her fingers in her lap as her nerves became unsettled. Having so many people of high authority surrounding her reminded her of her days in Nifelheim, and they weren't times she wanted to remember. "How far is it to Altissia?"

"Just a short drive," Clarus told her. "Right now we're in the city of Umida, and Altissia to the north. We should reach the estate in a half hour's time."

"Less." One of the agents interrupted their conversation. "We're taking a special route through Cataracta. There are fewer winding roads and it'll be less crowded at this time." Clarus and Nebula exchanged glances, both wondering just how intricate the Accordian President's plan to hide King Regis was. Cor snorted, knowing how layered the President liked to make his 'secret plans', as if the man thought he was a spy. He was already missing the comforts of Lucis which Nifelheim so kindly destroyed.

The sights of Umida and Cataracta distracted Nebula from the unease of being surrounded in such a small area. Nebula thought Duscae was the most beautiful place after fleeing the empire, and now found her previous thoughts wrong. Accordo's architecture held a beauty that outmatched the few structures in Nifelheim that lasted from centuries ago, and even the nice ones from the empire were poorly maintained. The first thing she picked up on was the vast amount of water fountains in both cities. There was one every few blocks, and the closer they got to the center of Cataracta, the bigger the fountains got. They drove past the town square and Nebula's lips parted when she caught sight of the large water fountain spraying hundreds of gallons of the clear liquid from its quadruple-tiered tower. It had to be nine feet tall, if she were to guess, crafted from marble with touches of granite and opal. Seeing how awe-struck she was, Clarus tapped her arm and motioned to the front window. "You'll really enjoy this one."

She cocked an eyebrow, wondering what Clarus was referring to, and her wonder exploded into amazement at the sight of a large waterfall. The bridge both cars were driving over led right up to a massive waterfall eighteen stories high and two highways wide. "Incredible," she whispered to herself, and pressed her face to the car window. The sound of water rushing soothed any anxiety in her mind and she closed her eyes, leaning back in her seat.

"Welcome to Altissia," one of the sentries said to them. "President Speculo is currently in a meeting and has one more to attend, so you will be brought to his estate tomorrow morning. Yours and the Prince's party will be dropped off at the safe house, where the rest of the royal brigade await your arrival."

Cor took out his cellphone. "I'll let Nyx know we're almost there." He dialed his brother's number and laid the phone against his ear.

In the lead car, Prompto had commandeered Ignis' phone and snapped pictures of the passing scenery. He'd been documenting the group's entire trip from the moment they were safely out of Insomnia. Ignis was normally one to complain about someone using up his phone's battery for
something so minute, but it helped with keeping track of everything the did and everywhere they went, so he didn't mind. Prompto was careful when he handled the phone, knowing it was their only connection to Cor, and the surviving Lucian court once they established contact with the other half of their group once more. They were eager to reunite with the others and see how everyone was doing, and the pictures taken over the course of the entourage's journey would help them understand everything more instead of just imagining what was told.

The further into Altissia they drove, the higher Noctis' anxiety climbed. He was so close to seeing his father again, and at the same time, they were still too far away. His leg bounced on the car floor, his fingers drummed against his knee, and every few seconds a sigh would leave his lips. "Patience, Highness," Ignis said to him, laying a hand on the royal's forearm. "The moment we arrive, you'll be able to see him." He understood why the Prince was so worried, but he wanted the young monarch to remained relaxed and not lose his cool.

As Prompto snapped another photo of Altesian architecture, the phone began to vibrate and a message appeared on screen. "Text from Cor," he told everyone, and slid his finger across the screen to unlock the phone and read the message. "Status update from Nyx: His Majesty is still resting peacefully. No reactions from the crystal since he sedation early this morning. Escort His Highness inside as soon as we get there. Let Drautos know the 'cargo' has arrived." The blond laid his closed hand on his cheek. "Is that what they're calling Nebula now?"

"I'm sure they were referring to the actual cargo, Prom," Gladiolus told him. "Or did you forget about the ton of elixirs in the trunk?" The amount of street lamps reduced the further they drove, and soon the lamps were replaced by trees, and cars by creeks. Gladio's head perked up at the sight of the changing scenery. "Looks like we're almost there."

Noctis looked away from the time on the dashboard's clock and laid his focus on everything out the window. The volume of trees thickened and the paved road became bumpy and unkempt. The SUVs slowed to a stop and parked side-by-side, the front of each pointing to a rocky path that flowed into the growing forest. The sentries got out of the cars and held the doors open for everyone else to exit. "This is as far as we drive," the lead guard told them, and gestured his thumb to the stone-covered path behind him. "Walk along this path until you come to a gate, and identify yourself to the guard standing at the first post. He'll let you inside." The sentries bowed to Noctis' crew and, after handing off the small overnight bags and elixir cargo to the passengers, returned to their vehicles. Noctis turned his attention to the dirt path disappearing into the forest, the last road for him to take to be reunited with his family and betrothed. He dropped the bag in his grasp and darted down the path, jumping over branches and boulders in his way.

"Noct, wait!" Gladiolus yelled after him. He retrieved the Prince's bag and chased him into the forest, and motioned for Prompto and Ignis to follow them. The others watched the young entourage sprint into the darkening olive environment. A small thought in Nebula's head told her to go after them, to be by Noctis' side and be there to lend a shoulder to lean on, but when she took a step forward, the rational doctor's mindset took over. He had three friends already following his speed, and though they regarded her as a friend more than once, Nebula knew her place in that matter was that of a physician. Her grip on her medical bag tightened and she waited for Clarus and Cor to move before she pressed forward.

Clarus offered his hand to Nebula when there was a large fallen tree in their path. "We should tell you now," he started, "that you will be checked before you're allowed into the mansion. Regardless of your occupation you're still an outside to Lucis."

"I understand." Her response was half-annoyed. Cor assumed it was from the lack of sleep from the night before. She didn't give any snide remarks afterward so he held his tongue and continued to
walk without saying anything. The gate of the estate soon came into view and Cor quickened his
step, meeting the sentry at the gate's entrance.

"Marshal Leonis," the guard said to him with a salute. Clarus and Nebula came to the entrance soon
after, and the guard acknowledge their presence. "His Highness and the others have already been
escorted inside by Sonitus and Pelna. Axis will be here shortly to bring you to Commander Drautos."

"No need." The soldier turned around to find Crowe and Tredd, another young Kingsglaive guard,
stopped in front of everyone. Crowe pointed her chin to Clarus. "Tredd and I can take care of this.
Axis and Luche are bringing in the cargo. It has to get to His Majesty right away."

"Ah, Lieutenant!" The Accordian soldier immediately straightened his posture and saluted Crowe.
"Of course, ma'am." He motioned his arm from Cor to the Kingsglaive guard. "Right this way,
please." Cor began to walk without any hesitation and Clarus followed behind him. Nebula lifted her
foot, and before she could plant it back on the ground, Crowe's outstretched hand stopped her.

"Doctor Ardere, is it? I'll need you to come with me for a security check. Standard procedure for a
visiting outsider." Tredd held out his hand, waiting for the medical bag, and Nebula reluctantly
handed it off. Crowe started to walk down a separate path alongside the gate and beckoned the
doctor to follow her. Nebula nodded and did as she was asked, Tredd standing behind her with each
step. She was led off to a small shed near another Accordian guard's post, still in the outer perimeter
and a ways off from the mansion. Crowe opened the door and looked at Nebula as she tilted her
head in the direction of the single room. The doctor stepped inside and Crowe went in next, Tredd
being the one to lock the door from the inside. He dropped the medical bag onto the sole table in the
room and pulled the zipper open. While he inspected the contents of the bag Crowe lifted Nebula's
arms to either side of her and picked up a handheld metal detector from the table. She waved the
device all over the doctor's body from head to toe, and when she got to the back of the doctor's neck,
the detector let out a loud beep. Crowe lowered her arm. "Take off your bolero, please," she told
Nebula, who unzipped the front and shrugged the cloth off of her shoulders. Crowe flipped the
bolero inside-out and checked for any metal clips or safety pins, and when she didn't find any, she
raised an eyebrow. She ran the metal detector over the back of Nebula's bare neck again and it went
off a second time. Lifting the doctor's hair she saw no obvious traces of metal, but when her eyes
landed on the sizeable lump under Nebula's hairline, her eyes widened.

Nebula heard the faint gasp that left her mouth. "It's exactly what you think it is," she explained. Her
eyes met Tredd's, whose curiosity led him to watch the body inspection midway through his own of
her medical bag. "It's a tracking device to monitor the actions of every Nifelheim citizen. I disabled
the tracker inside, but it's like tagging cattle. You can't remove it." Two scars lay on the back of her
neck: one below the lump made by the tracker, almost invisible; and another, much more crude and
obvious scar on top of it. It was no wonder Nifelheim citizens kept their hair long.

"I see..." Crowe looked away for a second and switched the metal detector to another mode, then lay
the device on top of Nebula's skin. No sound came from the machine and she sighed, relieved to
know Nebula spoke the truth. "Alright. Thank you for your honesty." She looked over her shoulder
to Tredd, who'd zipped the medical bag closed again. "How's it look?"

"All clear, ma'am." He handed the bag back to Nebula.

Crowe took a step back, allowing the doctor to put on her bolero. "You're cleared with us. Now let's
get you to see the King." She snapped her fingers and signaled Tredd to get the door, and they left
the confines of the shed. The forest had darkened significantly since her arrival to the estate, giving
their surroundings an eerie air. Crowe walked alongside the doctor and noticed the apprehension
floating in her gaze. "We were informed that you're new to magic casting."
The statement caught her off-guard, more so Tredd. "Yes," she replied, "though I've only just started to practice." A soft chuckle left her throat. "You're the fifth person to sound amazed at that."

"Well it's quite a shock. While many Lucians and members of other nations can cast spells, natives of Nifelheim have never been able to, for some reason. It's almost like Nifeli-born citizens don't possess the gene in their DNA." Crowe looked down at her hand and stretched her fingers, and Nebula watched snow dance around the wiggling appendages. "Then again, it makes some sense. Nifelheim has worked tirelessly to separate itself from the rest of the world, and in a way, magic is another connection between humans and the earth. I've heard of very few from the empire gaining the ability through a genetic mutation, but unfortunately...they're usually killed off." She met Nebula's gaze. "Do you know if anyone in your family possessed the ability, too?"

Nebula shook her head. "I only knew my father's side, and even at that, it was only a few people. None of them ever did anything like you just did."

"Then it's no wonder you wanted to escape so badly." Escape. She remembered the night crystal clear, and just thinking about it triggered a small headache. Nebula held the back of her head and groaned a little. "Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any bad memories."

"I'm alright. It's all in the past." The pain quickly subsided when they reached the mansion door. Nebula's eyes traveled up the brick for all five stories, and when they stopped at the top window, her nerves started to jump. It dawned on her at that moment that the life of the King of Lucis, Noctis' father, truly rested in her hands. If she couldn't save him, all would be lost, and Cor would have her tried for the King's death. She swallowed hard, and wished she was able to use healing magic.

Crowe pushed the door opened and let Nebula walk inside first. "I'll meet you upstairs later. I'm going to give Axis and Luche a hand with the cargo. Tredd, take her up." Tredd saluted his superior officer and shuffled up the first flight of stairs.

The sounds of the crowd above grew louder with each step. Someone was pacing back and forth in the hallway, their boots slamming hard on the floor. Another's foot tapped on the floor molding, a third clicked a pen furiously, and Gladiolus told the pen-clicker to stop before he made them. The two ascended to the fifth floor and Tredd pointed to the King's suite. "He's in there, Doctor." She turned to face the door, and only noticed the young Kingsglave guard moving when she heard his knee hit the floor. He knelt in front of her and took her right hand into his, his lips pressed into a hard line. "Please... Please save the King." Everyone's eyes fell onto Nebula and the pressure mounted. Her heart skipped a beat when Noctis looked at her with pleading eyes as he sat hunched over on the couch in the hall, Gladiolus' hand on his shoulder.

Nebula bit her lower lip, nodded and trudged forward. Each step she took was watched, and when she disappeared behind the doors to the King's suite, Noctis' hands tightened in his lap, his arms quivering.

The physicians and nurses inside the suite all looked at her when she came inside. Her nerves danced again as she watched the medical professionals go about their work, checking the King's vital signs and writing notes on a clipboard. "Are you Dr. Ardere?" the head physician asked, holding an extra set of scrubs in her arms.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yes," she answered. Her glance fell from the doctor to the patient, and her jaw dropped. The bag fell out of her grasp and she rushed forward, grabbing the spare scrubs on the way, and halted in front of the King's bed. She hoped Noctis hadn't seen his father yet, but based on the face he'd given her as she walked in, Nebula assumed he had. King Regis Lucis Caelum was a shell of his former self. At age fifty-three, the majority of male patients Nebula had were pretty fit and presented few medical problems. She could hardly tell they were
starting the later stages of their lives. But King Regis was a completely different story. Cor told her he was fifty-three years old, but his body showed a man in his late seventies, at the least. His limbs were covered in bandages and casts, a ventilator was shoved down his throat to help him breathe, and the only sign of life he gave was shown by the beeping on the heart monitor. Her legs trembled as she stared at the disheveled monarch. "This is...this is the King of Lucis? It can't be!" Two nurses stepped aside as she walked to the side of the bed and knelt next to Regis' unconscious form. "Etro, what has the crystal done to him?"

"Rapid aging, Doctor," one of the nurses replied, his voice heavy and frightened. "The Lucian crystal feeds on the life force of the royal it's bonded to. In exchange, they're given immense power, enough to protect a nation." He gave Nebula a moment to absorb the sight in front of her, and when she stood tall again, everyone waited for her to say something. "Doctor?"

She snapped out of her trance and threw her twin hair tails back. Any sign she was nervous was immediately masked behind harsh gray eyes. Nebula pulled her scrubs on and tied the string around her waist, and called for a pair of gloves. "You." She pointed to the nurse who'd just spoken to her. "Meet with the Kingsglaive Lieutenant and get those elixirs in here now!" The nurse scrambled for the door, pulling his surgical mask and gloves off in the process. Nebula picked up her medical bag and brought it to the King's bedside. "Update me! When was the last briefing on his condition to the Commander?"

"Five minutes before you walked in," another answered, handing her a clipboard. She scanned the words scribbled on the pages, quickly reading and flipping through them, then laid it on an empty space on the bed.

"Get me a fresh blood sample stat! I'm going to figure out what kind of poison is inside him. Prepare a microscope and slide. You, there! Let me see those X-rays!" Nebula took charge of the treatment room, her fear long gone, making sure everyone had a job to do that would save the King's life instead of merely extending it.

Outside the treatment room, Noctis was seconds away from chewing on his nails. He'd been informed that Luna and Gentiana were away at the time of their arrival to the mansion, attending a meeting with the President and King's advisor, and wouldn't be back for another hour. He'd been dying to see her since they entered the Accordian border, and having her far from him yet again only heightened his anxiety. His gaze was either on the door to his father's room or on the carpet lining the floor, only changing course once when Axis rushed past him with a bow as he delivered a large box to the suite. Ignis left for a short while to speak with Commander Drautos about ideas for the next step in the plan to retake Lucis. Gladiolus and his father went to the kitchen to prepare a meal for everyone. Prompto stayed on the third floor with Noctis, his eyes glued to a game he played on Ignis' phone. Nyx was away with the Princess and Cor had gone into the conference room with Libertus. Everyone had found a way to keep themselves busy and fight off the tension that sparked with King Regis' condition, but Noctis couldn't bring himself to do anything except wait for Nebula to come through the doors again and give everyone the news.

Two and a half hours after coming to the safe house Noctis heard footsteps. He leaped out of his seat and watched the doors of his father's suite, waiting for them to open, and disappointment washed over him when he realized they were coming from the stairs. The Prince sat down again and knitted his fingers together. Prompto half-watched the stairs to see who was coming inside, and when the figures made it to the top level, he shot off the couch. "Noct." He tapped his friend's shoulder with his knuckles and pointed his chin to the end of the hallway, where Nyx approached the Prince with a slow trot. Noctis remembered seeing him rush to the conference room back at the citadel to help the King in his then unknown condition.
Nyx's mouth fell open when he saw Noctis. "Your Highness!" He immediately fell to a knee and tapped his fisted right hand to his chest. "I'm relieved to see you're alright." Before Noctis could say anything loud heels echoed from the end of the hall and slowed, and the Prince found himself face-to-face with his betrothed and the Oracle, Lunafreya.

"Noctis..." Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. Nyx stepped out of their way as the two ran into each other's arms and held one another tight. Luna whimpered as she buried her face in the crook of his neck. "It's really you..."

Noctis swept her hair between his fingers as he comforted her, knowing no words were needed in that small moment. "The radio, the paper - they both said you'd died!" Luna shook her head to reassure his denial of the reports.

Separating herself from Noctis, Luna wiped her face with a tissue Gentiana handed her. "Please forgive my appearance. I've hardly slept since coming here."

"No apologies needed." He guided her to his seat and gave up his spot on the small couch, where she and Prompto embraced.

"Wait. If you're here, that means-"

Noctis gestured to the double doors of the King's suite. "She's inside, taking care of him now. It's been almost three hours." His nerves began to fray again. "That's too long."

"If I may interject," Nyx said as he stepped closer and cleared his throat, "we're combating a powerful poison nobody can identify. None of our physicians could figure out how to stop it from spreading or remove it from His Majesty. She may be having a difficult time, too."

"Even so," Prompto cut in, "Nebula's a great doctor. She saved Cor's life on the way here AND took care of Noct when we were attacked by wild animals in Duscae." Even as he tried to bring everyone's spirits up, he could feel his own hope start to crumble with the passage of time.

Gentiana stood beside Luna. "We must believe in her ability. If any doubt lingers in our minds things will take a turn for the worst. It's our job to stay positive, just as it's her job to save people's lives." Her hand on Luna's cheek made the Princess feel a little better.

Three more hours passed. Gladiolus and Clarus served soup to everyone as the clocks in every room slowly ticked by. Ignis encouraged Noctis and Luna to sit with the high-ranking military and political officials and work on their next plan of action to occupy their minds. Drautos and Astrum were relieved to see Noctis alive and well, and filled the Prince in on everything that happened up to the moment Noctis' entourage arrived. Drautos gestured a hand to Gentiana. "Lady Surgens believes the crystal is being held somewhere in the empire's Imperial Palace. No one outside of the Nifelheim royals and those who reside in the palace know of its layout. It'd be the perfect place to store it."

"Impossible," Noctis quickly told them. "Unless the citadel was completely obliterated, there'd be no way for Iedolas to get the crystal out of there. The palace was built around the crystal for that very reason. And if he wants to maintain control over Insomnia, he'll need to keep it standing so his leading forces have a rendezvous point. And if he did somehow manage to create an opening large enough to pull the crystal through, it's protected by several magic barriers and chained eighty meters into the ground. The chances of them freeing the crystal from its chamber are almost zero."

"Almost still gives them a chance to remove it."

Noctis grit his teeth at Cor's statement. The Lucian royal bloodline had done everything in its power
to secure the crystal bound to the family and keep it safe, but there was still the tiny possibility for the chains to snap, the magic barriers to weaken even slightly, and for the empire to use its power to force someone capable of wielding magic to help them. "And to worsen the situation, the one in charge of maintaining the magic barrier is dead." He hated the odds stacked against them.

"So where do we go from here?" Luna asked. "Insomnia or Nifelheim?"

Before anyone could think of an answer a rapid knocking at the conference room door caught their attention. Luche stuck his head inside and met the Commander's eyes. Without saying anything Drautos knew what was happening and he stood from his chair. Noctis and Ignis caught on quick, and the two bolted out of the room and ran for the King's suite. The Prince hopped to a halt when he saw Nebula stagger out of the room, panting and barely holding herself up. Prompto took her arm and hooked it around his neck when she looked ready to collapse to her knees.

"...He's going to live," she said to Noctis when he stared at her. And as if he'd sprouted wings, the Prince warped into the King's suite.
Always finding a way to bring more characters into the story. Maybe we'll see a bit of Iris one day. She's adorable <3

"This is the most aggressive case I've ever had to treat," Nebula said after taking a seat in the conference room. Her limbs were still shivering from the wave of relief that washed over her after she staggered out of the King's treatment room. "I've never had a patient as critical as him before." Nyx handed her a cup of tea. "Thank you."

"So how did you get the poison out?" Libertus asked the doctor as he sat next to her.

Nebula blew on her tea before sipping it. "The first step was identifying it. It took me forever to figure out what it was. Whoever made that poison definitely made it to kill." The doctor leaned forward and handed Libertus the paper she'd printed when researching the poison. "It's a mixture of three different types of venom from a Naga, Goblin, and the toxic elements from Marlboro breath. The creator of the poison melded them together so well I almost couldn't separate what strain came from where." Pointing to a line she circled on her notes, Nebula continued. "After identifying the exact poisons in King Regis' system came the tricky part. General antidotes wouldn't work fast enough, and it's dangerous to mix the antivenom of two different creatures. So I had to craft an entirely new antivenom from some ingredients in the room. It took four vials before the antivenom started to eat away at the poison, but after two hours I couldn't find any more in his blood. After that, it was a matter of treating the other injuries and making sure they properly healed. I gave him a few drops of Phoenix Down just in case, but he seems to be doing fine now. The pneumonia should be gone by the end of the night." Nebula leaned back in her chair and let out a long sigh. "I've never been so scared in my life..."

"The Kingdom of Lucis owes you a great debt," Crowe said to her. "I don't think His Majesty would've even survived without the elixirs you made for us." Nebula blushed from the praise, and as her eyes wandered through all the admirers around the conference room, she looked at Cor standing next to his brother, and she couldn't see any anger directed at her. He didn't smile, but nor did he grimace. His expression was calm, and in his eyes, she could see relief that his King would live to see another day. "If there's anything at all we can do for you-"

"That's not our call, Lieutenant," Axis said to her, his voice less reprimanding and more cautious.

She smirked and pat her subordinate's back. "Even if it isn't, Axis, I'm sure His Grace would say the same should he be awake right now. Speaking of which..." Crowe stood from her chair and headed for the door.

"Wait." She stopped at Nebula's call. "Noctis should be alone with him for now. He hasn't seen his father in almost a month, and the last image he had of the King was swimming in blood. He should be the first to see his father's eyes open. He'll come for us when the time is right." A faint grin captured the left half of Nebula's mouth. "I know His Majesty is family to you. Just give him a little time with his son." As Crowe nodded, the doctor got out of her chair and walked over to Astrum. "Sir Virtus."
"Doctor."

"I'd like to take a look at your arm, if that's alright." She beckoned for him to follow her out of the conference room. "Is there a private room somewhere near by?"

Crowe opened the door for them. "I'll bring you over there." Nebula nodded in thanks and helped the King's advisor out the door, asking Crowe for assistance in the examination as they passed her by.

When the door closed, Drautos picked up a vial of the elixirs Nebula had prepared for the squadron. "She's truly amazing, Cor. And even if you don't want to admit it yourself, we'd all be dead without her solutions."

Cor huffed as he twirled his katana between his fingers and the marble floor. "Keeping her out of harm's way has been a burden. Iedolas wants her so badly he's willing to cut through anyone standing between them, so long as he gets the elixirs."

"And if they're worth starting a small war over," Nyx added, "that means they work. She just proved it."

"Maybe she could teach us before Nifelheim gets another chance to snatch her," Sonitus suggested. "I've always wanted to learn the craft. Could be useful if more than one person knew how to make the stuff. Pelna could pick up on it, too."

Clarus leaned his arm on the large wooden table top. "If only it were that easy. Miss Ardere doesn't seem too keen of sharing her secrets with anyone. She has a list of ingredients for each mixture, but who knows how she cooks them."

Tredd rocked onto the back legs of his chair. "Maybe one of us can sway her to see things her way-"

"Won't work," Cor grumbled, and he proceeded to storm out of the room for some air. Clarus sighed and held his head in his hands while Nyx leaned against the wall with crossed arms and rolled his eyes.

"Cor's not too keen on the doc himself, Drautos," Nyx said. "So he definitely won't be the one to convince her. And before you suggest I do it, I've already got the Princess and her scary-eyed bodyguard to look after. So the floor is open to volunteers. He opened his arms to invite anyone to volunteer their services in the matter.

Libertus cleared his throat. "What about Crowe? It's always nice to have a woman's touch on things."

Clarus straightened his back. "Miss Ardere is in need of someone to teach her magic. If she's led to believe that Crowe can teach her healing magic, it just might work."

"Helping a Nifeli after receiving help from her... The irony is unbelievable." Luche snorted at the thought. Even with the woman sitting in the same room as him, breathing the same air and sharing his tea, he couldn't fathom how such an innocent creature could hail from the totalitarian state. "Well, if anything, it's the Prince's call. He's been traveling with her for a week or so; he probably knows what'll sway her."

"His Highness should discuss it with Astrum first," Drautos concluded. "And should the King regain consciousness before the matter is resolved, the final decision will be in his hands. Agreed?"

Everyone shared their agreement on the matter.
Noctis had been by his father's bedside for over a half hour. In that half hour the other doctors could already see the results of Nebula's antidotes and elixirs working their magic on the ailing King's body. Color had returned to his skin, the ventilator was removed from his throat, and his breathing and heart rate improved one-hundred fold. They were hesitant about taking the King off of his sedative for fear of another horrifying reaction from the crystal, but Nebula reassured them it was alright since the poison was out of his system for good. A sample of the toxic liquid was stored in a separate vial to be studied and have special antidotes made from it, and while he waited for his father to wake up, Noctis shook the vial between his fingers. It was a reflective purple-brown liquid with the consistency of mercury that bubbled every time it dripped from one side of the vial to the other. He wasn't too knowledgeable on poisons and venom like Ignis and Gladiolus were, but the color alone told him of its danger.

A Lucian doctor tapped the Prince's forearm to get his attention. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Your Highness," she began, "but I'd like to check your father's wounds and see if the dressings need to be changed."

"Go right ahead," he said to the doctor, and got out of her way. Noctis stayed close as the physician cut at the bandages wrapped around Regis' right arm. She checked his IV and drip bag while unfurling the bandage from his arm, and when the area of a nasty wound was exposed, she couldn't hold back a gasp. "It's gone!" The only evidence of any injury to his arm was a beige line slightly darker than his vanilla skin tone. The doctor removed the rest of the bandage and lifted the blanket off of his body to check one of the more serious wounds. His stomach had taken a bullet and the bleeding was difficult to stop after the discovery of the poison. But in the hour since Nebula administered a potent elixir, the only way anyone could tell he'd been shot at was the faint circle right below his rib cage. "Incredible." It was the first time Noctis got a glimpse of the true miracle of Nebula's elixirs at work, and for a brief moment, he found himself in awe of her abilities.

"So he's going to be okay, right?"

"Your Highness, allow me to be honest with you." The doctor brought a spare chair next to his and sat down, pulling down her surgical mask. "His Grace was at death's doorstep more than once. He's needed many blood transfusions over the past three weeks, and no matter how hard we tried, we were unsuccessful in stopping the bleeding. You brought Etro's blessing with you, Your Highness, in the form of that young doctor. I've worked as your father's personal physician since he became King, and not since your accident have I ever seen someone so ill. What we struggled to accomplish in three weeks was successfully done by Dr. Ardere in six hours. I... I'm at a loss for words, Your Highness. Her presence is a true blessing."

He couldn't help smiling. "Yeah, she's something else. It's a good thing we found her." The door opened and distracted the two from the sleeping King momentarily. Noctis gave a soft smile when Ignis, Gladiolus and Prompto walked inside, closing the door quietly, and approached him. Seeing relief on their Prince's face brought a sense of calm to them and they returned the grins.

"How's he doing?" Gladiolus asked, his voice lowered to a whisper. The Lucian doctor offered a salute to the Prince's bodyguard and gave her seat up for one of the court members to take. Exchanging looks amongst themselves, Ignis took residence in the chair.

"Much better. Nebula said he'll need a few days to rest, but now that the position's been removed he'll make a full recovery." Noctis looked to the Lucian doctor, who bowed her head and gave her report to the three waiting men. She pointed to a set of X-rays hanging on a glass panel above the side table, which showed almost immediate improvement in the King’s broken bones and lungs.

"His pneumonia subsided the second the poison was gone and Dr. Ardere's elixirs were injected into
him. His bones will take longer to heal, but if the elixirs can get rid of pneumonia in an hour, I'm sure
the rest of his injuries will heal quickly."

Ignis rested his head in his propped up hand. "That's a huge relief." He brought his attention from the
King to his charge. "Speaking of Nebula, Highness, she's tending to Sir Virtus' injuries as we speak.
Crowe is giving her a hand."

"It's great to see she's made a new friend," Prompto commented as he crossed his arms.

Ignis nodded in agreement. "Ironic how the first person she befriends here is the perfect person to
 teach her how to utilize magic." Being a much more masterful mage than himself, Crowe was the
perfect choice for a teacher. She taught Ignis before joining the Kingsglaive, and Nyx became her
next student when he was welcomed into the ranks. "By the way, we've received some news from
Solheim."

Noctis crooked an eyebrow at Ignis, who gestured his head in Gladiolus' direction. The bodyguard
closed his eyes as he leaned on the arm of Prompto's chair. "Iris called me. She and my mother are
safe in Gurgues. They were on their way back from Solheim when the invasion took place, and as
luck would have it they managed to turn around before any Nifeli soldiers could catch them."
Gladiolus was good at hiding his emotions from his comrades, but as his eyes reopened and his gaze
hit the floor, the others could see the worry in the glaze over his irises. He hadn't heard anything from
his sister Iris or his mother Cyna since their call three days before the invasion, telling their son and
brother of their impending departure from the Lucian allied nation. Their statuses had eaten at him
throughout the journey, and when he didn't receive any response when he tried to call them from
Cindy's shop, his anxiety formed a hard coil in the pit of his stomach. He'd laid most of his focus on
keeping Noctis and their friends safe for the duration of their journey, but the guys knew hearing
from his family lifted a massive weight from Gladiolus' shoulders.

"What are they going to do?"

"Mom said the King and Queen of Solheim offered them asylum until Lucis is recaptured. They'll be
safe in the capital."

Noctis pat the side of his friend's leg. "Good." Those were two less lives they needed to worry about.
"Where's Luna?"

"Gentiana took her to bed," Prompto replied. "She looked exhausted. She was probably waiting all
night for us."

The Prince bit his lower lip, his heart sinking at the thought of his betrothed foregoing sleep in the
hopes of not missing his arrival. So many were risking their lives and sanity for his sake, and so
many more were suffering while he sat with his friends in warm chairs. The thought brought back
the nerves that were calmed by his father's improving condition. "She's in a worse position than us.
None of her family knows she's alive."

Ignis rubbed the Prince's back to try and calm him. "We'll find a way to let them know the Princess is
alright." Noctis laid his head against Ignis' hip and wrapped an arm around the advisor's body,
 craving nothing more than the comfort of his friends and allies. As his comrades moved closer to try
and relax him, his eyes returned to the resting King, and the reassurance of at least one matter being
resolved took over again.

The night drew into the early morning hours. With the Prince and his group safely in the confines of
the estate, the court and the Kingsglaive shifted their focus to forming a plan for reclaiming Lucis and
the crystal. Being their source of power, the crystal took priority over the recovery of their land, which everyone knew would come easier once the King possessed the crystal once more. Drautos and Cor sat next to each other by the fireplace, and all other available chairs were laid out in rows for the rest of the court to occupy. The Kingsglaive filed into their seats, some eyes drifting to the conference room door when Nyx came inside after checking on Luna and Gentiana. To the Prince’s irritation he was pulled away from his father and asked to attend a meeting with every Lucian body. "It’s alright, Your Highness," the Lucian doctor reassured him. "Your father will still be asleep when you return. And if anything changes, we’ll send for you immediately." When he and his friends walked into the room everyone stood at attention and bowed to him, a gesture he’d normally show his annoyance over if the coming conversation weren’t so grim. Noctis took a seat on Cor’s left. Ignis, Prompto and Gladiolus brought chairs from the last row forward and arranged them beside their Prince before sitting down. Drautos stared at the door with impatient eyes, and when Nebula finally entered the conference room, he cleared his throat and motioned for her to take any available chair.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice. Your Highness, Senator Venenum, Sir Virtus, Kingsglaive members, and members of the court." Drautos pushed himself out of his chair and began to pace in front of the seated people. "We all know the situation. Nifelheim has taken over the crown city of Insomnia, making entry damn near impossible. The crystal so proudly used by His Grace, the King, is now in the hands of Iedolas Aldercapt. In the past twenty-four hours, it was presumed that - based on severe reactions on the part of His Grace and Your Highness - something is happening to the crystal. What it is exactly, we cannot speculate, but whatever it is will be considered destructive. We know how the crystal can be used and what it requires-" Nebula cringed at the mention of the crystal’s needed power source- "and we know that Emperor Aldercapt possesses no such connection to be able to use it. That’s why it’s believed he is experimenting on it as we speak, to find out how it works, and attempt to form a bond so he can override Lucis’ hold on it." Drautos gestured his hand to Cor, who took the floor in the Kingsglaive commander’s stead.

"What Lucis has in terms of magical capabilities, Nifelheim has in the form of technological power. We can’t deny their advances over the years, for a long time ago, we imported vehicles and the like from the totalitarian nation. Although our magic is strong and has defended our nation for centuries, I believe the day has come to admit that their technology may have trumped our spells." Everyone’s heads turned at the marshal’s statement, some agreeing with his words, others gritting their teeth at the admission of weakness to another nation. "But don’t let this admission cloud your minds with doubt. Nifelheim went behind our backs in planning this attack. They took advantage of our kindness in the form of a peace treaty. Iedolas Aldercapt stepped into our walls and tarnished the promise of peace between our nations. We’re going to see to it that he and the rest of Nifelheim will pay for their crime against us." Nebula twiddled her fingers in her lap, feeling as if Cor's eyes were on her every time he mentioned the Emperor or her homeland, and while she understood the circumstances, she couldn't help but feel that he did all he could in his speech to single her out. Noctis, having exchanged silent conversation with Ignis, got Cor's attention and requested to take the floor. The marshal offered him the space and stepped backwards, folding his arms behind his back. He didn't think he'd have to address the entire military and political force - or what remained of it - on his own so soon. He'd practiced many times in front of his friends, Ignis guiding him through each step from the opening address, to his closing words, and he was given multiple situations to speak about. Discussing the matter of reclaiming his fallen country hadn’t come up, so Ignis knew he’d be needed to keep the Prince’s mind at ease through his speech. Nodding to Noctis, the advisor used his hands to tell the Prince to speak slowly so he could be understood. Noctis drew in a breath. "Earlier today, Marshal Leonis and Commander Drautos brought me up to speed on our situation. The crystal is in danger; I've felt its cries hit me in two reactions which forced me into unconsciousness. My father and I have been fortunate to not have more reactions from the crystal, which tells me
whatever's being done to it has stopped for the moment. But it could happen again at any time, and the next could end our lives." He took a second to let the information sink into his subjects' minds. "This is one of many reasons why we have to get the crystal back as soon as possible, before we even think of reclaiming Lucis. Our efforts are useless if it remains in Iedolas Aldercapt's possession."

Luche stood from his chair and saluted the Prince. "Your Highness," he started, "do we have confirmation on the crystal's location?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. But I've seen the barriers put in place for it. Though the soldier who was responsible for creating the magic barrier was killed, it doesn't mean the seal's been breached. The barrier could still be in place."

"Unless they have a mage in their ranks, Highness," Sonitus added when he rose. "Nifelheim is a powerful nation who aren't afraid to use scare tactics to get what they want. The emperor could very well have brought someone from the outside in to undo the seal."

Crowe stood up. "There's also the possibility for a native Nifeli to have been forced in for this job. Before today, I never would've believed that anyone from Nifelheim was able to use magic." She gestured her hand to Nebula. "Miss Nebula Ardere is living proof of the gene for magic still existing in Nifeli blood. Though citizens found with this gene are usually killed, in this situation, Emperor Aldercapt will need to rely on these 'mutants', as they're called by him, to lift the seal protecting the crystal." All eyes in the room fell on Nebula and she curled her arms inward. Most of those who'd seen her only once or twice looked at her with doubt, having never seen any Nifeli cast a spell before. The few who had stared with worried eyes, except for Cor and Clarus, who kept their expressions unreadable to keep suspicions low. Looking up at Crowe again, the Kingsglaive mage nodded to her and helped the doctor stand. She gestured for Nebula to show everyone what she'd been taught, and Nebula lifted her hand palm up. Closing her eyes, she ignited a flame in the center of her hand, avoiding the stares of the onlookers. The fire danced in her hand at a perfectly timed, calm pace, and as quickly as it had sparked, frost grew from her fingertips and drew inward, freezing the flame before it could die. A jagged crystal now sat in her hand, cold to the touch, and the skeptical eyes grew in awe at her work. "This rare ability, once seen as something to be ashamed of and snuffed out, is now in high demand. I'm sure it's caused more than a few Nifeli to flee."

"But if something's happening to the crystal," Nyx said, "wouldn't that indicate a breach in the barrier already?"

"It could, but the barrier is connected to the crystal as much as the Caelum bloodline is. His Grace could feel it if someone merely laid their hand on it."

"So for now, let's assume the crystal still resides in Insomnia," Libertus intervened. "Aldercapt will have elite teams guarding it around the clock, and someone he trusts dearly keeping an eye on it. We don't know anything else: where the Emperor is, where his generals are, what their next course of action is-

"If I may..." Nebula gained everyone's attention as she spoke up, her hands folded to calm her nerves. "I'm a former citizen of Nifelheim. My family was in the noble ranks, serving as renowned medical professionals in the nation. Although I don't know much on the affairs of the Emperor and his military during times of war, I do know that he usually doesn't get involved in matters of war unless he knew it was something he sought for so long. He went to Lucis for the peace treaty signing well-prepared for an invasion, if what I've heard is true. Iedolas Aldercapt is a wretched man, unfit to be called a human being. He revels when his enemies cry at his feet and kicks dirt into the eyes of the fallen. I'm sure he would've stayed in Insomnia for at least a few days to see the crystal in person."
Figuring out how to remove it from wherever it lay would be left to his troops, and transportation to the Aerial Forces. He's not the kind of man that will sit around waiting when he has a victory to celebrate."

It was their first look into the life of a Nifeli citizen, aside from the knowledge known around the world of Nifelheim's people being tagged like livestock. Those sitting behind Nebula could clearly see the lump on the back of her neck, marred by a nasty scar she created herself to stop the tracker underneath the skin. "So you believe he's back in Nifelheim now?" Ignis asked her.

"Without a doubt. He has to keep up appearances for his followers. That's one of the things he and President Speculo seem to have in common."

Cor took the floor again. "Now we must decide where to go. Once His Majesty is well enough, we'll be moving to Solheim to regroup with any soldiers and citizens that may have escaped. From there, we'll meet with Solheim's King and Queen and determine where the crystal is being held. If it's still in its chamber in the palace, we go to Insomnia. But if it's been moved to Nifelheim..." He fell silent for a second. "...Then we'll have to form an elite team to bring it back to us."

"Perhaps Miss Ardere should be on this te-"

"Out of the question," Cor interrupted. "She may have some skill in battle, but what we're talking about here is infiltration. It's a job better tasked for experienced military men and women. Besides, if she were to be injured or captured, our Shadow Agreement will be done." Nebula, Clarus and Cor all knew that wasn't the only reason the marshal didn't want her on the team.

"I agree with the Marshal," Drautos added. "Miss Ardere's skills are better suited for taking care of His Majesty during his recovery process." He shared a nod with the Senator and Regis' advisor. "Now that our actions for the coming weeks have been decided, we'll bring up this matter with President Speculo tomorrow afternoon. Highness." The commander looked to the Prince. "As much as you despise these kinds of meetings, your attendance is necessary. You represent the leadership of Lucis in your father's stead while he's recovering. Astrum and Ignis will be by your side during the meeting, as will myself and Cor." His attention drifted to Gladiolus. "As Noctis' bodyguard, I understand your presence by his side will be needed as well. You will meet with the President's security detail shortly before our arrival to ensure everything is clean."

Gladiolus nodded. "Will do."

"Everyone else will remain here," Drautos concluded. "Now that everyone is together, security will have to be tightened. Your Highness' group will be moved to the suite next door to His Grace. Dr. Ardere will stay with Crowe, Nyx and Axis. All other living arrangements will remains as they stand." Drautos stood up and his subordinates followed. The Prince's crew rose from their seats as well, and after receiving bows and salutes from the Kingsglaive members, the soldiers began to file out.

Nebula waited for everyone else to leave before she made her way to the door. As she grabbed the gold handle, a hand laid on top of hers. "You understand why I turned down the offer," Cor said to her.

"Yes." She didn't want to say why.

"Good." Cor opened the door the rest of the way and gestured for her to walk out. She followed his motion without another word and headed to the King's suite before retiring for the night. She was allowed in after knocking on the door and grabbed a set of gloves and surgical mask. Sitting next to the King's bed, she pulled out her stethoscope and listened to his heart.
"How has he been?"

"Doing much better," the Lucian doctor said to her. "We drew another blood sample after His Highness departed for your conference. No evidence of poison at all."

She smiled under her mask. "That's a relief. That mixture was toxic. Any reactions from the crystal?"

"No. He's been asleep since you tended to him."

"Good, good." The sounds of his heart beating satisfied her and she removed her gloves and mask, standing and putting her stethoscope away. "I'll be retiring for the night. If anything changes, don't hesitate to get me." Nebula shook the doctor's hand and left the King's suite, and turned for the stairs. It was three steps away from the top of the staircase that she felt a headache begin to set in. She assumed it was from over-exhaustion caused by the long journey, and her usual lack of sleep. Nebula did her best to brush it off as she descended to the second floor and made her way to the room she'd be staying in for the night. She knocked before entering and found Crowe and Axis already laying on their cots, while Nyx sat on his on the far side of the room, facing the window. He glanced over his shoulder to see who was coming him and returned his gaze to the leaves rippling in the wind.

As Nebula settled her belongings in her area, Nyx started to unbutton the jacket of his uniform. "What's it like?"

"Hmm?" She half-listened to his question as she kicked off her boots.

"Living in a totalitarian state, I mean."

Nebula paused. "Oh." Her arms lowered. "...You may find this strange, but growing up in Nifelheim felt pretty normal. I know you don't expect to hear that from a refugee."

"What do you define as 'normal'?" he asked, shaking the jacket sleeves off his arms.

"I lived in a house. I went to primary and secondary school. I had friends. I had rules to follow..." The more she thought about it, the more repressed memories resurfaced. "...We had to declare our love for Nifelheim every morning in school through song and oath. If we passed by the gates of the Imperial Palace, we were expected to bow and recite our oath again. No one dared to say anything negative about the emperor or our nation. Aside from having a tracker embedded in my neck, it was an ordinary life...an ordinary life in a dictatorship." She settled herself on her cot. "What about you?"

Nyx loosened the laces in his boots. "I was orphaned before I hit ten. Lived on the streets for a few years, then Cor's family brought me in. I found out he was in training to serve the royal bloodline and wanted to follow in his footsteps, so I signed up for training in Kingsglaive."

"Not to be rude, but did he always have a stick up his ass?"

It took everything in him not to laugh. "That's just Cor. He's a stern guy sworn to his duty. Why? Does he have a soft side I should know about?"

A shiver ran down her spine. "N-no, not that I know of," she quickly answered. "He just seems to have a grudge against me because...because of my heritage."

"Guess you'll just have to prove him wrong," he said before laying down and rolling onto his side. Nebula didn't say anything else when he fell silent and assumed he'd fallen asleep. When she laid down she couldn't close her eyes, feeling the headache ram into all sides of her skull, and folded her hands behind her head. A gasp escaped her lips when her hand brushed against the tracker under her skin. The reminder scared her, driving sleep further away, and for once she wished for the comfort of
unconsciousness that came with her episodes.
Important Matters

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into the situation in Lucis as Nifelheim plans their next move, and at the same time, the Lucian forces meet with the President of Accordo to move theirs forward.

Chapter Notes

I spoiled the Kingsglaive movie for myself (found a post on tumblr I SHOULDN'T have read AGHHH) and know some details about the up, and I've decided to ignore these spoilers and go my own route. So In The Shadow's Glow will be a slight AU-ish story, with the majority of the characters and locations being the same, but some storyline stuff taking a different route.

Heavy metal footsteps clanked on the scratched marble floors, rushing down the hallway. A metal-garbed hand pushed away thick tattered cloth hanging from a window passed by in the hurry, some of the strings getting caught on the sharp edges of the gauntlet and tearing the curtain further. Two other pairs of hands followed the hurrying figure a few feet behind and were quick to separate the frayed string from their leader's armor, lest they get reprimanded for not taking care of the curtain in the first place, as he and another had ordered since their task had been completed. A notice of arrival from the Empire of Nifelheim's Third Army Corps 86th Airborne Unit came quickly as the unit flew in mere hours before the squadron itself. Being in command of Lucis since the fall of the crown city, General Glauca had grown cross with keeping an eye on what remained of Insomnia. The city was near complete destruction brought about by the invasion he personally carried out with a third of the Nifeli army - a number he still thought was unnecessary to keep in, since most of the people that remained in Lucis were either regular citizens or murdered infantry men. Playing babysitter with not only weak Lucians, but a large glowing rock still sitting peacefully in its chambers, weren't the only things getting on Glauca's nerves. The invasion was meant to seize the crystal and end the Lucian royal bloodline - kill Regis, Noctis, and his fiance Lunafreya, the little witch who'd betrayed them by going behind the parent country's back and bringing about an engagement that could very well free Tenebrae. Bringing about the deaths of the three had been a complete failure, despite what news had been fed to any media who managed to let the world hear their voices, and it irked him to know neither task had been finished. And now his fellow general - a man who had 'gifted' him with the one-third of the human army to seize Insomnia - had sent the commodore of the 86th Airborne Unit to bring the crystal back to Nifelheim, when all three of them knew very well the crystal was still chained eighty meters into the ground in the lower basement.

As he stormed down the hall to meet with the captain in the remains of the conference room, he snorted at the condition of the half-destroyed palace that now served as his base. Dried blood, uncleaned from the massacre that took place, still stained the grout between the marble tiles. The sight disgusted him. Though a military man, he wasn't one for praising the horrifying outcomes of battle: the dead bodies, the blood staining everything; they all left a bad taste in his mouth. He did as his emperor ordered, but the second the task was done, he made sure his subordinates took care to clean everything immediately. Where do they dispose of the bodies, one soldier asked with some
snark in his voice. "Out of my sight," Glaucu simply commanded, "and add yours to the pile." And the soldier with a bit of attitude was slain and burned with the dead Lucians. No one questioned Glaucu's need to keep up appearances since then and quietly abided by his orders. So to see a blood stain mixed in with the grout made the general, still clad in full armor from head to toe, growl something audible that made the soldiers following him scramble to sink to their knees and start to clean the spot with anything they could find. "Don't let me see another spot," he warned as he walked on ahead. "Red in this house means certain death for those who tread before me."

He reached the conference room soon after, one door completely blown off and the other a splintered mess of bullet holes, and saw the commodore sitting on top of the long rectangular table. "You're late, General," her words rolled off her tongue, stinging the body beneath the armor like venom. "His Radiance is growing impatient. So impatient, in fact, that he had General Interitio send me here to check on your progress. He wants the crystal in Nifelheim, Glaucu, and you're wasting time-"

"Don't repeat what I already know, Commodore Highwind," Glaucu hissed. "His Imperial Majesty knows the circumstances we're facing. We don't have anyone capable of using magic in what I was given. And these Lucian rats continue to refuse me to the point where my blade must make them atone for their insolence." Aranea sighed and crossed her arms.

"And what matter is it to me that your patience and temper are worse than the Emperor's?" She pushed herself off the table top and began to pace in front of him. "What happened to the mutant we sent you last week?"

Glaucu growled again. "It barely lasted a day. Its abilities were well below par in terms of performance and it couldn't even put a dent in the barrier... Pathetic."

"That's probably because you exhausted its energy."

"I had no regulations on how to handle the mutant. I simply used it as I would any other tool." Glaucu brushed off some dust he found on his pauldron, grimacing under his helmet. "If you're wondering where I put it, you'll have to ask Captain Murex. He's in charge of handling the corpses."

"Very well, I will. But first..." Aranea ceased her pacing and stopped in front of the armor-clad general. "If you don't have anything better to do aside from rounding up Lucian rats, I'd like to ask you to show me the crystal."

He sighed. "I figured there was more than one reason for your visit. Is it really necessary?"

"Maybe I can help you figure out how to finally get rid of that barrier." Under the helmet, the general raised an eyebrow at her offer. Aranea Highwind was a gifted warrior: top of her class, skilled with a lance and a favorite to succeed her commanding officer when she joined the 86th Airborne Unit. The way she fought with the lance she so favored earned her the title of Dragoon, a name meant to be feared once bestowed upon a soldier. Many who met Aranea for the first time couldn't believe the young woman, whose appearance could be noted as angelic and timid, was the commander of the unit. Only when they heard her speak or saw her in battle did the non-believers change their tune and speak of respect for her rather then their desires to ravage her. "Before you get any ideas, my offer of assistance comes so we can find some sort of weak spot in the barrier. Did you find anything on the mage before you killed him?"

"The only thing present on that man was a sharp tongue that cried for my life to be taken as I took his."

"Hmm. Of course," Aranea commented as she marched past him, staring at the intricate grooves that decorated his helmet through the cut-outs of her visor. "You need my help more than you realize."
Lead me to the chamber." He didn't know if the statement was directed towards him or the soldiers still cleaning the floor., who scrambled to their feet and saluted the air fleet captain. One of them reassured the other that he'd finish the cleaning while his comrade escorted her to the crystal chamber. He walked behind Aranea and Glaucu, who remained quiet for most of their walk through the hallway that led to the basement elevator. They took the lift down seven levels, below the palace armory and even the dungeon, and got off on the lowest basement level. When they stepped off the elevator Glaucu groaned, finding the body of the person Aranea had sent him the week before to try and destroy the magic barrier. He said nothing and stepped over the body, his arms reaching for the elevator in a last hope for salvation, a dried line of blood running a meter from the back of his head along the stone floor. Aranea and Glaucu's subordinate followed him in silence through the narrow hall, walking down some steps that descended further into the basement. Aranea's eyes lingered on the fallen Nifeli, a solemn look in her eyes; most would believe that gaze showed some compassion in her as she quietly grieved his death, but those who knew her ways would explain any sadness that existed in her eyes only existed for the wasted use of the lost person.

Glaucu stopped walking after a few minutes, catching Aranea's attention. Without saying a word she looked over the general's shoulder and her jaw dropped immediately. She brushed past him and stood in the opening of the crystal chamber, her eyes drawn up by the sheer height of the ceiling. She wondered how high it reached to house the six meter tall crystal, jagged towers jutting out of all its sides, and particles glittered the air around the mineral. Its color remained mostly clear with subtle changes of orange, blue and purple in the heart of the crystal. A thick tungsten ring encircled the crystal in between its protrusions, attached to chains that dug into the concrete floor the crystal floated above. Its gravity-defying suspension in the air captivated her the most. Aranea raised her hand, curiosity wanting to know what the crystal's surface felt like, and as she reached her hand toward the massive mineral, a wave of electricity shocked her fingertips through her gauntlet and she jumped back. "You should know better, Aranea," Glaucu warned her.

Aranea flexed her fingers, still feeling the sting from the barrier's shock in her nerves. "I see what you mean. The man must've lost his life before he could even cut through the first barrier."

"And now you understand why the only option left is-"

Her eyes widened. "You're not serious!" she interrupted him.

"I've already sent word to General Interitio. He's been trying for five years to retrieve her, anyway."

"Yes, but only for her elixir crafting skills. And even if she had any control over magic-casting, she's been dubbed a sorceress!"

"She's the only hope we have of breaking through the barrier," Glaucu explained. "Verstael said there's hope of her learning to control her abilities. The results from the first stage of the experiment have proven quite interesting, from what I've heard."

"Interesting?" Aranea leaned her back on the archway of the hall, being careful to avoid the barrier. They both seemed to ignore or forget about the presence of the escorting soldier, who began to shudder at the mention of the woman in question.

Glaucu turned around and began to march away from the crystal, knowing it was useless for them to hang around any longer. "You don't know all the details of the experiment, but the mutants that weren't killed were rounded up and brought to Verstael for testing. Most of them failed the experiment, but she survived. And when I say there was an interesting result, I'm talking about the sorceress' mind."

"I still don't understand."
"You'll have to see for yourself, Aranea." They stopped in front of the lift. "When you return to Nifelheim, deliver a message for me. Tell His Imperial Majesty and General Interitio that having Lamia as a mere elixir craftsman wouldn't be beneficial for our nation. She's better suited using her magic in our favor." Aranea opened her mouth to ask how he planned on accomplishing that, but the elevator door opened before she could voice her question. "Before I divulge anything else, we must retrieve her." He motioned for the escorting soldier to press the button to bring them to the ground level again.

Before the doors opened on the ground floor, Aranea's reflection met Glaucia's helmet as she turned to face him. "Has our little sparrow found out her whereabouts yet?"

As usual, sleep only stayed with Nebula for a few hours. She awoke at seven in the morning and rolled out of her cot, moving slow to keep the creaking to a minimum. Her headache hadn't changed at all, still ringing in her ears, and even while sleeping she couldn't completely rest. It left her grouchy with bags under her eyes, and she immediately craved coffee to soothe the nerves aching under her scalp. Nebula pulled her boots on and left the room, keeping her footsteps light as she walked down the stairs and headed for the kitchen. She turned around the corner and reached for the light switch, where she felt skin instead of plastic, and retracted her hand. "Oh," a voice called, and the person who'd touched her came around the corner to investigate the other party. "My apologies. I didn't think anyone else would be awake."

"You're the..." Nebula's sentence died and she readied herself to bow before Luna stopped her.

"Please, that's not necessary. I hate it almost as much as Noctis does." The smell of coffee suddenly hit the doctor and drew her gaze to the fresh pot sitting on the counter. "Do you want some? I just made it a few minutes ago."

"That would be great, thank you." Nebula took a seat on a stool next to the island in the middle of the kitchen and Luna poured a mug of coffee, handing it to her. The princess stood adjacent to the doctor, blowing a wisp of steam away from her cup, and stared down at her drink.

"I recognize your voice. You're the one I spoke with over the phone, right?"

Nebula nodded. "Yes." It dawned on her that they never shared a formal introduction, and hesitantly, she offered her hand to the Princess. "I'm Nebula. No one really calls me by my title unless it's a business meeting."

Luna took Nebula's hand and shook it. "In that case, I insist that you call me Luna. My title is mostly used in the same cases as yours."

"What about Lady Oracle?" Luna cringed at the title, and her reaction surprised Nebula to the point of soft laughter. "Alright, I get it. Too formal for your taste." Her laughter quieted as she studied the Princess' features, and noticed the heavy circles that had formed under her eyes. She knew those circles all too well, and wondered if the oracle had been getting any sleep in the mess they were stuck in. "...Luna? Have you been sleeping at all?"

Luna's grin fell into a line. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only because I can spot anything from lack of sleep to a life-threatening condition." Nebula set her mug on the counter. "I know we're in a stressful situation right now, but you need to rest. And I don't mean cat naps like the one you had last night. I mean a full eight-hours. I'm sure your guardian has told you all this already."
"Yes. Gentiana's been worried about me too. We haven't had a real opportunity to rest since the invasion, and even after we finally made it here I couldn't stay still knowing Noctis was still out there..." Her gaze moved from her mug to the window on the other side of the room, watching a squirrel fiddle with an acorn as it sat atop a thick branch. Nebula couldn't imagine what she'd been through, even with all the stress written on her face, and Luna caught on quick. "I take it you don't know much about what happened."

Nebula grabbed the nearby pitcher of milk and poured some into her coffee. "Ignis explained some of the events to me. I know it was supposed to be a treaty signing to ease tensions between Lucis and Nifelheim...unfortunately for His Grace, it didn't turn out how he hoped it would."

"I'm glad he spared you from the gruesome details. You don't want to know what General Glauca did in the palace." The name sent chills down Nebula's spine. She knew of the man's reputation in Nifelheim, especially how he immediately had everything cleaned as if whatever hellish act he'd committed never took place. She'd had the 'honor' of seeing him once in her life, and as rumors told, almost no one knew what he really looked like underneath all that armor. "But let's not discuss something so grim right now. We should focus on moving on from this tragedy."

"Right." Nebula stirred a pack of sugar into her coffee. "Would it be rude of me to ask you what Tenebrae is like? I've never been there before."

"Really?" Surprise danced in the oracle's eyes. "Well, though it's a Nifeli territory, Tenebrae is said to be 'the land closest to the heart of Eos'. A lot of oracles from the past have originated from there, so it's believed that it was the first nation created by the Archaeans. It's the power of the oracles that Nifeheim wanted, so they seized full control of our country ninety years ago."

Hearing the words from Luna's mouth, compared to everything she learned as a child, made the doctor chuckle, and her laughter ceased Luna in the middle of her explanation. "I'm sorry," Nebula apologized, "it just amuses me how deep the lies go with everything Nifelheim fed us in our school days. Our professors taught us that Tenebrae was in the midst of a century-long war with Lucis - our sworn enemies - and our involvement and 'taking over' of Tenebrae was Nifelheim's way of saving Tenebrae from complete annihilation."

Luna expected as much. Those Nifeli rulers always held the reputation of hiding the truth and being bad eggs. "Well as you've known for a while now, I'm sure," she said again, "those are all lies. Your former emperor's a tyrant."

"Good thing I left," Nebula replied while taking another long sip of her coffee. "But I have to say, it was a hell of a job getting out."

"Can I ask you about that?" Luna didn't want to cross any boundaries the doctor would be uncomfortable with. At the mention of her escape from Nifelheim, Nebula's eyes dropped to the floor. "I'm sorry. I-"

"No, don't. I'm alright. Just..." Her gaze jumped to the reflection in her coffee mug. Fives years didn't erase the struggle she faced when she made her attempt to leave the totalitarian nation. "Getting out of Nifelheim was difficult. You can only bring with you what you can carry on your back and in both arms; sometimes it's even less. The border is riddled with security - hundreds of cameras and soldiers guarding almost eleven kilometers of dirt and rocks, and even that area is lined with traps. The guards walk along a wall ten-and-a-half meters high as if they're armed for war. Nobody is allowed in or out without a travel permit, and if you dare to attempt an escape from the empire, you're either shot and killed, or imprisoned by the empire for Etro know how long." She chuckled, rolling her eyes. "They'll force you to accept their 'greatness', whether you like it or not."
"When I escaped, I followed a tunnel system used by the kids to play and stay out past curfew for a bit. It led to a spot close to the border. Fortunately there are a lot of trees in that area, but there's also a horde of soldiers with guns and dogs. Somehow the dogs missed me, but what triggered the alarm was my cutting through the fence. I'm sure I got shot a few times while running through a drain pipe and into the uninhabited zone. Worse, I knew they'd be tracking my every move with the device under my skin." Nebula laid her hand on the back of her neck, feeling the large metal disc still embedded and attached to her, the one permanent reminder of where she once lived. "I just took a fork and knife and went at it until I was sure its wires were destroyed." Her fingers moved, feeling the massive scar she'd given herself. "Hurt like hell and had me nearly immobilized for a few hours, but by then I was a long way from the Nifeli border. I don't remember when exactly I ended up in Duscae, but I found an old house and fixed it up, and have been there ever since."

By the end of the story Luna had lost all interest in her drink and was captured by the doctor's account. It was her first time hearing about life in the empire from someone who escaped and survived to tell the tale. "I'm glad that there are good Nifeli like you, Nebula," Luna told her. "Noctis' father might not be alive right now without your help."

It was the sixth time since her arrival that she'd been praised in that way. "It wasn't me. It was the medicine."

"But who crafted the elixirs? And who made the antidote after identifying the poison no one could?" Her argument died at the questioning. "Once this is all over and Lucis is whole again, I wouldn't be surprised if Noctis chose to make you part of his court."

Nebula immediately shook her head. "Oh, no, I couldn't. I..." She got up from her stool. "I've never been so close to... I don't think it would work out."

"Why not?"

"Cor said it himself. Noctis and I are from two different walks of life." The doctor walked to the window and stared out at a tree. "And even if he and I were on the same level, I shouldn't be involved after we're done here. Having a Nifeli in the court would be...inappropriate."

Luna got up and joined her by the window, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Noctis doesn't care about heritage. What matters to him is what's in someone's heart." She met the doctor's gaze. "If where someone came from mattered to him at all, Prompto wouldn't be allowed anywhere near Noctis."

Nebula raised an eyebrow. "Prompto?"

"He's a Nifeli refugee too. Didn't you know?" She watched shock form on Nebula's face as she stepped back, shaking her head. At first Luna thought she'd revealed something she wasn't meant to; Prompto's heritage was something only known to Noctis, his friends, Cor, and King Regis. Not even the Kingsglaive had knowledge on Prompto's true origins, and if someone ever asked why he had a gun, the matter was immediately dropped by His Majesty. But as a smile crept onto Nebula's face and she leaned on the window frame for support, Luna realized that her reaction was out of relief.

"Prompto's..." She couldn't say it, but the truth lifted a weight from her shoulders. "I can't believe it. I never thought another one of us would've made it out alive. Almost everyone who tries leaving is killed, and anyone who does manage to escape alive is too scared to speak of it." She turned her attention back to Luna. "How did he survive his escape?" She had more questions, but she'd save them for Prompto when it came time to question him.

Luna shook her head. "He doesn't talk about it much. Too many bad memories." Her hand dropped
to Nebula's as it rested on the window frame. "But I'm sure he'll open up to you if you ask. He might've been scared to say anything in the beginning."

"I'd be, too." Nebula closed her eyes, the grin still on her face. An image of Noctis and his friends appeared in her mind, Prompto standing to his immediate right. He wore the same freckled grin he always had, his cheeks raising slightly and causing his eyes to squint. The more she stared at him in her imagination, though, the more Nebula got a sense of familiarity from the face staring back at her, like she'd seen him somewhere before meeting him in Duscae.

Noctis hated meetings. If he had to pile everything he hated on a 'Top 10' list, meetings would be tied with vegetables for second place. Only Nifelheim stood at the top of the list, and once they were out of the way, he could debate whether he despised vegetables more than meetings or vice versa. He was elated to have Ignis by his side: making sure no threads were out of place on his suit - which Ignis magically made him despise less than usual; keeping his nerves calm as they waited to sit down with President Speculo by making him tea that would soothe his mind; and even having a plan on what to say and where to sit once they made it into the conference hall. The meeting's attendees were to consist of Prince Noctis and his court, the President, Accordo's secretaries of defense, their top general and advisement team, Princess Fleuret and Gentiana as ambassadors for Tenebrae, and an ambassador from Solheim who was informed of His Majesty's whereabouts and summoned to help prepare plans for the Lucians' transport. An interpreter was present from Solheim as well to translate everything, and an Accordian records keeper was on hand to write down every word of the conversation to keep for future reference.

With so many people present and the meeting a secret from Nifelheim, security was heightened more than twice over. Gladiolus had been running around the Presidential Palace since eight in the morning - in uniform, as much as he despised wearing it - communicating with the President's secret security to ensure that only those part of the meeting were allowed into the conference hall. Even palace staff had to gain clearance from Gladio and the head of the secret guard before gaining entry into the hall to bring refreshments. The young Amicitia insisted that at least the younger Kingsglaive members be allowed as part of the security detail, which Cor later approved. They were to stand guard at both ends of the long hallway leading to the conference hall, and tell Gladio when a servant was approaching.

Everything moved smoothly when the attendees entered the conference room, servants and guards saluting and bowing those who came to sit down for the meeting. Gladiolus gave Noctis a reassuring pat on the shoulder when he and Ignis came to the double doors. "Just remember to breathe," he said to the Prince. "And if you get lost, Iggy's there to take care of you."

"Nice to see I have two moms," the Prince commented with a smirk, which quickly turned down when he walked inside. At least the shorter meeting from the night before had been a sort of practice for him, but even then the advisor had needed to remind him to speak slower and remain calm. He focused on each of the faces in the room, and when his eyes landed on that of the Accordian President, he couldn't help feeling a little annoyed. "Mr. President."

"Ah, Your Highness." Frons Speculo took Noctis' hand in his to greet him. "I'm delighted to see you in good health. Tell me, how is your father doing now that the cargo has arrived?"

"Much better. Thank you for asking." After shaking hands with the rest of the attendees, everyone sat down in their seats. Noctis' designated chair was near the head of the table, adjacent to the President and with Ignis to his left. A servant came around and took orders of refreshments for everyone. Noctis allowed Ignis to order for him, trusting the tactician's choices to keep him relaxed during what he was sure would be a long meeting.
The drinks and snacks were served, and when the large double doors of the conference hall closed, the President stood up to get everyone's attention. "Thank you for coming everyone. Your Highnesses, royal courts of Lucis and Tenebrae, Ambassador Freina of Solheim, Accordian secretaries of Defense, esteemed guests. This isn't a normal conference, as I'm sure all in the room are aware. Our world is trapped in trying times, in both war and anomalies. Daylight lasts for shorter periods of time despite summer's approach. Lucis has suffered a major blow thanks to Nifelheim, and it's been brought to my attention that Nifeli forces may be attacking the crystal itself." Frons cleared his throat. "Your Highness, Prince Noctis, I understand that your court has evaluated the situation at hand."

All eyes fell on Noctis. The Prince pushed his chair out and stood up as the President sat down again, his hands folded on top of the table. Noctis cleared his throat before he began. "With the magic barrier put in place around the crystal, it's nearly impossible to remove it from its chamber without disabling the barrier first. And Nifelheim is known for not possessing the gene for magic in their blood; those few people who do are dubbed 'mutants' by the emperor and are killed off. The Lucian people wouldn't submit to the will of Nifelheim, so I'm positive the crystal is still there." He paused and looked to Ignis, who gestured for him to take a breath and continue. "We need to take back Insomnia so we can reclaim the crystal. But Lucis alone doesn't have the numbers as we stand, which is why our nation asks for the assistance of Accordo."

"I assume the assistance Lucis asks for is of the military type," one of the defense secretaries intervened.

Before Noctis could feel his nerves start their attack, Cor stepped up to the plate. "When you put it so bluntly, yes, that is the kind of help we need. Our numbers right now are small, and we need as many abled bodies as possible to ensure recapturing Insomnia and the crystal goes in our favor."

"And what would Accordo gain in the fight?" asked the President, and the Lucian party fell silent. It was a question they'd known would come up, but hoped to Etro President Speculo wouldn't ask. They'd practiced just in case it came up, but it still took them by surprise. Noctis bit his lower lip, the memorized words Ignis had him recite slipping from his mind. To Lucis, this was a life-or-death fight, and the country needed all the allies it could get. But to Accordo, whether the nation dealt with Lucis or Nifelheim, it was always business, about what they could get out of the deal. They were in it for the money or notoriety, not for the safety of potential allies. It was the reason Noctis despised President Speculo, and now here he was, trying to plead his case to the very man and government leader who still insisted on trading with Nifelheim.

To the Prince's relief, Luna took the floor. "What you would gain from helping us, Mr. President, is the knowledge that you've kept our world safe from the wrath of Emperor Aldercapt. After that, we could renegotiate trade agreements-"

"Trade agreements undergoing a minor edit are hardly a favorable gain, Your Highness," another defense secretary told her. The President got out of his chair again and reached for a small remote, activating a pull-down screen and turning on a hanging projector. A map of the world came onto the screen. "Look at our world. We live in a vast landscape with plenty of resources, most of which are provided by the Archaeans whom roam these lands." The screen was switched to the next picture, which was a photo of a young Luna making her way to a prayer altar in Tenebrae. The ceremony had been broadcast live around the world after she was declared Oracle at the age of ten. "If we could have access to communication with the Archaeans, we might consider offering some of our army to help you."

Luna exchanged a long glance with Gentiana, as if they were sharing a silent conversation. After a minute the Princess faced the President again. "Why would you want access to my gift?"
Frons crossed his legs and folded his hands atop his knee. "That's none of your concern, Your Highness."

"It is if your intentions are malice."

The President leaned close to his advisor and listened as the man whispered to him. He nodded at the suggestion and returned his attention to Luna. "Alright, we can compromise. Is it possible for you to take one of our own under your wing and train them to become an Oracle?"

"Well..." She wasn't exactly sure. She turned to Gentiana again and shared another silent conversation with her. To anyone unaware of her Oracle status, it would look as if Luna and Gentiana were captured in an intense staring contest. But all the higher-ups in the world knew the power of the Oracle, and even fewer knew how she and Gentiana spoke with one another without their words. Becoming an Oracle usually took many years of hard work and dedication, and if the trainee got lucky, their work would be recognized by the Archaeans. In Luna's case, she was born with the gift, and it was discovered when she was a child. "If I can be honest, I can't guarantee the birth of an Oracle. I can only guide the one who follows me and hope their work is noticed by the Archaeans. But Gentiana says there's a big chance for success, as long as the chosen student harbors no evil in their heart."

"That can be ensured. We already have a list of candidates for you to meet with." President Speculo motioned for one of his men to pass a folder to Luna and Gentiana. "We can pick a suitable time for you to meet them all in the next few days. Now..." Frons cleared his throat. "I believe we should discuss your stay in Altissia, Your Highnesses. Now that His Grace has finally begun to heal, you won't need to hide out anymore. Have you started making plans on your departure?"

He wanted them gone as soon as possible. Ignis beckoned for the laser pointer and used the red light to make a line from Insomnia around the western end of Lucis. "While we gather an army capable of seizing full control of Insomnia, we'll be residing with the King and Queen of Solheim until Lucis is under our complete control once more." Ignis gestured his hand to the Solhemnian ambassador, who listened as her translator made what was being said clear. "His and Her Majesty have also agreed to help us retake Insomnia. We're not sure on a timeline for our departure yet; we have to consult the doctors and make sure His Majesty is in good enough health to travel such a long distance. We are talking about traveling nearly halfway around the world, after all." Ambassador Freina said something to her translator, to which Ignis nodded, and he replied in the Solhemnian tongue.

"Solheim is more than happy to accommodate His Majesty, King Regis," the translator said to President Speculo. "We will be keeping in touch with Lord Scientia and Sir Virtus to make sure His Majesty is well enough to endure the trip to Solheim. His and Her Majesty, King and Queen Valderde, would like to offer you a thank-you gift for being so kind and offering your country as a safe haven, President Speculo." The translator passed a silver box across the table to the President, who opened it and smiled at the sight of a medal resting on a bed of velvet and padding. "This medal represents one of our highest honors in Solheim, only given to those who open their hearts and show true kindness and selflessness in times of danger."

"The honor is very much appreciated." Noctis did his best to avoid rolling his eyes at the President's so-called 'gesture of kindness'. He'd known for weeks that the Prince of Lucis would be there with his friends at some point before his wedding, and Noctis still questioned why, despite the agreements broken off between the two nations, President Speculo allowed his father and his entourage into his borders, knowing Iedolas Alder capt could find out at any time. The Accordian President was a man he still couldn't understand. "Well now that all the formalities are out of the way, I'd like to invite you all to stay for lunch. Chef Polus has prepared a lovely meal for us, and I couldn't possibly allow it to go to waste." As much as he wanted to pass on the offer, Noctis and Astrum knew it was in the best
interest of Lucis for them to stay and listen to the President prattle on about whatever he chose to talk about next. As everyone stood and were led down the hallway to the dining room, Frons walked alongside Noctis and got his attention. "Your Highness, can we talk for a second?"

"Sure." Noctis had no idea what the President could want now after literally asking when they'd be leaving - practically hinting that he thought of them as nothing more than moochers.

Frons and Noctis fell to the back of the pack as they slowed their pace. "I know these last few weeks haven't been the best for you and your people, and I'm very sorry to hear that. No matter what business relations Accordo may have with Nifelheim, I want you to know that we care deeply for the well-being of the Lucian people. Lucis is one of our closest allies, and we could never see our relationship falling apart." Allies. Yeah, maybe, Noctis thought, if term were used as loosely as it could be. "I'd like to show my appreciation for your safety and presence here. I've organized a gala, to honor the lives of the Lucian royal court."

"That's not necessary, sir-"

"I insist. I'm sure you could use one night of relaxation and excitement after all this turmoil, right?" For once he wasn't wrong. The Lucian royals and their court hadn't had a moment's peace in weeks as they jumped from country to country in search of rest and temporary shelter. A night to just forget about everything couldn't hurt.

Rubbing his nose, Noctis nodded at the offer. "Okay. Alright, we'll go."

"Splendid!" Frons clapped his hands together. "Now, I imagine you and your party must be tired, so why don't you use tomorrow to relax. And don't hesitate to let me know if you'd like to see some sights. You haven't vacationed in a while, yes?" And there went the President, lost in his own words as Noctis struggled a bit to keep up as the topic was changed every five seconds. Ignis noticed the Prince falling behind and waited for him to catch up, hearing parts of the conversation as the two drew closer.

When the President walked ahead and Gladiolus caught up to follow them to the dining room, he was filled in on the situation. "Really? A party at a time like this?"

"I don't think it's a good idea, either," Ignis said, "but we should at least humor him after he's agreed to offer us some help."

"Yeah, only after getting Luna to agree to train a new Oracle for them." Free from the judgement of the Accordians, Noctis rolled his eyes. "Wait 'til Prompto hears about this."
Prompto never really liked sitting still. He was used to it when driving for long distances in the Regalia, but when it came to being stuck in a large house, he wasn't interested. It was especially pain-staking when Noctis wasn't around. Meetings always meant he'd be gone for a few hours, and Gladio and Ignis would always be with him, leaving the gunner to fend for himself since he held no 'official' place in the government. Watching Nebula practice magic in the backyard with Crowe was entertaining, until she had to stop and check on the King. She hadn't asked for Prompto's help since they got to the safe house, and he understood why. There were so many doctors and nurses on hand to help her, each with much more experience than him. The only other things he could do were photograph wildlife outside - which he decided against to keep their location hidden - and find a book to read in the library, which he settled on after crossing out all other options. He went downstairs to the library and searched through the books, surprised at the vast amount available, and picked one out at random. As he settled into one of the armchairs and propped his feet up on the foot rest, the door to the library opened and Nebula walked in, looking even more exhausted than the night before. "Hey."

"Hey. How's the King doing?"

"Good. He's still asleep, but he should be awake by the time Noctis gets back." There was a sort of distance in her voice that Prompto picked up on. "What are you reading?"

He shuffled the book between his hands. "Oh, this? Just picked it at random. Haven't started reading it yet." Scanning the cover of the book, his body tensed at the title. "'History of the Empire of Nifelheim... Oh." His eyes dropped.

It was too perfect. Nebula fell into the nearest chair and huffed, her fingers twiddling on top of her knees. "Prompto..." She wanted to hear it from his mouth, and the fact that he hadn't said anything to her from the beginning gave her an uncomfortable vibe. "Why didn't you tell me?" As his mouth opened to say something her irritation and exhaustion got the better of her. Her hands clenched tight and she cut him off. "You're a refugee! You're from Nifelheim, just like me, and you didn't tell me!"

Her annoyance boiled over what she could handle and she shot out of her chair, pinching between her brows. "I told you the night we met, Prompto. I divulged my secret to you, and you didn't say anything. I had to hear the truth from Luna. Why?" At that point she was pacing in front of him, her hands waving in the air as she tried to calm herself and make sense of everything.

Prompto spotted tears welling in the corners of her eyes, either from anger or sadness, or a combination of the two. He got out of his chair and walked over to her, holding her shoulders in his hands. "I'm sorry," he quickly apologized. "You're right. I should've said something earlier."

"Then why didn't you?" Nebula hugged herself and stared directly at him.
Good question, he told himself. Not once had it crossed his mind to tell Nebula where he was really from, even when they engaged in battle with the enemy...even when he heard the way Cor was treating her. He'd received similar treatment from the marshal shortly after he was rescued, but as the years rolled on, he was regarded as an equal to Gladiolus and Ignis, and his heritage was quickly forgotten. But the way Cor glared at Nebula - and the injuries the others saw on her after her conversations with the marshal - were far worse than how he used to be spoken to, "When I think about when I used to live in Nifelheim," he started, "I wasn't from the best class. My family was in the lower class, which you know Aldercapt has no regard for. Our neighborhood was a dump; there'd be times when we didn't have heat or running water in our apartment. Escaping was hard. I was twelve, and I didn't take the safer route through the drainage pipe, like I should have." He pulled his shirt halfway up his torso and pointed to a circular scar. "A bullet went into my back and came out here. I don't know how I survived that. Next thing I knew, I was waking up in a hospital in Insomnia." A pained smile crept onto his face. For the first time since they first met, Nebula saw herself when she met Prompto's eyes: the fear, the regret, the self-pity. His experience was far worse than his, she realized. Luna hadn't minced words when she said Prompto didn't like talking about his past.

Nebula felt her anger crumble. "Oh, Prompto." She pulled the gunner into a tight embrace, laying her chin in the crook of his neck. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"You did, too."

"Not as awful as your experience. If I'd known the hell you had to endure just to escape..." Her words trailed off as she felt his hands lay on her back, reciprocating the hug. "And you were so much younger than I was. You just wanted to get out of there."

She couldn't see his face, but the shakiness in his voice told her everything. "Yeah..."

"I'm sure you would've told me when you were ready," she continued, shaking her head. "I should've remembered how painful it is to talk about. I'm sorry I blew up on you like that. I was out of line." Nebula loosened the hug and held him out at arm's length, watching the pain lift from his expression. "Did the Imperial Forces try tracking you down?"

Prompto rubbed his nose. "Yeah. The last thing I remember is a caravan following me across the border before I got shot. My body must've gone on auto-pilot after that."

Nebula's hand crept onto his shoulder, and when it drifted further up to his neck, he tensed. "The tracker, Prompto... What happened to it?" His eyes widened when he realized what she was talking about. "You know just as well as I do that it can't be removed without causing serious harm to the one it's embedded in. I don't feel it in you."

His hand rested on top of hers. "At some point, after I was brought to the hospital in Insomnia, one of the doctors managed to take it out. I don't know how they did it, but they were able to separate the prongs and wires from my muscle before it could kill me." Nebula took a step back, her own eyes widening as she imagined the skin at the back of his neck with a flat lump.

"...It's possible to take it out?"

"Seems like it. Otherwise I wouldn't be standing here, talking to you." As her hand fell, his trailed up her arm and landed on the back of her neck, right below her hairline. He felt the large, warped scar under his fingertips, and his eyebrows furrowed. "I see you disabled yours."

She nodded. "It was the only option I had while I was on the run. Wasn't exactly the most glamorous choice, but it worked. Just wished I'd done it sooner than I had." Nebula smiled and met his gaze.
She'd never thought she'd meet another Nifeli refugee alive outside the border, and to know that someone Noctis deeply trusted - the person standing right in front of her - was the same as her, made her feel a little better about the possibility of being a part of the Prince's circle. "Now that I think really hard about it, I feel like I've seen you somewhere in Nifelheim before either of us escaped."

"Really?" he asked, walking with her to a nearby couch. "And what makes you think that? Nifelheim is full of blonds."

"True, but not a lot of people have so many freckles like you do."

When Noctis and the rest of Lucian/Tenebraen group returned from the meeting, the Prince couldn't wait to tell Prompto about what the President had in store for them. "Should've seen this coming." Prompto scoffed. "I told ya, Noct, these Accordians live to party."

"Agreeing was the right thing to do," Ignis added.

Gladiolus snorted. "Better that you did, Noct. He looks like the type that gets easily offended." Ignis cleared his throat at the statement to disregard Gladio's bluntness, though he'd never admit to agreeing with the bodyguard's opinion.

"Glad one of us finally said it."

"Regardless of what you think, Your Highness," Drautos interrupted the young monarch, "please make sure to keep your opinion under wraps outside of the safe house. Gaining assistance from President Speculo is already like pulling teeth; we don't need to give him any incentive to forget about our agreement. This gala should be instead used to strengthen relations between Lucis and Accordo." The commander glanced down the opposite end of the hall. "Perhaps this is the opportunity we needed to get President Speculo to see what we do."

Astrum sat down on the nearest couch, rubbing the cast on his arm. "You may be right, Drautos. But we also can't listen to every ridiculous suggestion Frons gives. We're trying to regain our country, not drink ourselves silly."

"We'll just have to tango with him for a little while longer," Cor added, crossing his arms and huffing. "As annoying as he is, he's the one thing keeping us safe until His Majesty is well enough to travel to Solheim." His eyes went in the same direction as Drautos', where he knew everyone was staring. Though the King still hadn't woken up, there was still a lingering hope that he'd walk down the hall at any second, cane in hand, and inquire about their meeting with the Accordian President. It bothered them all to not see him up and about.

The tension in the hallway finally got to Noctis, who walked toward the staircase. "I'm going to check on my father," he told his friends as he ascended. Ignis headed for the kitchen, offering to put a kettle on and make tea for the returning party.

While everyone else settled down or returned to their assigned tasks, Noctis' footsteps slowed. Things had been too quiet on the fifth floor. The calm could be a good sign, he told himself, but there was still the anxiety that lingered deep within. Something could go wrong at any moment, or something could've already gone wrong, and the doctors were too scared to tell him anything. He turned around the corner and approached his father's suite, and stopped short when he saw the Accordian physicians wheeling equipment out of the large room. His mouth fell open and he approached one of them, obviously distraught. "What's going on?"

The head Accordian doctor stopped his understudies' actions and had them bow to the Prince. "Your
Highness. We're in the process of taking out all the life support machines, as they are no longer needed. His Grace's condition has improved so much that only the basic machines are needed to monitor him.

"You mean...he's out of danger?" Distress left him, making way for relief, and his frown was replaced with a smile. "Has he woken up yet?"

"No, Your Highness. He's still asleep."

As if on cue, the head Lucian doctor marched out of the King's suite, and immediately ran to Noctis when she spotted the Prince. "He's awake, Your Highness! The King is-"

He didn't wait for her to finish speaking. Noctis pushed past the doctor, shouting for her to inform his friends and the court immediately of the change in his father's condition. All he could see was the last sight of his father in his mind: the frail man's body in Cor's arms, blood dripping from his wounds, his heartbeat slowing to nothing... When he entered the room and ran to his father's bedside, the horrifying image was replaced with the sight of the King of Lucis sitting up in his bed, his head supported by pillows and his arm in a sling. A coat was draped over his shoulders by one of the nurses who kept checking the monarch's vital signs, and gave orders to send for Dr. Ardere. "Dad..." The Prince sank to his knees at the foot of the bed, holding onto the end board for dear life, water streaming from his eyes. "You... I thought..." He didn't notice anyone else come in, despite the loud ensemble of footsteps and voices that cluttered the room. The crowd drew closer to the King, too close for comfort for Noctis, whose knuckles went white when his grip tightened on the bed frame. Cor caught on to Noctis' distress as quickly as Ignis had and both men stepped forward, motioning his arms for everyone to move back. "Give him some space," the elder ordered. "He's only just woken up."

"Let me pass." Much to Cor's brief annoyance Nebula squirmed through the crowd and pushed her way into the room, and stopped in her tracks when she saw the King awake. Finally getting some strength back in his legs, she saw Noctis run to his father and fall into the elder ruler's arms, reverting back to the times in his childhood when he found himself scared of the outside world or the creatures of the night. Noctis wept into his father's chest, and aside from Nebula, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Everyone lining the perimeter of the room dropped to a knee and bowed to the King of Lucis, relief washing over them now that they knew he was alive. Regis pat his son's hair with his good hand, letting Noctis cry every sorrow and loss of hope he felt in the last three weeks. The way he held Noctis, the evidence of the familial bond they shared, caused a lump to form in Nebula's throat that she could barely choke down.

Still caressing his son, Regis finally looked upon the people who worked tirelessly to get him and his son to safety. His Glaive knelt to the right, his court to the left, and in the middle of them stood the young grey-eyed woman whom he'd only heard of once ten months ago. His eyes met hers and quickly made her feel uncomfortable, which he could tell when she averted her gaze. Cor gave a quick knock to the side of her leg to remind her to kneel before the King, and when she was halfway to the floor with her head already bowed, she heard the King's voice for the first time. "Nebula Ardere." The way he said her name felt both safe and threatening. "The young Duscaen doctor, originating from Nifelheim, center of the Shadow Agreement." He spoke with much command in his injured state, carrying his head high like any true king would. "Rise, my dear." Nebula did as he asked and straightened her posture, but fear kept her from meeting his gaze again, and she bit her bottom lip. "When I heard about you, I was told of a woman who bravely faced the gates of Hell to find freedom and help those around her. So why is it that now, after seeing me battered and broken and saving my life, are you unable to look me in the eye?"
She was making a bad first impression, she quickly realized. Nebula forced the lump in her throat and met Regis' glance, seeing the same stoic eyes Noctis gave her when they prepared for battle. "...Forgive me, Your Grace," she began. "I'm elated to see you awake and talking, as everyone else surely is. I've just never..." She couldn't find the right combination of words to say. "I've never had the honor of being in audience with a monarch. It's a little intimidating, if I may be honest."

"You have no need to be nervous. My son seems to have a great deal of trust in you." His hand lowered to Noctis' forearm and the Prince, finished letting out every suppressed emotion he'd held inside, stood beside the King. They stared at her, the uncomfortable vibe returning to her body, but she shook it off fast.

"If it's alright with you, Your Grace, I'd like to examine you. I want to make sure your wounds are healing properly."

Before his examination, Nebula suggested everyone get individual time with King Regis. She wanted the court and the Glaive to spend as much time with him as possible, stating that being surrounded by friends and loved ones helped the patient heal much faster. Nebula remained in the room, staying on the far side out of the way, in case Regis suddenly felt unwell. Despite his miraculous recovery from his injuries, King Regis still had some factors working against him. The crystal was more of a hindrance on his body than an allied healing factor. It relied heavily on his life force in order to keep its connection with him and all others who used magic. A lot of his energy went into sustaining the crystal, leaving his body in a state at least twenty years his senior. A lingering leg injury left him unable to move at more than a walking speed, and though he was able to fight and fend off the Imperial Forces for as long as he had, the combination of the factors left the ruler tired and unable to carry on a war with just his strength alone. Nebula knew a threat could hit them at any time, despite the President's promise of safety. They were still in the middle of a war, whether they wanted to remember it or not, so any time Regis could get with his loved ones and trusted companions was precious.

Noctis, his friends and Cor were the first to have time alone with the King. Nebula stayed at a far off table, working out plans to create more antidotes from the poison she'd extracted, and half-listened to their conversation, keeping an ear out for any signs of distress. The young royal and his friends told Regis all about their journey from the second they escaped Insomnia, to their meeting with the country doctor, not sparing any details all the way up to their arrival in Accordo. Nebula gave the okay for the King to have some food, though she kept his diet strictly liquid-based until he could handle solid food again. One of the nurses served him a light soup, which Noctis fed to his father, despite the monarch's reassurance that he could feed himself. Prompto showed Regis the photos he'd taken along the way from Lucis to Altissia, some which made the elder Caelum chuckle, much to Noctis' delight. Though he knew keeping the situation light was the best thing for the King's health, Cor knew they couldn't dawdle for long, and brought the King up to speed on their ordeal. He informed Regis of the meeting he attended with President Speculo, saying that though terms were discussed, nothing was truly set in stone yet, and the final details would be decided after the gala in a couple of days. Regis nodded at the President's gesture, one he suspected may come from such a peculiar man, and was glad to at least have the nation of Accordo on their side - as it seemed for the moment.

The Kingsglaive and the royal court of Lucis shared an audience with the King after Noctis - with some hesitation - left his father's chambers for lunch. As the Glaive filed into the room, Gladiolus ran back for Nebula and invited her downstairs for some food. She was as reluctant as the Prince to leave Regis' side, wanting to be there if something went wrong. The head Lucian doctor assured her that she'd be called back if that came to be, and as much as she still insisted on staying, the look Commander Drautos gave her when she pleaded told her this was a matter she couldn't be a part of,
even if she were merely sitting and listening in the background. They were probably going to discuss the details of reclaiming Insomnia and the crystal - classified things which an outsider couldn't know. She got the hint and dismissed herself from the room, bowing to Regis before she left him with his personal guard, and headed for the stairs.

She was the last one to make it to the kitchen, and saw Prompto putting together ingredients for a sandwich on the counter on the right. Luna sat next to Ignis and Gladiolus, and Noctis stood beside the far end of the island they sat around, a smile on his face for the first time since they made it to the safe house. Luna was the first to see Nebula walk into the kitchen and gestured to the empty stool next to her. "We saved you a sandwich before Prompto sniffed 'em out," Gladio commented.

"You guys seem to think I just live for food," the blond said back to the bodyguard, and five pairs of eyes met his. "What?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?" Noctis asked. "Did you even look at the height of your sandwich? You used almost all the ham!"

"Honestly, Prompto," Ignis added as he wiped his face with a napkin, "I thought you would've learned by now. You'll never be able to bite through the entire thing. It's too thick."

Prompto raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really? Dare me to try it?"

Nebula nearly choked on her own sandwich. "Etro, please, no. I don't need another patient on my hands right now." She laughed a little, but the mere mention of King Regis made a small ball of worry expand in her mind. Luna noticed the anxiety growing in her expression and laid her hand on top of the doctor's. "Sorry. I know he'll be fine. I'm just worried about him handling the crystal's power. In the state he's in, with it draining his life force-"

"He'll pull through," Noctis interrupted her, setting his food on his plate. "I know the crystal seems like a scary thing, but it's much more helpful than what you've seen. It's allowed Insomnia to be protected for as long as it was before the whole mess happened. The only reason it failed this once was because we allowed Iedolas into our borders." His frustration quickly took over his laid-back grin, and even as he did his best to remain calm, he couldn't hide the tension mounting in his clenched fist.

"I know he'll pull through, Noctis. I'm not saying he won't recover for this. I'm saying it'll take a long time for someone in his condition, and until then, he shouldn't use the crystal in any way." She saw the reluctance on everyone's faces. "Guys, I'm serious. He can't do anything until I determine he's fully healed. He's the King; I get it. But one more outburst from the crystal could be really bad for him, and if the only way to prevent that is by leaving it alone, it'll have to be done." Nebula pointed to Noctis. "That goes for you, too."

"What?"

"The Imperial Forces are just waiting for the next time you or your father use the crystal for something. We have to maintain a cover until we can figure out where it is and how we can get it back. I know you hate sitting back and doing nothing, but we're talking about your life being at stake."

He shot off of his stool. "My life has been at stake since the day I was born. I'm not going to stop fighting now just because the crystal is being experimented on or whatever they're doing to it. They started this fight; I'm ending it." Noctis pushed away from the counter and stormed out of the room. Ignis and Luna quickly followed after him, while Nebula groaned and held her head in her hands. She looked at Gladiolus and Prompto, hoping they'd say something to show their agreement with her
idea, but they remained silent and stared down at their plates.

"You both know I'm right. One sign of the crystal being used, and that could be it for them."

Gladiolus huffed. "It's not so simple. The crystal is more than a symbol of protection for Lucis. It's a literal part of Noct and the King, almost like another body part. It's not something they can just turn off. It'll still pump power into them, even if they don't do anything. No matter what it'll be active, monitoring their lives and working to fix any abnormalities for as long as they live. That's how it is when you're Lucian royalty."

Nebula shook her head. "They're just people. They need time to rest before they burst." She pushed her plate away from her, her appetite long gone. "I can only do so much for them. It's up to them to want to heal. And they can't do that if the crystal's stealing the very life from their bodies." She glanced from her plate to the men, hoping for some sort of answer to their predicament.

Prompto shifted in his seat. "Noct's not the kind of guy who enjoys watching others fight for him when he can be working alongside them. He hates being babied like that. Not even Iggy can get him to sit still for more than a couple of minutes." Nebula snorted and rolled her eyes. "He's very stubborn."

"Tell me about it." Nebula stood up and crossed her arms. She remembered the way he cried at his father's bedside, after seeing the King awake for the first time since the invasion of Insomnia. The way the family members clung to each other, never wanting to let go, stayed in her memory. "It doesn't have to be forever. I just want to give the King a chance to recover."

"The crystal is helping him-"

"The crystal is hurting him!" She couldn't help raising her voice. "Why can't any of you realize that?"

"We know what the crystal is doing to His Majesty." Everyone's attention fell to Cor, who entered the kitchen with a grim expression. "We're all aware of what's at stake, Miss Ardere, but there's no way around it. His Majesty knew the terms of the crystal's power when he ascended to the throne three decades ago, and he was still willing to put his life on the line to protect his kingdom. Using the crystal is part of being a Lucian royal; there's no way around it."

Nebula stared at them and raised her arms. "So that's it? We just let the crystal suck the life out of them?" She sucked her teeth and let out a sardonic chuckle. "I can't sit by and watch them wither away for the sake of a rock."

"The crystal is what protects Lucis," Gladiolus reminded her. "Without it, the country's doomed."

"There has to be a way around this..." Nebula bit her lower lip and began to pace the floor. "Is there any way to at least keep its use to a minimum?"

"That means no fighting for Noct. He won't like that." Prompto leaned forward on the granite counter.

"But it will minimize the risk of another reaction from the crystal. The Imperial Forces can only experiment on the crystal if they see it's in use." Cor rested his back on the kitchen wall. "The crystal emits a glow when it's being used, but it stays faint when its only job is to scan the body for abnormalities. So long as Noctis and His Majesty stay out of harm's way, they'll have a chance to heal, and the crystal's use will barely be traceable."

"I can deal with that," Nebula replied. "It's better for the King, anyway."
"Not to mention we're in Altissia," Prompto added. "The President doesn't want us in combat while we're here, anyway."

"So we stay in Accordo until His Majesty is well enough for the move, and when the time comes, we rely on the Glaive for our protection." Gladiolus looked at Cor. "Will you be fighting alongside your brother?"

Cor shook his head. "We've only been in battle side-by-side twice in our careers. My participation shouldn't even be a question."

"Too bad I'll have to miss that." Everyone's attention fell to Nebula again.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't go with you to Solheim," she started. "The people of Duscae need me as much as Lucis needs your King. I came this far to make sure he lived to see the next day, and that's been accomplished. I'll still be a part of your lives for as long as the Shadow Agreement is in motion, but once you're ready to depart... I'll have to..." Her gaze drifted away from Gladiolus and Prompto. At the same moment, Noctis returned to the kitchen with Luna and Ignis, much calmer than when he dashed away from the island counter. His and Nebula's eyes met, and both came to a silent, mutual understanding.

The Prince walked up to the doctor. "How long do I need to lay low?"

Gladiolus gave his friend a crooked smile. "Just until we get to Solheim. From there, it'll be Cor's call so you and His Majesty can maintain a low profile."

"Fair enough." He noticed the solemn look on Prompto's face, followed by the slight sad grin Nebula wore. "What did I miss?"

Before Nebula could speak up, Prompto changed the subject. "We were just thinking about spending some time in the city. Nebula's never had a tour of Altissia before." The air in the room became warmer at the mention of some leisure time, and smiles came across everyone's faces. "What do you say, Nebula? We'll give you the grand tour."

"That sounds lovely." She brushed some hair away from her face. "Tomorrow morning sound good? I'm exhausted from all the excitement today."
Ruled by Secrecy

Chapter Summary

In their final days of rest before their departure to Solheim, the Lucian royals and their court take some time to enjoy the sights and each other's company before diving headfirst into battle.

Chapter Notes

A very long chapter coming up (the longest yet). There will be a list of music to refer to for a certain point in the chapter, which will be listed on a note at the end of the chapter. Enjoy the Lucians' last moments of fun.

Also refer to the music list in the end notes for the chapter. Lots of music for this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To everyone's relief, King Regis was in good health. His pneumonia had completely vanished, his bones and wounds were healing well, and - to the shock of every Lucian in the safe house - even his leg, normally wrapped in a brace for a support, felt much better than it had in years. Nebula and the other doctors told him to remain in bed for at least one more day before trying to walk. His diet was increased to have pureed solid foods and thicker liquids to help him regain his strength, and the nurses were traded in for physical therapists to help him practice moving his legs again. To treat his asthma, Regis was given a prescription for inhalers containing special medicine made by Nebula herself, and the prescription was made to last for as long as he needed it. Nebula gave him a second, brief once-over the next morning before she and Noctis felt comfortable enough to leave him and see the sights of Altissia.

Once he was confirmed to be stable and the others in the safe house were checked over for any injuries, everyone changed into different clothes to help themselves blend in with the citizens, and Nebula left with the Prince and his entourage for a tour of the city. Luna and Gentiana caught up with them a short while after as an SUV pulled up the road. It stopped in the same area they were dropped off at, with an Altissian driver as their escort. Nebula attempted to bring her medical bag with her, though the Prince's friends reassured her she wouldn't need them, that it was as much her time to relax as it was theirs. Eventually Gladiolus took it from her and handed it back to Axis, who promised it would be safe in his hands until she returned home. She felt naked without the rounded leather straps hanging from her shoulder, but obliged to Gladio's request and didn't fuss over it. Nebula sat beside Luna and Gentiana in the second row, with Prompto, Ignis and Noctis behind them. The group of seven were given a list of attractions and sights to see, including a ride on the famous gondolas of the Fons Adolescentia River and a boat ride to the Sacri Lumine waterfall near the Presidential Palace. The mention of the waterfall made Nebula's eyes light up, which Prompto immediately saw, and they decided to see it first. Along with the list of sights was a second for places to eat and shop, which they looked over on the drive to Sacri Lumine. Luna's jaw dropped when she learned that Nebula had never been to Accordo before. "Altissia is so nice," she started. "You have to try the restaurant by the waterfall. They make the best pasta dishes in the whole city."
"Don't they usually require reservations a week ahead of time?" Noctis asked. "Because it gets packed with all the tourists who go to see the waterfall."

Prompto's face dropped. "Aw, why'd you have to jinx us, Noct?" He crossed his arms and huffed. "Now I won't get that big steak they serve."

"And you stuff all that meat where?" Nebula asked.

Gladio chuckled in the front. "You'd be surprised how he can stuff himself, Doc. He'd probably eat a village if the people were made of steak."

"Tch, you make it sound like I have no self-control."

Ignis adjusted his glasses. "You're the one who said it," he replied with a half-grin. His comment caught the blond off guard and made everyone in the car ignite into laughter. "So Sacri Lumine Waterfall first, and then what?"

Before Luna could speak up, she felt Noctis lean on the back of her seat. "I already know what someone's thinking."

"You say that as if I always suggest shopping," she commented. "...But since we're here, we could look through a few stores." The Princess wrapped her arm around Nebula's and pulled her closer. "What do you say, Nebula? I'm sure you'd like to see the height of Accordian fashion, no? And you can pick out a dress for the gala tomorrow evening."

"What gala?" Nebula asked, and immediately saw that everyone in the car was in on the topic of discussion. Noctis sank back into his seat and groaned.

"The President wants to throw us a fancy party at his estate. Says he's doing it to help us relax before we go." He blew his bangs away from his eyes. "I only agreed because he didn't give me much of a choice on it."

Ignis looked down at his watch aimlessly. "It's for the best, Highness. Let him spoil you while he's on our side."

"If I might make a suggestion," the driver said in the middle of their banter, "I recommend Lilium in Valle after shopping. There will be a performance tonight by a legendary opera singer for dinnertime, Serafina de Giglio. We can guarantee a table for your group."

"I'm surprised she's here," Noctis remarked, recognizing her name, then went on to explain himself to Nebula. "She's a Lucian singer, known all over the country for her voice. I'd heard she was returning from her world tour around the time of the invasion."

"Altissia was the last stop on her tour, Your Highness. She turned around when she heard of the incident and was granted asylum." Of course she was granted security, Noctis thought as he rolled his eyes. "Her performance will be at 8pm tonight."

Luna glanced out the window. "I don't mind waiting. Nebula?"

"If it means we can listen to Serafina, I can wait." Everyone agreed to push back their dining time for the opportunity, and shortly after they arrived at the port for the boat ride to the waterfall. The driver parked nearby the entrance to the port and got out after the group departed for the boat, pulling out his cigarette pack. As he shook out a cigarette, he couldn't help feeling a stare lingering on him, and found his feeling to be correct when he caught the doctor staring at him as if she'd caught a child with his hand in the cookie jar. Even from afar, her eyes told him it was a bad thing to do to his
body, and the driver was relieved when Prompto pulled her onto the waiting boat and said something to her, something he was sure would stop her from doing her job on her time off.

The waterfall tour director and her assistant handed out plastic ponchos to the passengers. "Welcome to the Sacri Lumine Waterfall tour," she began as the boat left port. Luna and Nebula took a spot against the wall, Prompto leaned on the railing, and the others stood between them, keeping an eye on each other in the fairly-sized crowd. "The waterfall is the oldest in all of Accordo, and the country was built around it and the five other waterfalls that now line our borders. The Sacri Lumine got its name from our first President, Riccardo Ferrum Anacleto, after he saw how brightly the water shone in the sun at its highest point in the day." She pointed to the waterfall, still pretty far off. "It's said in legend that the six waterfalls were carved by the Archaeans Titan and Leviathan, and were cut from the rock to keep their warring families from fighting any longer. The story goes that Titan and Leviathan knew the survival of their loved ones mattered more than their lives together as one, and gave up their one chance at a life together in order to save not only their families, but the world from the destruction the fighting brought about. Though Titan left these lands long ago, it's thought that Leviathan still lives in the waters surrounding Accordo and watches over our people from the depths of her home." The tour guide continued on with her stories, telling the tourists facts about how much water spilled over the fall's edge each day, and how the economy thrived from using the waterfalls to create power and feed the plants in the country's farms. From the corner of her eye, Nebula noticed Gentiana walk over to the railing and stand beside Prompto, her eyes closed as she drew in a deep breath. She stayed that way for longer than the doctor felt was appropriate, and she leaned over to Luna and whispered in the Princess' ear.

"Is Gentiana alright? She looks a little seasick."

"She's fine," Luna reassured her. "Gentiana has a special connection with the waters of Accordo. It's her first time home in a while."

"Really?" Nebula watched the Princess' guardian, seeing the look of nausea change to one of ease. She looked relieved, almost on the verge of tears.

They reached the waterfall soon after, and the tour guide urged everyone to put on their ponchos. "Don't be afraid to get up close to the edge," she told everyone, and her voice was soon drowned out by the sudden raise in volume of the waterfall's sound.

Before Prompto could ask Ignis for his phone to take some pictures, the tactician shot him down. "The last time you almost dropped it in mud. I won't risk losing it in the sea."

"Aww, c'mon, Iggy! I'll be careful!"

Gladiolus handed Prompto a disposable camera. "Relax, Prom. I got some disposables at the counter before we departed. They'll be developed by tonight, they promised." He passed another to Nebula. "I'm sure you'll want some to show everyone back in Duscae."

"Thanks," she nearly had to shout over the waterfall, and started to take pictures with him and Prompto.

The boat stopped twenty-five yards away from where the pouring water met the calm, massive amounts of droplets splashing from the impact site and onto the passengers. Children squealed with delight as their parents tried to keep them from running and slipping on the slick wooden deck.

Luna walked toward the bow, where Noctis stood and watched the waterfall do its job, and wrapped her arm around his. "Isn't it beautiful?"
"Yeah." He leaned his head to the side and laid it on top of hers.

"It'd make a lovely background for our wedding." Glancing down at her, the Prince could see the longing in her eyes. This was supposed to be their happiest occasion. The wedding between the Prince of Lucis and Princess of Tenebrae should have taken place already. Noctis and Luna were supposed to be wed, on their honeymoon, or returning from the long vacation and preparing the Princess to be moved into the citadel in Insomnia. Their lives had been thrown in the complete opposite direction: Luna almost unable to escape from either Lucis or Tenebrae, with no word from her brother or the Tenebraen parliament on the affairs of her homeland; and Noctis was on the run with his friends and only family, trying to regain control of his home and take back what was stolen from him.

"As soon as this is all over," he swore to her. "When everything is right again, we'll come back here, and we'll have a nice wedding with our family and friends by our side." He freed his arm and pulled her closer to him, both of them suddenly unaware of the rest of the people on board the small vessel. Ignis and Gentiana watched them from afar, both feeling the happiness radiating from them. The former folded his hands in front of him as his focus shifted to the others, making sure everyone was still nearby.

"You're a strong man, Lord Scientia," Gentiana suddenly said, getting his attention back. "Your heart screams for him, yet as you're forced to see him in the arms of another, you show nothing but joy for the love they share."

Taken aback by the sudden commentary, Ignis cleared his throat and took off his glasses to wipe the splashing water droplets from the lenses. "Noctis is my Prince, and eventually, he'll be my King. I intend to do whatever I can to see that his life is long and prosperous."

"Even if it means the two of you can never be together?"

"His duty is to Princess Fleuret. They're to be married once everything has been fixed..." He hesitated to finish his sentence. "I will remain by his side no matter what."

The boat pulled away from the waterfall and headed back to port, ending the tour. "Leviathan Tours and the nation of Accordo thank you all for coming to tour the Sacri Lumine Waterfall," the tour guide said to the crowd. "If you have the time, please check out some of our other attractions and sites. They include the Altesian gondolas, our high-end shopping district, the old Museum of Archæan Myths and History, and the unique fountains all over Accordo. We hope you visit again really soon." Each of the visitors were handed key chains and pamphlets as they filed off the boat, the key chain resembling the Archæan Leviathan. Nebula held it up to the sun and watched the light flow through the crystal, separating into a spectrum of colors that reflected onto her pamphlet. She thought of who she'd give it to, and thought of Aurum, who was back to riding Chocobos through the plains, this time with a supervisor riding alongside him.

"That was a great ride," she said to the others when they rejoined the driver in the parking lot. Her eye drifted to the driver, who was finishing off a cigarette, and she sighed at him.

Ignis cleared his throat. "We're all off duty today, Miss Ardere," he reminded her. "Leave the driver be." She listened to him as much as she wanted to scold the driver, who was grateful for her friends being there to stop her.

"Where to next?" Prompto asked. "We have time to spare before dinner."

"Not that much," Gentiana interjected. "The gondolas will be full around now. And the wait for them is too long to do both."
"Then shopping it is," Noctis said. "How much do we have to work with Iggy?"

"We can survive one shopping trip. The President was nice enough to cover our bill for dinner, so there's room to spare." The seven piled into the SUV again. "The shopping district, please."

"Right away." They pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road, swerving through traffic that gathered every few streets.

Halfway to the shopping district, the doctor played the memories of her journey with the royal retinue through her head. She remembered the anxiety in Prompto's voice when he banged on the door to her home, the worry on Ignis and Gladiolus' faces as Noctis was carried inside, discovering they were the Lucian royalty. She remembered their drive to Lestallum, meeting Cor for the first time since the incident between them, Noctis demanding she accompany them against Cor's wishes, battling on their way to Cape Caem, saving the marshal's life a second time... Knowing she only had one more day left with them made the doctor bite her bottom lip to fight back the sadness creeping on her. Luna noticed her eyes becoming glossy and laid her hand on top of Nebula's. Luna had promised that she and the others would tell Noctis that she was leaving to take the pressure off of her; she wanted to make her last days with them as enjoyable as possible.

They arrived in the shopping district after 4:30 in the afternoon. Luna seized Nebula from the others and ran off with her into the nearest store, shouting over her shoulder they'd meet them back at the car in a little while. "I believe your fiance's just traded you in," Gladiolus chuckled as he followed Noctis and Ignis into a food store. The strategist immediately drifted off to the spice section and asked Noctis to follow him, leaving the gunner and bodyguard to find other groceries for their trip to Solheim. They walked to the canned goods section to pick out soups. "So how do we tell him?"

Gladio asked his friend a few moments after picking out a can of tomato soup.

"He's gotta be in a good mood first," Prompto replied, piling some more cans into a basket. "It'll be easier for him to swallow if nothing else is bothering him. So that means no vegetables, no talk of war..." He started to count on his fingers. "...We can make sure there's a frog pond around. That'll relax him."

"The chances of that will be near zero if we're heading toward Solheim." Gladio sighed. "Maybe Iggy can help us figure something out."

Prompto lowered his voice. "Maybe if the King's with us when we tell him, he'll stay calm. He always knows what to do when Noct is mad."

"Guess we'll have to save it for later, then." Gladiolus threw some more cans into the basket and took it from Prompto, and they rejoined Noctis and Ignis. They paid for the food and left the store, wondering whether the girls were still in the same store, or if they'd wandered off to another one. "Doesn't Luna have a phone?"

"Yeah," the Prince answered, "but one she gets the shopping bug, nothing can pull her attention away."

"Especially now that she has Nebula with her," the gunner laughed. "We might as well get some new clothes for the road. Who knows how long we'll be out there."

"You make a good point, Prompto," Ignis said. "We've been using the same sets for weeks." He glanced down at his watch and read 5pm. "I'm sure they'll call when they're done...hopefully in time for our dinner reservation."

The guys walked around the plaza, stopping in a few stores to get some new clothes. The Lucian gil
They were able to buy more expensive things than they'd been accustomed to over the past month, and even decided to pick up something nice to wear for dinner later that evening. Ignis told them not to worry about the upcoming gala; the President hired top designers to dress them for the event, and much care was taken into crafting special garments for the Lucian party. Noctis groaned, knowing the gala meant having to dress as uncomfortably as he had to for the meeting, possibly more. He voiced his quickly growing regret on agreeing to attend, and Prompto told him to think of it as more downtime until the President sent them on their merry way into the war zone. They still couldn't believe how ridiculous the Accordian President had been in regards to their asylum in his country, and took Prompto's words in stride.

Ignis got a text on his cell from Luna, saying the girls were headed back to the car. "Just in time," the tactician said to himself as he and the other guys walked to the plaza entrance. They quickly spotted the girls ahead of them, bags piled in their hands, and Noctis shook his head, knowing from the start that Luna would suck Nebula into her shopping hobby. Gladiolus whistled to get their attention as they neared the car, and Luna nearly tripped when she turned to see who was calling them. "I see you ladies had a good time."

"Noct..." Nebula huffed, out of breath. "Etro, I don't know how you're going to keep up with her when you start your wedding registry. Luna's got some set of legs on her."

"That's Luna for you." The Prince took a few bags from his fiance. "Though I'm settling for an online registry to avoid the walking."

"That's what you think now," Luna said to him with a giggle. "I already saw some things I want to add. I wrote them down for later." Her attention shifted to Ignis. "How long until our reservation?"

The tactician checked his watch again. "We've a half hour to get to the restaurant. Just enough time."

Everyone ran to the car and buckled up, the driver placing their bags in the back before pulling away from the plaza and turning onto the highway. Halfway to the restaurant, Nebula shifted in her seat and looked over her shoulder to Noctis. "Noctis?"

"Hmm?"

"I was thinking...do you think Commander Drautos would be opposed to me taking one of the Glaives as an apprentice?" No one expected her to ask anything close to that. If Cor had been in the car, he'd probably have a heart attack, the doctor assumed. But with her impending departure, and the possibility of the Shadow Agreement coming to an end, Nebula knew there had to be someone within the Lucian circle who could create elixirs that were close to her quality. Normally, she wasn't one to share her secret with others. The ingredients list was the most anyone knew about her mixtures; anything having to do with specific amounts or how the ingredients were cooked were something only she had knowledge of. The Lucians had grown on her, despite Cor's attitude, and for the first time in years, she felt like she could really trust someone with her craft to take care of others. "You, too, Prompto."

"Wha-" His focus went from the window to Nebula, who stared back at him.

"You've been a huge help to me, assisting me with Noct's care and all. We've shared an experience with escaping from Nifelheim. Prompto, you're the first person I've really trusted in a long time." She gave him a soft smile. "Only thing is, I only have my equipment at home in Duscae, so you'd have to stay with me for a few weeks."

He was lost for words. "I..."
"Take tonight to think about it. I'll talk to the Commander when we get back."

The rest of the drive was silent and fast, and before anyone realized it, the sky darkened to night. The moon rose from the north-west, shining just above the waterfall, providing a perfect backlight along with the rest of Altissia. The parking lot for Lilium in Valle was packed. The driver had to circle the parking lot four times before finding a spot - near the entrance, much to their luck. Everyone got out and walked inside, escorted by the driver, who told the greeter of their reservation. At the mention of the President the greeter's jaw dropped and he scrambled to get the party to their table. They were led up to the second floor, Nebula becoming distracted by the intricate decor and the smells of the plates as they were carried past her to their designated tables. Ignis took her arm and gestured for her to keep up before she got lost. They made it to their table and were seated, the waiter handing them menus as she introduced herself. Their table was near the back of the room, close to the balcony guests stood on to have a glimpse of the Sacri Lumine Waterfall in the far background. A stage sat adjacent to the stairs, a piano to the right and two stools in the center and on the left.

Nebula looked down at her menu, unsure of what to pick. She couldn't stop thinking of a dish she saw when they were walking up the stairs, which Noctis picked up on. "I'll order it for you," he told her. "That's what I usually get. You allergic to anything?"

"No." Her gaze shifted to the balcony, where she couldn't pull her eyes off the sight. Nebula got up from her seat. "I'll be right back. If he asks about wine, I'll have red. Ginger-ale otherwise." She walked between the nearby tables and onto the balcony, where she caught sight of the waterfall lit underneath. Nebula rested her arms on the railing as she watched the water pour over the edge of the cliff. "One more night..." she told herself.

"Nebula, she's here!" The doctor turned back into the room and saw three people climb on stage. A man sat on the leftmost stool and laid a violin case on the floor, and a woman marched to the piano. A second woman, wearing a dark, sequined dress, adjusted the microphone at the center of the stage, and the crowd clapped as Nebula sat down again.

"Thank you for coming tonight," Serafina said to the guests. "As many of you have heard, my home, the Kingdom of Lucis, has recently been invaded by the Empire of Nifelheim. My songs tonight will be a tribute to the people of Lucis who have been displaced, lost loved ones, injured, or killed in the events that took place last month." A somber air took over the second floor, even as waiters rushed by to deliver the cooked meals. "While you dine tonight, please have the people of Lucis in your thoughts, as well as the royal family who so tragically passed away during the invasion." The meals and drinks came for the royals quicker than the doctor expected, just before the trio on stage prepared to perform. The lights turned down, leaving one to focus on the stage. The pianist's fingers pushed down on the keys, thickening the somber air with the instrument's tone as the song began, the violinist joining her soon after.

\[
\begin{align*}
\textbf{Deus dormit} \\
\text{Et liberi ignem faciunt} \\
\text{Numquam extinguunt} \\
\text{Ne expergisci possit} \\
\textbf{Omnia dividit} \\
\textbf{Tragedia coram} \\
\textbf{Amandum quae} \\
\end{align*}
\]

The pianist's fingers pressed harder as she and the violinist got into the music and rocked to the tune. Even Serafina was feeling the song in her heart, tears welling in her eyes when the crescendo hit.

\[
\textbf{Et nocte perpetua}
\]
When they returned to the safe house, Nebula was exhausted. She couldn't remember a day where she'd walked so much, and listening to Serafina sing drained her mentally and emotionally. The songstress' voice was as beautiful as the waterfall, and combined with her days with the royals dwindling, the doctor's energy was gone. She still found strength to walk herself to Commander Drautos and discuss teaching one of his subordinates her craft. Her willingness to teach another person her secrets was a shock to Cor, as she suspected it'd be, when he overheard the two talking in the conference room. Through his surprise, Titus said he'd talk the matter over with King Regis and his Glaive, but knew one member who'd already expressed interest in learning from her. They agreed to continued talking after the gala the following night, allowing the doctor to go to the bed she so desperately wanted to hold until she fell asleep.

The next morning the doctor was the first one awake and made everyone coffee. Luna was with her in the kitchen soon after, and they watched the sun rise together through the window. The President's assistant said he needed them to arrive before eleven so the designer could take their measurements to better fit the dress, followed by a spa session for them. "It'll just be you, me and Gentiana. Noctis and the others will be going apart from us to be fitted in their suits." She sipped her coffee. "How'd you sleep?"

"Like a rock," the doctor replied. "You have some energy on you, Luna. I'm surprised I still got up this early." Crowe walked into the kitchen. "Morning. Seems the ladies are the early risers today."

"Please tell me there's coffee creamer." Nebula pointed to the row of ingredients next to the coffee machine. "Oh, thank Etro." The mage rushed to pour herself a mug. "You two are lucky. While you were out touring Altissia last night, I pretty much had to babysit the guys by myself. One of them decided to mix alcohol into a warping competition, and things got super crazy."

"You haven't see the real Nyx and Pelna until they're given a day off. Let me tell you: never let them get their hands on any Tribus Stellae beer, because you'll heard some weird shit from them you'd never expect either to say."

Nebula leaned against the counter. "Try me." She sipped her coffee.

"Pelna told us about every person he's ever slept with." Crowe suddenly let out a low laugh. "Nyx told us about you and Cor."

"You and Cor what?" Luna asked, immediately focusing her attention on the doctor with wide eyes. Coffee sprayed all over the floor from Nebula's mouth as her face turned red. The Princess sat herself on top of the counter next to Nebula and set her mug down. "When, why - give me the details."

"One," the doctor coughed as she pulled some paper towels from the rack and began to clean her mess, "remind me to kill Nyx. Two: it was a one-night thing. We were inebriated, he was in my house, I made him dinner-

"And then dessert," Crowe added, earning a laugh from Luna and an embarrassed groan from the doctor whose entire face went pink. "Sorry. He told me you have no poker face."

"Well now I have to get dirt on Nyx. And you'll get me the details."

"You could always beat him in a spell match. He hates losing more than anything." Crowe smirked.
Nebula tilted her head up in thought. "He's got years of experience on me. Plus Luna told me he warps like he'll never get another chance."

Luna added a drop of milk to her mug. "We'll think of something at the spa later. Let's make some breakfast in the meantime." The Princess, mage and doctor got to work making eggs and pancakes for everyone, knowing the smell of food would help the household to rise. Crowe and Nebula talked about scheduling some time to practice magic before their departure from Accordo, and promised to refer her to some masters closer to Duscae. The mage told her of Sonitus' interest in learning how to craft elixirs and the doctor's head perked up. Sonitus Bellum had experience with making basic potions, Crowe told her, and he was looking to learn how to make more advanced things.

The members of the safe house came into the kitchen one by one, with the last people entering being the designated clean-up crew. Nebula dug her new cellphone - bought in the previous night's shopping spree - out of her pocket and gave her number to Ignis and Luna, promising to call them the second she made it back to Duscae in one piece. The news of her separation from the group upon their departure from Accordo had been delivered to Noctis before bed the night before, and though it upset him that she wouldn't be going with them to Solheim, he understood that Nebula had a duty to her patients. He promised that her last days in Altissia would be memorable, even if the gala turned out to be as tacky as he assumed it'd be.

By eleven the girls were out of the house, leaving before the guys to start their spa day. The President welcomed them into his estate with open arms and introduced the assistants of the designers, who led them to a large suite on the fifth floor. The assistants presented their boss' dresses to them, six choices hanging on portable racks. A dress toward the end of the fourth assistant's rack caught Nebula's eye: a strapless, sweetheart-neck made of satin, dyed rose, with an olive lace overlay for the skirt and sash. The assistant clapped her hands in glee and took her new client's measurements, telling Nebula to raise her arms and stay still. The doctor looked to Luna for help, not having experienced something so invasive in years. "Just a few minutes," she reassured her new friend. "They're going to make it fit perfectly." The assistant took care of picking out shoes and jewelry for Nebula, and once Luna and Gentiana were finished, the trio were sent downstairs to begin their spa day.

On the other side of the palace, Prompto was clueless with what style tuxedo to wear. "I've never worn something so fancy before," he said out loud as he rummaged through the racks. "How do I know what looks good on me?"

"Do what I do: ask Ignis," Noctis replied, listening to Ignis mumble to himself at every tuxedo. "Makes it much easier on me."

"I've never been more glad to have to wear my guard uniform than I am now," Gladiolus commented. "I never liked tuxes. Still don't like how confined I'll be, though."

"It's not like you'll have any actual combat to partake in," Ignis said while studying one of the designer's suggestions. "You'll just be keeping an eye on things when we're at the gala. But you'll have room to move so you can dance."

"Pssh. Good one, Iggy."

Nebula couldn't remember the last time she attended any kind of large formal gathering. The doctor usually kept to herself, and even in her earlier days in Niflheim, she never had a huge interest in fancy parties. To be dressed up and have her makeup done felt strange to her. And this was no normal party. The President of Accordo had organized a ball for that night; his reasoning was to 'celebrate the safety of the Lucian and Tenebraen royal families'. She'd been included on the
exclusive guest list as part of Lucis' royal circle, much to Cor's disdain, who wished she'd stayed back at the safe house. Instead he was there, responsible for watching his charge for yet another night, one where he actually hoped to be able to relax a little.

Having other women around made the stress on her mind easier. Gentiana and Luna were there as the palace maids helped Nebula into her dress and fixed her hair into a neat low bun. The princess guided them in getting the doctor ready for the ball, pointing out areas to change or put more focus on. “Pin that part a little higher,” she told the hairdresser who worked on Nebula's bangs. Watching the woman do as instructed Luna pinched her face between the fingers, and when she felt the hair was in the perfect place she held a hand up. “That's perfect.” The makeup artist finished seconds later and spun Nebula's chair around, allowing the doctor to see her reflection. “What do you think?”

Nebula’s jaw dropped when she stared in the mirror. “Wow...” She rose from her chair and leaned forward on the vanity table. “Is that...really me?” The doctor looked like a whole new woman. Strangers would've never known there were nights she couldn't sleep and developed circles under her eyes. Her skin tone was evened out and the makeup was left subtle, yet bold enough to help her features stand out. The gloss on her lips matched the magenta hue of her strapless mermaid dress, her eyeshadow near identical to the olive lace overlaying the skirt. Looking past her own reflection Nebula glanced at the other women in the room, seeing the smile on Luna's and Gentiana's faces.

“You look beautiful.” Gentiana told her, looking over her shoulder when she heard a knock at the door. “Excuse me.” Luna's bodyguard walked toward the door to answer. After a moment she looked back to the other women. “They're waiting for us. Are you both ready?” Nebula looked to the princess, who gave her a reassuring nod, and Gentiana opened the doors to the suite.

Noctis and the others waited in the hall next to the suite for the ladies to come out. The prince and the gunner were fidgeting where they stood, both clearly uncomfortable in their attire. Neither were really a fan of formal wear, especially the former, who was forced to dressed in the style on a regular basis. Gladiolus did a better job of hiding his discomfort with his Crownsguard uniform, though it was clear how restricting he found the jacket. He crossed his arms and threw back the neat ponytail he was forced to wear. Ignis had no issues with his tuxedo, and Cor wore his formal Marshal's uniform. They all had a similar look: all black, button-up shirts in varying shades of gray, black ties, and red rubber-lined Oxfords. Cor's boots were made to match the prince's, medals and ribbons decorating his shoulders, and all five men had brooches with the Lucian crest pinned to their lapels, Noctis' holding the blazer and sash together. “What's taking them so long?” Noctis wondered, half-complaining while looking down at his watch. He normally wasn't one to be impatient, but after hearing of how over-the-top the President went with the gala, he just wanted to get the night over with.

“Patience, Highness,” Ignis told him while adjusting the prince's tie. “The princess wanted to make sure she and Miss Ardere looked their best for tonight. Give them some time. Senator Venenum can hold her own downstairs with Pelna.” Cor rolled his eyes at the mention of Nebula, which he made little effort to hide from the others. Gladiolus and Prompto shook their heads, wondering when the marshal would get over his dislike of the doctor, and all eyes were drawn to the suite when the double doors were opened. Gentiana stepped out first, wearing a tea-length red dress with quarter sleeves. Her hair was tied back in a decorative braid that draped over her shoulder. She walked to Ignis and stood beside him, allowing him to take her hand in his and kiss her knuckles. “Might I accompany you to the ballroom, Lady Surgens?”

“It'd be my pleasure, Mr. Scientia,” she replied. They looked on to the open doorway, where Luna came out next. Her dress matched the color of her eyes, flowing all the way to the carpeted floor. Straps adorned her shoulders and met at her neck to create a halter-style top, giving the illusion of a keyhole back to the dress. Luna's hands were folded on top of one another as she walked to Noctis,
who rubbed the back of his head while trying to hide the blush growing on his cheeks. “It appears you've left your betrothed in awe, Luna.”

Luna chuckled as she watched Noctis do his best to regain his composure. “You always act like you've never seen me in a dress before,” she commented while taking her fiance's arm. Turning back to face the door, the princess called to the doctor. “Don't be like Noctis,” she joked. “There's nothing to be shy about.” Prompto snickered, to which the prince elbowed him in the side.

Taking a deep breath, Nebula stepped out of her suite, and was met with four awe-struck gazes. She slowly walked over to them, feeling a little embarrassed by their reactions. “Nebula, wow!” Prompto was the first to say. “You look incredible.” Gladiolus whistled to her, making the doctor's face turn red for a second, signaling his agreement. Her eyes went to Ignis and Noctis, who both showed their approval for her new look, and when her glance met Cor's, she stopped. His eyes were fixed on her from the moment she came out of the room, and thought he hated to openly admit it, the transformation in the doctor's appearance was astounding. If things were different, he would've offered his arm to escort her to the ball without question. Cor remained silent, as did she, and Nebula broke the stare between them.

Ignis and Gentiana took the lead in bringing everyone to the ballroom. “This way, everyone,” the king’s hand instructed the group as he led the woman on his arm down the hall. Clarus has gone ahead of them to survey the area, which got his seal of approval. He awaited their arrival alongside the President and his wife, who were caught up in conversation with some of the Altesian nobles in attendance. Luna and Noctis followed behind those keeping watch over them, Gladiolus walked behind them alongside Cor, and Prompto and Nebula brought up the rear. The doctor was more than happy to let the gunner lead her to the ballroom; he was much better company than the stuffy guardian she’d had forced upon her.

They reached the stairway leading to the ballroom within minutes. A guard standing at attention noticed their presence and cleared his throat, preparing to announce their arrival. He banged the bottom of the gold staff in his grasp on the marble floor, getting the attention of many of the attendees. “Presenting Lord Ignis Scientia of the Kingdom of Lucis, and Lady Gentiana Surgens of Tenebrae.” Another guard on the opposite side of the stairs blew into a trumpet, and Ignis and Gentiana began their descent down the large flight of marble stairs. The announcing guard waited for them to reach the bottom before shouting the next pair of names. Everyone recognized the next two people, and some gathered near the bottom of the stairs to pay their respects when the royal couple approached. “Presenting His Highness, Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum, of the Kingdom of Lucis, and Her Highness, Princess Lunafreya Nox Fleuret, of the Province of Tenebrae.” Their names brought about a yell of loyalty hailed to the Lucian throne as the guests raised their glasses in Noctis and Luna’s honor, all bowing their heads when the two walked down the stairs. Hearing the prince and princess’ names, President Speculo and his wife left their conversation with a senator to meet the couple.

Cor straightened his beret as he and Gladiolus stepped forward. “Presenting Lord Gladiolus Amicitia, and Marshal Cor Leonis, of the Kingdom of Lucis.” The horn sounded after their names were called and the two walked down the stairs. Prompto took a step closer to the stairs, but halted halfway when he noticed the scared look on Nebula’s face.

“Nervous?”

She bit her bottom lip. “A little.”

He pat the hand she held onto him with. “Don't worry. Just take a deep breath and put one foot in front of the other.” The announcer banged his staff. “Ready?”
Nebula didn't have a chance to reply as the announcer parted his lips. “Presenting Lord Prompto Argentum, and Doctor Nebula Ardere, of the Kingdom of Lucis.” The announcer's words didn't go unnoticed to Nebula, who showed her surprise to Prompto as he led her down the stairs. She did her best to take the gunner's advice in stride, taking even breaths and keeping tabs on where she placed her foot for each step. Her heels made walking a bit difficult, and she was glad to have Prompto beside her to help her stay balanced. They received many bows and greetings as they walked around the ballroom, and the doctor quickly realized she didn't fit in with all the people around her.

Delegates, assemblymen, royalty, even the President himself were in attendance, conversing over the orchestra as they played waltz music on their instruments. Prompto could sense her distress and thought of ways to comfort her. He motioned his chin across to a group of women. “Most of the people here are either nobility, politicians, or celebrities. Those four over there are from the play 'An Evening in Etro's Garden', the biggest production in Tenebrae.” Nebula squinted as she took a step forward to peer at them between passing guests, and her eyes widened when she recognized their faces. Prompto looked over his shoulder and pointed behind them to a couple. “Those two are Rex and Caesar Cithara. Rex is one of Lucis' most famous actors – big movie star back at home. His husband Caesar's a fashion designer...” The blond's words drifted off as he glanced down at Nebula's dress. “You know you're wearing his dress, right?” The look of shock on her face told him she had no clue. Prompto grinned. “You want to meet him?”

“I...” Her eyes widened again. “Can I?”

“I don't see why not. Come on!” The gunner and the doctor weaved through the crowd to reach the fashion designer.

On the far side of the ballroom, President Speculo and his wife had sat down to eat with the Prince of Lucis and his fiance. The guests had their orders taken by passing waiters to prepare for dinner. “I really hope this is to your liking, Your Highness,” Frons said across the table. “I did my best to include all the accommodations you'd have back in Lucis.”

Noctis looked up from his champagne. “The effort is appreciated,” he answered. “It's like I'm still in Lucis as we speak.” He didn't want to butter up the president too much– if it were up to him, the ball wouldn't have happened. Though it was a kind gesture on his part, President Speculo's research into Lucian royal parties was a bit outdated; and by outdated, Noctis meant by at least a full century. There were painted portraits of the prince's great-great-grandfather waltzing with potential brides during a ball organized by the king at the time. The event seemed a bit staged with the setup of the orchestra playing ballroom music, but at least the guests appeared to be enjoying themselves, and Noctis could deal with one night of fancy clothes and dancing so long as it meant he could forget about the doom hanging over Lucis' head. So for tonight – and with Luna and Ignis' help – the prince held his tongue and wore a relaxed smile on his face.

“I must say,” the First Lady began, “the nobles of Accordo look like they haven't had this much fun in ages. It's so nice to finally have a night of calm in this time of tension and war.” She pat her husband's hand that lay on top of the table. “Though it's a shame that your wedding had to be postponed, milady. We were really looking forward to attending.”

“Yes, it is a shame,” Luna agreed as she stared down at her engagement ring. “But right now, the most important thing is to get the Lucian crystal back so Prince Noctis' country may be restored to its rightful power. I'm willing to wait until that day comes to move on with the wedding.”

“Well who's to say you can't have the wedding here?”

Noctis raised an eyebrow. “I don't understand.”

President Speculo and his wife looked at one another, smiling. “Frons and I were talking recently,
and while we've already offered help to the Lucian government, your wedding's cancellation was so sad. It touched our hearts." The First Lady met Luna's gaze. "Frons and I wanted to offer you and His Highness the chance to get married here, Princess. It doesn't have to be anything elaborate. We'd keep it small and simple so no suspicion is raised, and this way the King can be in attendance."

Luna had to do her best to keep her jaw from dropping. "You're not serious..." She gave Noctis' hand a light squeeze. The First Lady nodded to her and she looked back at Noctis, asking with her eyes what they should do.

"That is...a very kind gesture, ma'am," Noctis replied. His gaze left the conversation for a moment to look at Ignis, who was leading Gentiana to the center of the ballroom to dance. Meeting Luna's eyes again, Noctis cleared his throat. "If we may, we'd like some time to think your proposal over."

"Take all the time you need." The First Lady turned to her husband, who stood up and offered her his hand. "We'll be nearby if you come to a decision tonight." She took the President's hand and walked off to the dance floor, the two moving in sync with the changing music.

With the changing music, many couples stepped aside to either change dance partners or sit down for a meal. Nebula and Prompto walked away from the center of the ballroom, both grabbing an h'ors derves from a passing waiter's tray. They walked to the table reserved for their party and sat down as Gladiolus was deep into his second serving of the dinner he'd ordered. "You eat any more and your buttons are gonna pop," Prompto commented as he sat next to the bodyguard.

"He's right," Nebula added. "Why don't you dance a little to work off the food?"

"Gladio? Dancing?" The gunner chuckled. "Please. Poor Gladio was cursed with two left feet."

"At least I don't stuff my face 'til I puke," the bodyguard commented after swallowing the food in his mouth. "Why don't you eat, too, Doc? You look hungry."

Nebula shook her head. "I'm actually still good from lunch. And I think that h'ors derves I took from the tray messed with any appetite I had after." She reached for her glass of wine and sipped it. A light pain started to throb at the base of her neck and spread throughout her scalp, a pain she assumed came from the pins holding her hair in its style. She traded her wine glass for a cup of water and downed half the glass.

"Feeling okay?"

"Yeah... It's just a little loud in here. I'm going to step out for a bit." Nebula got out of her chair and fanned at her face as she exited the ballroom and walked into the hallway, the lights several shades darker than those in the large crystal chandelier. The darkness helped her headache some but it still lingered. Returning to the ballroom after a few minutes, Nebula cursed at herself for not bringing any potion pills with her to alleviate the pain, and grabbed another glass of water from a passing waiter's tray.

The wine that filled the glass of the King's guard wasn't nearly strong enough to take his mind off of his concerns. He'd feel better if she weren't here at all, but at the very least her being in attendance would make keeping an eye on her a simpler task. Even so, his instincts made it impossible for him to relax. His eyes remained fixed upon his charge, watching her shift awkwardly in her spot as if she were not quite sure what to do with herself. With a heavy sigh, he pushed himself off of the marble pillar and into the festive scene. "Are you always this reckless?" He addressed her sternly.

Nebula looked over her shoulder to Cor, noticing the annoyed glare in his eyes as he approached her. "Reckless?" She repeated his word. "I wasn't aware that socializing was an activity that could be
defined as such." Her grin was short-lived as she averted her gaze away from him and played with
the skirt of her dress. "...You should relax a little, Marshal. You're at a party. Noc-" She stopped
herself, remembering to address the prince properly in front of him. "His Highness seems to have
loosened up, so perhaps you could, too."

His eyes narrowed a bit at her proposition. "I can't 'loosen up'. Staying vigilant is my duty." His jaw
tightened as he glanced down at her hand, spying the ring still securely looped around her finger. It
surprised him that she still wore it, despite its diamonds having cracked days ago and its sealing
power long gone. "Besides, I define 'reckless' as playing dangerous games with the life of His
Highness - which is something you seem intent on continuing to do."

There he went again with his little rant. "Of course, because I became a doctor just so I could play
such dangerous games." She watched a group of musicians step forward on the performance
platform, one adjusting a microphone next to the grand piano, while his partners set up a drum set
and tuned a bass guitar. A lot of the people who were dancing watched the new performers with
curiosity, and whispers floated around, mentioning them to be a popular Solhemnian band. Nebula
sighed, knowing Cor was going to hang on her elbow all night long like a leech. "Well if you're
going to babysit me all night, at least have the decency to offer me a dance," she commented as she
set down her water glass on a passing waiter's tray. If she was going to be tied to the Marshal all
night, she was going to get something out of it.

His eyes narrowed again. Each of her comments grated on his patience, but she had a point. It might
draw attention to be this close to the dancing area while having a hushed conversation. "Fine. If that
is what you wish..." He bowed courteously, taking her hand in his before placing a feathery kiss
upon her knuckle. "Care to dance, milady?" He groaned internally, lamenting how ingrained the
etiquette training he had undergone had become into his memory.

"I'd be honored," she replied, momentarily enjoying seeing the usually humorless man show a hint of
embarrassment. Nebula followed him to the dance floor and laid her free hand on his shoulder.
Feeling his hand glide in place on her back, she made eye contact with him. Even looking past her
reflection in his eyes, she could feel his disgust toward her boiling inside. He stepped forward and
she followed his lead, lowering her voice to a whisper. "So will I be getting an apology for that
slap?"

The bouncing piano rhythm nearly caught the man out of place as his step faltered slightly, but his
subconscious mind saved him with an assertive bend at the woman's waist. "You're exceedingly
lucky to have possession of your head right now." She just had to push him, and it was something
that was wearing away at his reserves of patience.

She could've said the same thing in response to him, that he was lucky to have his own head, but
they both knew what that would invoke in him. He obviously still had a grudge against her for nearly
killing him all those months ago. Her eyes shifted to the beret atop his head. She remembered asking
him about it the day after they met, wondering what he looked like in his formal uniform. "You look
nice," Nebula mumbled, stepping back and extending her arm outward before being pulled back in
with a twirl.

His grip tightened around her waist. "Do you believe you deserve forgiveness?" He replied through
clanched teeth. Nearly losing his life to his charge was something he couldn't take lightly. His eyes
locked with hers as his right foot drew a circle behind him; conflicted portals that were once soulless
voids - all too many times for his liking.

Though part of her expected it, his question still threw her off guard. Nebula chewed on her lower
lip, momentarily looking away from him. "Sometimes...I don't. I became a doctor to try and undo the
harm I'd caused on so many people. I poured everything I had into bringing you back from the brink of death..." She looked at him again. "I'm sorry..." Two words she'd said a thousand times before. She hoped they would sink in this time, though didn't hold out hope that they would.

His jaw tightened again as the music came into its crescendo. "Your apologies don't erase anything. Even with all the precautions taken, you can still....relapse." His steps became more aggressive, invading her space with his presence with greater urgency. "You're a powder keg, and when you go off, you'll take out everything around you..."

"I know..." She kept her voice low. The music approached its climax and Nebula felt her body spin in time with the piano, following Cor's movement. He was right, no matter how hard she fought the truth. There were many factors against her. Her gaze landed on her new friends, congregating on the far side of the ballroom. This was the last night she knew she'd spend with them; anything after would be decided by the Lucians. The piano and drums faded out slowly and the surrounding people applauded the band, who bowed to them. Nebula's head was swimming with emotions and the pain of her headache. Something in her rang, something she hadn't heard in a long time. "Come with me." Before Cor could ask where she grasped his hand and pulled him out of the ballroom and into the hallway away from prying eyes.

"Why the sudden retreat?" he asked. The nervous behavior she displayed was abnormal even for her, and it made his concern for their situation grow.

"Do you still feel anything?" His brow scrunched at her question. "Clarus asked me the same thing on the ferry, and I said I didn't. But after everything...after this..." Her hands dropped to her side. "I'm second-guessing myself. When we danced, when you were holding me, it felt like us. The us before the Shadow Agreement, before the incident..." He cringed at how she referred to her killing him. "I thought I wanted to forget about that spark between us, for the better, but something in me just can't let it go. It's... I..." She didn't realize she was pacing in front of him until he stopped her.

"Nebula..." He didn't expect her to come out of nowhere like that. "Atra... What happened between us can never be again. And you know all the reasons why."

"You still didn't answer my question." He averted his gaze and sighed, leaning his back on the wall. "Cor..." The way she said his name sent a chill down his spine. It was the old Nebula, just as she'd said, calling to him, craving to feel his touch again. And the way she looked at him... He couldn't meet her eyes. Nebula chewed on her lower lip again and, wanting to see how he'd react, she kissed him. His eyes widened and he pushed her away. The doctor stepped back and hugged herself, seeing the regret in Cor's glance at the floor. "Okay. I won't ask anymore." Nebula headed back to the ballroom, leaving Cor to sort his feelings out in silence.

As she walked past the party guests, Nebula bumped into a passing waiter. "Oh, excuse me! I'm so sorry."

"No need to apologize, ma'am," he reassured her, and when he looked closer at her, he offered his tray to her. "You look unwell. Can I offer you some water?"

She nodded and took a glass, downing it immediately. "Thank you." Nebula continued through the ballroom, not noticing the waiter's lingering stare on her.

As the party went on, the doctor began to feel worse. Her headache intensified and took over her entire head, and when she tried to walk, her steps felt sloppy and uneven. The sounds around her were drowned out, as if she were under water, and the room started to spin. The patrons didn't seem to notice her changed attitude, and none of her friends were nearby. Sweat accumulated on her brow. Something was wrong, much worse than a normal headache. The pain spread down her neck and
back. She felt queasy. Nebula knew she needed to get out of there and to a bed, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't walk in a straight line or focus completely. The other partiers finally began to take notice and watched her with concern, though it lasted no more than a second, and no one asked if she was alright. As the doctor struggled toward the balcony to get some fresh air, the one person who she managed to stay focused on without any trouble was the waiter who gave her water. His eyes remained on her as she struggled to walk, and after a moment of thinking, Nebula realized what had happened. The waiter was the man who tended to her belongings on the ferry from Caem, and he'd drugged her drink. She couldn't comprehend why he'd do such a thing until he helped her stand - she had no idea when she'd tripped over her dress - and whispered something to her. It was the same phrase Lugos had said to her before she lost control of herself. And she felt that very control slipping away.

"Are----lright?"

"Nebul-----ook sick---"

The voices around her were no longer recognizable. She didn't know who the blonde-haired woman was who held her and yelled her name. All she knew was that her body burned. Her head hurt a lot. She wanted it to stop. She let out a scream and felt something take over her, stemming from the back of her neck and flowing into her brain. All she could think of was the pain stopping. That's all she wanted.

"What's happening to her?" Luna asked as the doctor suddenly crawled away from her and out onto the balcony, uttering grunts and gasps with each step she took. Thunder rolled in the sky, despite the cloudless night, and as the Princess reached out to comfort her friend, Gentiana threw herself on top of her to protect her from a bolt of lightning landing near her feet. More bolts cracked the marble floor and surrounded the doctor, who pushed herself to her feet. "Nebula!" When she turned around to face the Tenebraen Princess, her movements slow, a gasp escape Luna's lips as she stared into the near-blackened eyes of her friend. Nebula's pupils were so dilated they covered almost all the gray of her irises. Her eyes were wide, concentrating on the Princess and her bodyguard, who knew what was happening.

"Luna...she's not Nebula anymore." Gentiana bared her teeth and pushed the Princess behind her.

**Lunafreya autem Tenebrae...** Nebula reached a hand out at Luna, and black smoke seeped out of her skin. Luna choked back a scream at the realization.

"Lamia."

Chapter End Notes

One specific track is played during dinner at the waterfall restaurant: Somnus Nemoris, and the opera singer is the one singing the words.

The music list starts from the beginning of the gala, right up to the battle on the balcony.

1) Platinum Demo FFXV - Playroom Theme (Extended): the Lucian court's entry into the gala [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9fJGgLti0k&t=304s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9fJGgLti0k&t=304s)
2) Dmitiri Shostakovich - The Second Waltz: Prompto and Nebula meet the actor/designer couple [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoS1_CRS5fA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoS1_CRS5fA)
3) Tchaikovsky - Waltz of the Flowers: Noctis and Luna talk with the President of
Accordo and his wife: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg1dMpu4v7M

4) Muse - Ruled by Secrecy: Cor and Nebula's dance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKiayHSR4DI

5) Camille Saint-Saëns - Danse Macabre: after Cor and Nebula's dance, Nebula is drugged, descends into the Lamia mindset: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YyknBTm_YyM
Fury

Chapter Summary

Everything is falling apart. No one expected to have to fight one of their own.

Chapter Notes

More Muse titles because the band just makes so many good songs that can be referenced to FFXV.

Also apologizing for the (possible) crappy Latin. Just used Google Translate to tell me how to word it.

"She's..." The Princess was lost for words, her mouth hanging open from the sight of the doctor - her friend - with blackened eyes and smoke swirling around her. Gentiana urged her to stand, yanking on her arm to get her away from the witch before something bad happened. "Nebula..." Gentiana pulled her out of the way of another lightning strike, which cracked the marble they sat on a second earlier. Pieces flew everywhere. Luna turned to the ballroom entrance, wondering how no one had heard the floor split from the electrical impact. She looked back at Nebula - Lamia - she didn't know what to call her anymore. "Nebula, listen to me," she pleaded. "It's me, Luna. Your friend. I don't know what's happening with you right now, but you're not you. Something's-"

"Luna, look out!" Gentiana pulled Luna away from an approaching tendril of black smoke and kicked Nebula's hand away, crouching between her charge and the doctor. Her attention went from the Princess to the doctor, confusion piling onto the fear and protective training that snapped onto her face. "Something's wrong with her," the guardian said, knowing it was more than evident already. Gentiana squinted and examined Nebula closer as she staggered towards them to study the woman's aura. It had been completely wiped out, replaced by whatever was controlling her at the time. "It's as if something has possessed her!" She'd been fine the last time they saw her in the ballroom, and none of the guests or security gave any indication that someone had slipped in and done anything.

Nebula stared at them. "Lunafreya autem Tenebrae..." she repeated, and shifted her glance to Gentiana. "Leviathan... Quid forma tamen miser occultauerat?" Gentiana's eyes widened, wondering how she knew classified information. "Iam ego hanc proditor. Quae ignominia..." She smirked, sending chills down Luna's spine. The rumors of Lamia told of a woman with black eyes and profound magical capabilities, using them to bring death wherever she walked. The key clue to finding her was her voice: Lamia spoke exclusively in the language of the Archaeans, something only Oracles had knowledge of.

Gentiana growled and got into a defensive stance. "Lingua Astrals scis?"

"Non quaeritur stultus quaestiones. Ut plane nostis veterem linguam agens Etro." Nebula's gaze shifted to Luna. "Princess, quem proditionis crimine domesticae. Nisi cui omnes amatis, et ad quid?" She took a step toward them. "Nihil domi te retrorum." She stuck her hand out in
their direction, and more black wisps seeped out from the pores in her skin. "Etro iudicavit, et dignatus es dignus vivere in hoc mundo. Et dextera mea, ibi desinet te!"

The black wisps crawled across the floor and reached for Lunafreya, who was shielded by her guardian a third time. The smoke swam up her face and invaded the space between her eyes and their sockets, darkening the world around her.

"Luna, run!" she ordered the Tenebraen native. "Get to Noctis! Tell him to send Ignis, Cor - anyone!" Her head whipped back to Nebula. "Non accipiamus vitam saeculi nocte!" The guardian stood up and shook off her shawl, preparing to fight against the friend now turned enemy.

Luna scrambled to her feet and picked up her dress to keep herself from tripping when she ran. She took a step forward, then another, searching through the throng of people in the ballroom and trying to figure out how the scene on the balcony was still unnoticed. A third step sent her into what felt like a wall, though nothing was visible, and it didn't take the Princess long to realize Nebula had created a barrier between them and the ballroom. She banged her fist on the transparent wall, then her shoulder, and when neither of them worked, she grabbed the long-necked candelabra sitting on the corner of the wall and used it to hammer a hole through the barrier. The thin brass bent after two hits on the barrier. "Dammit..." She looked over her shoulder and saw Gentiana and Nebula throw spells at each other, neither getting hit by the other's attacks. Luna searched her mind for a way to break the barrier down. As she continued to bang on the barrier, a lightning bolt shot out from Nebula's hand and flew toward Luna. The Princess jumped out of the way and hit the barrier, shattering it and allowing Luna to pass through. She ran into the ballroom, heels clicking hard against the floor, and called for her fiancé. "Noctis!"

Noctis and his friends heard Luna yell the Prince's name, and when they turned to look toward the ballroom, the windows on either side of the balcony passageway broke into millions of tiny pieces that sprayed all over the attendees. Shrieks of fear erupted in the ballroom and people started to scatter. The President shot out of his chair and stared at the broken glass flying everywhere, his hand instinctively reaching for his wife's. The Accordian security details rushed over to him and formed a circle around the leader to protect him. "The hell's going on?" he asked the guards, none of which could answer his question.

Luna made it to Noctis and Gladiolus, heaving to catch her breath and swerving to avoid the running people. "Noctis!"

"Luna!" He reached out to her and caught the Princess before she could fall. His gaze darted from her to the scene unfolding, then back to her. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"Nebula... Gentiana..." She couldn't get a full sentence out. "Lamia! She's here, Noctis! Lamia is-" Luna turned back to the ballroom and pushed her way out of Noctis' grasp. "We need Cor! Get anyone who can fight to the balcony before she hurts someone!"

"Wait!" he called to her, chasing her a few steps before Gladiolus pulled him backwards. Spirals of fire shot into the ballroom, followed by horizontal geysers of water flying in the opposite direction.

"Pelna, get your ass here now! Lamia's in the building!" Gladiolus yelled over his wireless communication system. He wrapped an arm around the Prince's shoulders to hold him in place. "How'd she get in here? We had every corner lined with security!"

"It had to be the balcony," Noctis replied, his eyes scanning the floor for anyone of Lucian descent. He spotted Prompto and Ignis helping people file through a hallway to the left of the entrance and whistled to them. Prompto heard Noctis' call and slapped Ignis' shoulder, pointing to their friend, and they shoved their way through the patrons to make it to him.
"What's going on?" the gunner asked. "Everything was fine a second ago, and then-" Another blast of fire shot into the ballroom, its flames licking the curtains of the broken windows, instantly igniting the fabric and burning holes into it. More guard scrambled to put it out but couldn't work faster than it burned. Ignis lifted his hand and shot water from his palm at the curtain, putting out the fire.

"We have to get out of here," the tactician ordered. "It's not safe!"

Gladiolus pulled Noctis toward the exit but the Prince pushed him off. "Not without Luna! She said Nebula's over there, too. What if the witch gets them?"

"Then we'll have to be fast!" Loud footsteps echoed above the others as Cor, Pelna and Senator Venenum dashed into the ballroom. "It's Lamia," the bodyguard informed them.

Cor's eyes widened. "Shit!" He laid his hand on his katana. "I knew this was going to happen!"

"Knew what was goi-" The floor shook, knocking everyone off their feet. One of the large marble pillars lining the wall cracked from the bottom upward. The marshal grit his teeth and raced toward the balcony, not waiting for anyone to follow after him. He regretted ever meeting Nebula Ardere, believing a single word she said, bringing her to Altissia, letting his guard down and giving himself to the sorceress... The entire ordeal was a mistake. He was to blame for what was happening. Cor picked up speed, dodging plaster that cracked from the ceiling and fell down. "Marshal, wait up!" Pelna called after him. "What's going on?"

"I'll tell you when this is over," Cor yelled to him. They skidded to a stop at the balcony entrance and saw Luna and Gentiana defending themselves from an onslaught of magic attacks, and at the other end of those spells... "I should've killed you when I got the chance."

His voice got Nebula's attention. Her eyes landed on him, and for the second time in his life, Cor stared into the mydriated eyes of Lamia, the witch who killed him and brought him back to life. Pelna shuddered beside him, his hands doing their best to keep a grip on his throwing knives. "Marshal, that's-"

"I know who it is." He drew his katana and pointed it at her. "Luna, I think it's time you asked the gods for some help."

She didn't understand how he knew Gentiana's secret, but didn't question it, and dashed to her guardian. "Gentiana, it's time."

The black-haired woman nodded. "I understand. Be safe, Luna." She kissed the Princess' forehead and closed her eyes. A blue-white glow took over Gentiana's body. It narrowed to a single point on her chest and shot into the sky, making the guardian's body levitate as the energy flowed out. It arced into the waters below and Gentiana's body fell to the floor, motionless. Luna caressed her guardian's body and waited. The air grew silent, and after a moment, something rose out of the water. Its roar echoed through the ballroom and across the city, enticing people to run as close to the water as they could to catch a glimpse of the legendary being. Leviathan's head hovered over the balcony, white smoke flying from her nostrils, and when she looked down at Nebula, her mouth opened, and another shriek erupted.

"Et non timebit te," she said to the Archaean, and she turned her back on the creature. Pelna ran between Nebula and Luna and held up his throwing knives.

"You sure she's the witch, Cor?" Pelna asked. "She doesn't look so scary." He hoped the lie would help convince himself that the enemy wasn't to be feared. He'd fought many different creatures in his time in the Kingsglaive, many which were venomous, many that had frightening appearances. The
only thing scary about Lamia was her eyes, and if he didn't look at them, it felt like he was in battle against just another person.

"Don't underestimate her, Pelna. She may look fragile, but she's capable of causing major damage."

"Quare pugnare sciret moriemini quo stas?" she asked them, not expecting them to answer. "Vanum labor tuus est. Currite, dum potes." When no one moved, Nebula sucked in a breath. "Optime."

Her hand lunged forward and ice particles sprayed everywhere. Pelna pushed Luna and Gentiana out of the way, throwing one of his knives in the witch's direction and warping closer to her. Cor jumped in at the same time and swiped his katana downward. Nebula summoned a barrier on both of her arms and parried both oncoming attacks. She sank into the ground - a warping spell, Cor recognized - causing their blades to clash. Both men backed away from each other and saw the sorceress reappear just in time to evade Leviathan's bite at the marble. Nebula flipped into a backspring and slashed the Archaean's nose with her heel, her dress ripping when it caught on Leviathan's teeth. Pelna charged at her again, throwing both knives to catch her off guard, and managed to cut her arm. Nebula sent lightning in Leviathan's direction and swept Cor off his feet with an aero spell, knocking him on his back. He rolled upright again and jumped into the air, sending energy waves from his katana when he cut the air below him. Nebula created thick ice walls and threw them into the energy waves to knock them away, one being thrown into the pillar behind Luna. The marble cracked and large pieces fell toward the Princess and her unconscious guard.

"Your Highness!" Pelna yanked one of his knives from the floor and threw it in Luna's direction. He vanished and reappeared just as a large marble chunk came close to caving in her skull. He spun horizontally and pulled Luna out of the way of the marble, which cut deep into the skin on his temple. Pelna held the quickly bleeding area, feeling the red liquid seep between his fingers and drip on the marble. "Fuck..." His ears rang when he tried to stand, and he blew hard on his nose, sending more blood dripping on the floor.

Cor reached into his pocket for an emergency potion, but stopped himself when he saw Nebula coming at him from the corner of his eye. She'd taken possession of one of Pelna's knives, and the two engaged in swordplay, parrying each other's attacks and pushing one another backwards. Leviathan did her best to aid the marshal by whipping at the sorceress with her whiskers and biting at her feet. Pelna, back on his feet, rejoined the fight and tried to regain possession of his knife. He reached for Nebula's free arm to twist it and make her let go, but her leg arced up far behind her and knocked him in the head, causing him to stumble backwards. Sending Cor into the other pillar and knocking the wind out of him, Nebula marched closer to Luna, but was stopped when one of Leviathan's whiskers wrapped around her waist and threw her off the balcony. She hit the water with great force and the area fell silent. The marshal pushed himself to a standing position and held his stomach, feeling a bruise form where he knew there was a broken bone underneath. He panted and stumbled in his steps as he walked over to Luna and Pelna. He glanced up at Leviathan and nodded a silent thank-you to her. "Are you hurt?" he asked Luna.

She shook her head. "No, thanks to your efforts." She heard footsteps coming toward them, and when she looked over her shoulder, she saw Noctis and his entourage, with Senator Venenum behind them. "Good to see you safe."

"We made sure everyone got out of here," Gladiolus told them. "The President's still in the building. He insisted on staying close until the situation was under control. His security detail are with him." The bodyguard looked around the balcony. "Where's the witch?" Cor huffed and pointed to the water under them.

Prompto knelt next to Luna and helped her lift Gentiana from the floor. "Where's Nebula?" The Princess and the marshal immediately looked away from the gunner, both refusing to answer him.
"Guys, where is she?"

Cor's lips parted, and before he could get a word out, Leviathan shrieked in pain. Everyone watched her head sway from side to side and saw electricity crawl up the Archaean's body from the water. "No!" Luna yelled, watching her guardian fall, her head hitting the inner left side of the balcony. More marble cracked, the jagged lines seeping into the foundation of the balcony, and the structure started to crumble.

"We have to get out of here!" Noctis said to them. "There's a tunnel in the basement we can take! Let's go!" Noctis' voice fell silent when something flew out of the water and landed next to the twitching Archaean's head. Nebula stood up straight and observed the onlookers, her eyes lingering on Luna, then Cor, and finally Noctis.

"Noctis Lucis Caelum."

"Nebula..." Nebula lifted her hand and snapped her fingers before anyone could react, and the surrounding people and Archaean froze. All time was slowed, allowing them very little movement or reaction time. The sorceress stepped forward, paying no mind to her bleeding arm or the tattered remains of her dress getting caught on the jagged edges of the marble floor. She sauntered Cor's way and tore his katana from his grasp, and beckoned cold energy above her shoulder, forming a jagged icicle. Her walk ceased in front of Pelna. Frost accumulated on the floor as she fired the icicle into the Glaive, piercing him on the right side of his torso. The impact took time to register on his face, and while his suffering began, Nebula ran her hand across the katana's blade until ice grew on the metal, and stabbed it into Gentiana's gut. Her sight shifted to Luna, who's just begun to see the damage done to her guardian, and her hand reached for her blonde locks.

"Stop." A voice rang in her head, igniting a painful jolt from her neck into her head. "Worry not about the Princess," it commanded her. "Take out the Lucian senator." When she tried to ignore the voice's order, Nebula felt another shock hit her, harder than the first. "Don't disobey an order from Etro. It is her will that Pluvia Venenum dies tonight. Go for the President when you're done with her." Unable to resist the command any longer, Nebula walked over to the Lucian senator. She hadn't yet noticed that the witch was standing centimeters from her.

"Quia auferetur a vobis vitam voluntas Etro," Nebula told the unaware Senator. "Princeps vester ibit cum vobis." She laid her hand on the Senator's head. "Obrigescunt." Senator Venenum's skin started to turn taupe and harden as the curse spread. It moved quickly throughout her body, and Nebula could see the air leaving her body as her entire form turned to stone. Time crept back to its normal pace as she walked away from them, throwing an Aeroga spell behind her that scooped up the Senator's petrified body and threw it into the wall. Noctis could only watch in horror as one of his country's few surviving parliament members was split into hundreds of pieces that scattered all over the floor.

"No!" he cried out, and broke into a chase after Nebula.

"Noct, wait!" Gladiolus called after him, finding himself unable to keep up with the Prince's suddenly quick stride. "Shit. Prompto, catch up to him!"

"On it!" the blond yelled, and he sprinted ahead of them.

The bodyguard skipped to a halt and ran back to Luna, who was screaming as she held Gentiana in her arms. "How is she, Ignis?"

The tactician shook off his blazer and scrunched it into a ball, and pressed it to Gentiana's bleeding
stomach. "Not good. The blade seems to have pierced her liver and intestines. She won't make it if we don't get her to a hospital." He removed his gloves and pressed down on the wound. "I'll try Curaga to buy us some time."

"What about Pelna?" Ignis lowered and shook his head. Gladiolus looked at the fallen Glaive, whose eyes were wide open with frost crystals growing and forming new icicles that poked more holes into his body. The large icicle that had pierced his abdomen was thick and still frozen solid. Gladiolus scoffed, not believing that Pelna was dead. He knelt down and placed two fingers on the guard's jugular vein. He waited to feel a pulse of any kind, indicating life still flowed through him, but after a few minutes he felt nothing but the ice growing further across his body. The bodyguard looked away from Pelna's body and reached his hand up to his eyes, closing them out of respect. "...Prompto went after Noctis. They're following Nebula as we speak." The bodyguard turned to Cor. "Care to explain what the fuck's going on, Cor? What happened to Nebula?"

Cor searched the area around him, uttering a pained gasp when he saw the scattered stone body parts of Senator Venenum, to make sure no Accordians were around. "Noctis is going to get himself killed," he said in a low voice, then looked at Gladiolus and the others. "Nebula Ardere, the woman contracted with our kingdom in the Shadow Agreement, is not who you believe she is. That's not even her real name. She's-" Before he could finish his explanation, a cone of flames blew onto the balcony. Cor stared into the ballroom again and saw the fire licking the marble pillars, smoky black wisps emerging from the hall connecting the ballroom to the rest of the Presidential Palace. "No!" He grabbed his katana from the floor and darted into the ballroom.

"Cor, wait!"

"I'm going to stop Nebula before she kills Noctis!" he shouted without thinking of the right choice of words, leaving the bodyguard and tactician stunned as he ran toward the hallway.

"Nebula...kill Noctis?"

Luna's hands tightened around Gentiana. "...She's the witch," she said, regret lingering in her voice. "Nebula is the sorceress Lamia."

Ignis fell into shock, the green glow of magic leaving his hands momentarily. "Lamia? But how?"

"I don't know, but she's been hiding it from us this whole time. I found her stumbling here like she was disoriented, and then she started speaking the Archaean tongue and throwing lightning bolts at us..." Luna shook her head, still unable to come to terms with the news. Her head perked up and she looked at Gladiolus. "You have to go after them, Gladio. Noctis doesn't know yet! He could get hurt!"

"Iggy-"

"I'll get them somewhere safe," Ignis promised his partner. He removed one of his hands off of Gentiana's body for a second and dug out his phone, and handed it to Luna. "Call the Kingsglaive commander. Tell him to send reinforcements here immediately, especially Crowe. She's the only one who can combat Nebula in that state." He returned to working on Gentiana. "Keep him safe, Gladio."

The bodyguard nodded. "Will do." He called on his sword, which appeared as crystals surrounded him and landed in his graps, and he galloped away after his Prince. Luna found the desired number on Ignis' phone and called the safe house, explaining their situation to them. Her hands were coated in Gentiana's blood.
Gladiolus could barely see as he ran through the hall. The smoke had thickened twice over since his initial entry into the ballroom, flames still crackling from paintings and furniture, and he could only rely on his hearing to figure out which way to go. "Noct!" he yelled, his free hand reaching to feel the wall. "Prompto! Cor!" He pushed on the receiver in his ear, listening for any kind of signal, but all he heard was buzzing. "Dammit..." Gladiolus continued down the hall, turning left and finding himself at a set of stairs. Voices - more like screaming - grew louder the further he descended the stairs, and when he reached the bottom, he saw bright flashes through the darkening hall.

"Don't let her get to the Pres-AAAAAAAAAA!"

"Get back, witch!" Another shriek of terror, and then silence.

"Please, tell me," the Accordian President pleaded, "why are you doing this?"

"Sed voluntas est Etro." More fire blew out of the room. "Noli pugnare."

"I don't know who sent you here, but please know my full loyalty is to Emperor Aldercapt. I'd never-" His voice was replaced by yelling - his yelling.

Then more voices interjected. "Get him out of here, Noctis." Cor had arrived.

"Tell me what's going on, Cor!" the Prince objected. "Why is Nebula messed up?"

"Isn't it obvious yet? She's the sorceress Lamia!" Gladiolus ran into the palace's dining hall. Broken glass and wood lay everywhere. A chair leg was stuck inside one of the security guards' heads- Gladiolus looked away. The room was littered with the bodies of eleven security guards, all with gruesome and fatal injuries. On the right stood the President, Cor, Noctis, and Prompto, all staring at the woman across the room.

"Eum," Nebula spat at them, smoke curling around her torn dress. When no one said anything, she shot out another lightning bolt and aimed it at Noctis. Gladiolus intercepted and deflected the strike with the flat edge of his greatsword, sending it into the stone fireplace that cracked when hit.

"She's too strong!" Prompto's voice cracked. "Cor, what do we do?"

"Ignis is calling for backup as we speak," Gladiolus answered in the marshal's place. "He's having Crowe sent over to help."

"She'd better get here soon!" Cor stated as he charged at Nebula, and the two engaged in another battle. He sent her backing away from them, aiming his blade directly at her vital points, and dodged the electricity she shot at him. When she ducked under his katana he kneeled her in the chin and had her staggering into the nearby corner, wiping blood from her lips and shaking it off. He laid the sharpened edge of the blade against her neck to keep her in place. "Get the President out of here," he ordered the younger men. "She's going for him-" Nebula's foot flew up between his legs and knocked the air from his lungs a second time, and when his stance faltered and the blade lowered, she scratched at his eyes. Cor sucked his teeth from the sharp stinging that hit his face, and when he regained his footing the room suddenly became dark and blurry. "Shit... He knew the smoke she sent into his eyes was a Blind spell, and it was working fast. He slashed at the space in front of him as he tried to get a hit on her, but the sorceress easily evaded every one of his attempts and watched him fall onto the long wooden table. She grabbed his head and smashed it into a ceramic pot. While he rolled over and tried to get up, she kicked his legs out from under him. Cor's head hit the edge of the table and he fell, groaning unable to get himself up again.

Cor distracting Nebula allowed Prompto, Gladiolus and Noctis to get the President far from the
dining hall and down another level. "My bunker isn't much farther from here," Frons said to them, his around Gladiolus' neck. "Will the marshal be alright?"

"Cor won't lose," Noctis said, more to himself than the President. "Good thing your wife isn't as stubborn as you are, otherwise we'd have two targets on our hands."

"Lilium is much more bull-headed than she lets on," Frons told them. "But you'll understand why once you're married, Your Highness."

"Well, there won't be a wedding until everything is taken care of. Including the witch." Witch. It still didn't match the kind doctor who'd saved his life. She'd taken them in and protected them from the Imperial Forces; it didn't make sense for her to suddenly attack them like she had.

"I still don't understand how she got in at all. We had the tightest security since the war began..." Frons shook his head. "Your marshal told me what happened to Senator Venenum. My deepest condolences are offered to you."

"Thank you," Prompto told him. Something creaked as they got closer to the escape tunnel and everyone stopped. "Ssh. I heard something." Prompto and Noctis shared a glance, and crystals formed around the blond's right hand, forming a gun shape. His pistol dropped into his grasp and he motioned for Gladiolus to switch positions with him. The President was handed over to Prompto and the bodyguard stepped forward. The creaking continued, and as everyone readied themselves to fight, relief washed over them when they saw Tredd and Crowe run toward them. "Oh, thank Etro! We were starting to think we were done for!"

"We came as soon as the Princess called," Tredd told them. "Nyx and Luche are on their way to her now. Axis and Sonitus went with them to..." He didn't want to say 'collect the bodies of Pelna and Senator Venenum. It hurt to know one of his fellow Glaives had been murdered, and it was worse to know that the Senator's body would be piled like rocks in a bag. "Where's the witch?"

"Cor's dealing with her as we speak," Noctis explained. "He should be back by now, though..."

Crowe stepped closer. "Where are they?"

Prompto pointed to a room far behind them. "The dining room. Last I saw he was winning-" A fiery cyclone took over the hallway and lunged at them. Gladiolus and Prompto shielded Noctis and the President with their bodies, and before the flames could reach them, Crowe jumped in the line of fire and created a barrier. She pushed against the flames, her feet skidding on the floor as she forced it back. Three more shoves snuffed out the fire, leaving only more black smoke, and when Crowe lowered the barrier, she could see Nebula walking closer to them.

"Dr. Ardere-"

"No, don't!" Someone knocked them out of the way of an oncoming blast of icy air. Libertus protected his friends from the stinging particles that cut into his coat and scraped his back raw. When the blizzard died down he helped Crowe and Tredd stand. The mage's eyes were wide brown saucers as she glared at the doctor, who was preparing another Blizzaga spell. Crowe staggered to her feet and raised her hands at Nebula, quickly realizing she wasn't the kind country doctor anymore, and made a new barrier to separate her from them.

"We have to weaken her," she told the others. "I can't contain her while she's like this. She has to be distracted before I can get close."

"Dammit, I should've traded places with Nyx," Tredd complained. "He'd enjoy playing hero here."
"He'll have to do that another time." Gladiolus looked at the witch again, who was sending spell after spell into the barrier in an attempt to break it. "But we have to get Cor first. If she's out here, that means he's in bad shape."

"Leave that to me." Noctis handed off the President to Tredd. "I can warp farther than the rest of you; I can make it to the dining hall the fastest."

"Then let me be the distraction," Prompto offered. "They don't call me 'Quicksilver' for nothing."

The barrier started to crack.

"Commander Drautos will meet with us when it's over. He's watching over His Majesty until then."

Libertus met each person's gaze and nodded to them, signifying a mutual understanding of the plan.

"Alright, let's go!"

The barrier cracked and the group split into three parties. Libertus took up guarding the President. Noctis and Crowe hung back as Gladiolus, Tredd and Prompto launched their attack on Nebula. It was three-versus-one for the witch again, who had more difficulty than the first time in keeping up with the three fighters. Even without the warping abilities which Noctis and the Kingsglaive possessed, Prompto and Gladiolus were faster than Pelna with their assault. Prompto stayed just out of Nebula's reach as Tredd and Gladiolus used their blades to keep her from launching any long-distance spells at any of them. The plan worked as Nebula struggled to keep up with deflecting the sword attacks and Prompto's shooting. A bullet grazed her knee. Tredd's knife slashed a second gash in her arm. "This is gonna hurt!" Gladiolus roared as he charged at Nebula and slammed his shoulder into her gut. Nebula flew across the hall and landed in the wall, creating a dent the size of a table which her legs hung out of. "Noct, now!"

Noctis didn't hesitate for a second. He summoned one of his swords and threw it down the hallway, warping himself away from the battlefield. When his feet touched the ground, he heard Gladiolus grunt as his body was hit with a Flare spell and he was knocked into the opposite wall. Nebula flew out of the hole she sat in and threw a Thundaga spell at Noctis. He threw one of equal strength back at her. Both casters pushed their arms out, trying to one-up their opponent. Nebula pushed harder on hers and forced Noctis to skid backwards. Prompto fired several rounds at the sorceress only to have them deflected by a Reflection spell. One ricocheted off the glassy plate protecting her and flew at Prompto, grazing the side of his neck. "Prompto!" Noctis' irises went red. He drew power from the crystal and sent it into his Thundaga spell, forcing Nebula down to her knee. She still found strength to hold her own against him, and the Prince started to wonder if it was really going to be the end of them.

A sudden scream erupted from Nebula. She clutched the back of her neck with her free hand, doing whatever she could to control the agonizing pulse that throbbed under her skin. She bared her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, and in the split second of weakness, her focus on her Thundaga spell wore down. Noctis' attack struck her and she flew seven meters across the hall, rolling and landing near Prompto's feet. Crowe jumped into action and raised her hands. Nebula, barely aware of what was going on, levitated off the floor. Her body was limp as she moaned, her vision nothing but dots. She didn't know what had happened. Crowe took advantage of the moment and wrapped Nebula in a strong barrier, paralyzing her movements. The black smoke she'd created began to dissipate, allowing the President to see the full extent of the damage to his lavish estate. They could hear the sirens of ambulances and other emergency vehicles whining outside. With Crowe having full control over Nebula, Noctis darted down the hall to get Cor.

Libertus put a hand to the receiver in his ear. "Libertus to Glaive," he said. "The sorceress is secure. I repeat: the sorceress is secure."
"Nice job," Nyx said over the air waves. "Princess Fleuret is alive and secure. Lady Surgens is still alive, but in bad shape. She needs to get to a hospital. How are the others?"

"The building's been evacuated," Tredd said, hissing from the bullet in his ankle. "I'm hit, but otherwise fine. I'll survive."

"And Crowe?"

"She's sealing the hold on the sorceress as we speak." Libertus caught sight of Noctis and Cor, the marshal's arm around the Prince's neck, slowly making their way toward the group. "Marshal Leonis is alive. He requires medical attention." Hearing Libertus' words made everyone immediately glance at Nebula, the one they'd been calling 'doctor' and 'friend' all these weeks. She had been their go-to person for medical treatment. She'd been the center of the Shadow Agreement, keeping Lucis on its feet with her elixirs and expertise in treating illnesses and injuries. And now...

He stared at the unconscious woman. "Kingsglaive, please note: Nebula Ardere is now the enemy."
Water was splashed on her, instantly shocking her awake. Her head shook and she curled into herself. "Wake up."

"Wouldn't it just be easier to kick her until she gets up?"

"Okay, then. Be my guest. Walk right in there and wake her up."

"No way. I'm not going anywhere near her."

"Exactly. So stop bitching about it." The voices were harsh as they spoke about her. Her eyes peeled open, crusted over with dried blood that had poured from a gash on her forehead. "Get up, witch. We know you're awake." Her vision, blurred at first, cleared to take in the small, grayed surroundings. She hadn't realized how hard the floor was until she discovered she'd been laying on it, her hair a complete mess on top of the concrete. She sat up, wondering why her arms felt so stiff when she tried moving them. "Look at that. She has no clue what's going on."

"Hey. Hey, Nif. Mutant. Whatever the fuck they call you back there. Look up." She glanced up in the direction of the voices and saw three figures standing at a distance in front of her, crossed bars in between her and them. They were all clothed in black, two of them in suits and sunglasses. The third had her arms crossed and didn't say a word. Her throat was dry. Her head throbbed. She pushed herself off the floor in an attempt to stand, but was yanked backwards by chains. Pulling on her arms, she found them bound tight behind her back under thick layers of fabric, the restraints chained around her upper arms. "Rise and shine, sweetheart. Did you have a nice sleep?"

The doctor's gaze focused on the two service guards and Crowe, who stood on their right side. "...Where am I?" she asked in a raspy voice. "The waiter... Have to get the waiter... He's-

"We'll be asking the questions." One of the guards reached for keys hanging from his belt loop. "You'll be able to keep her stable?"

Crowe nodded. "I'm ready for anything she may try." The guard turned his key and pushed the barred cell door aside, and reached for the prisoner. His partner took her other arm and they shoved her forward. Crowe stayed a few steps behind as they guided her down a series of halls leading to a small white-walled room. She was led to a chair and forced to sit down. Crowe hung back and whispered something on the other side of the door. "Yes, she's awake. They pumped her full of sedatives so she doesn't have a meltdown. She might not be responsive, but she's ready." As the
mage stepped aside, the doctor watched Cor Leonis walk into the room, followed by Clarus Amicitia, Titus Drautos, and Frons Speculo. The Accordian President sat on the opposite side of the table, his security flanking him on either side. Titus stood beside them, and Clarus and Cor approached her, the latter's head wrapped in bandages. He kept one hand rested on his katana in case anything went wrong.

"Cor..."

"You will address me properly, witch," he spat. "We're going to ask you some questions, and two things can come out of this. You can be difficult and we can kill you now, or you can comply and we can kill you later. Which will it be?" The witch lowered her head, the words swimming around inside her skull. "State your name." She tried to think of her name, but all that came to light in her mind were blurred words, moments of scenes coated in a transparent red film. She wanted to go back to sleep. When she closed her eyes, Cor unhooked his katana and sheath from its holster strap and banged it on top of the metal table. She woke up again, her breath heavy from the sudden sound. "It seems you need something to help you be more aware of your situation." Cor gestured to Clarus, who flipped a manila folder open and slid it across the table. A stack of photographs lay inside, and the marshal pushed the stack in the doctor's viewing range. "Do you know who this woman is?"

She stared at the photo of the woman, her appearance showing an age past the middle of her life. It was the last surviving senator of Lucis, posed for her official portrait. "...Senator Pluvia Venenum..."

"And what happened to her last night?" He switched to the next picture, which showed a pile of rocks scattered all across the ballroom. On the bottom left-hand corner another picture was held on with a paperclip: a close-up of one of the rocks. Her eyes widened when she recognized a portion of a face in the rock.

"She was...p-petrified..."

"You mean you petrified her." He pushed the picture away and placed another in front of her. "Name him and tell me what happened." The man in the first picture was smiling as he posed with his friends, and in the second, his body lay on the floor, his eyes closed and mouth agape. Frost covered most of his body, stemming from an icicle that remained solid as it perforated his body.

"...Pelna Khara... Icicle impaled...his...diaphragm and lung. The frost grew and froze the...rest of his organs."

"It's amazing how much detail you can get from a photo, isn't it?" He laid his hands on the table and leaned close to her. "Say your name, witch." Her lips parted, but no words came out. Her voice cracked as her memory from the night before started to resurface. She suddenly recalled taking the katana from Cor's hand and shoving it into Gentiana's stomach. She remembered how the icicle pierced Pelna, how she angled it to go into his lung so he'd choke on his blood while he froze. She remembered the exact second when Pluvia's skin began to harden into rock under her fingertip, blinding Cor when they fought in the dining hall, exchanging blows with Noctis and Gladiolus... It became a fresh memory, one that brought tears to her eyes and made her more aware of everything she'd done. She bit hard on her bottom lip and drew blood, knowing full well that her cover was blown. There was nothing left to hide. She straightened her back as far as her restraints would allow and blew hair out of her line of vision, sniffling and stopping her tears as much as she could with rapid blinks.

"My name is Atra Ardere Interitio." The President's eyes widened when he heard her surname, which she took momentary notice of. "I'm the daughter of General Callisto Interitio of Nifelheim. I ran away from Nifelheim of my own volition and assumed a new identity to protect myself and others. I don't serve the emperor or anyone; I pushed myself away from them long ago."
"And why should we believe that?" the President interjected. "You hail from the very country you swear is your enemy. Do you claim to be one of the many refugees that flee the empire?" She opened her mouth to answer, but was stopped by the President's hand raising. He gestured to Clarus, who walked up to her with his arms folded behind his back.

"Atra Ardere Interitio. A beautiful name that could strike terror in one's heart." He pulled out the chair adjacent to her and sat down. "Tell us something, Atra. Why did you run away from Nifelheim?" The tone of his voice was the complete opposite of Cor's and brought about a sense of calm, but Atra knew it was just a ploy to get her to talk.

"The empire of Nifelheim is a terrible place to live, even if you're a member of the upper class. You're not exempt from the curfews or any of their laws." She met Clarus' gaze. "Nifelis can't cast magic, but there are cases of a genetic mutation granting them that power. If you're found to have magic-wielding abilities, you're automatically deemed a criminal of the state. You're labeled a mutant, something too dangerous to be allowed on the streets."

"What would happen to the others like you?"

Atra stared at the pictures of the people who died at the gala. "Torture. Interrogation. Forced to live in squalor in a cell." She looked up at everyone. "And sometimes, even human experimentation. Nifelheim did all they could to try to control the magic in the people they dubbed 'mutants', just because they couldn't do it themselves." Her head shook. "I had to escape."

Cor's hands relaxed. "But you knew you were different. You knew you'd be putting the world at risk if you left the confines of your empire, because that was your order from Aldercapt."

Her head whipped in his direction. "I told you, I had no orders from him. I ran away from Nifelheim to find freedom!"

"How is it you know the language of the Archaeans?" Her eyes widened. "Don't tell us you have no memory of the words you spoke to me when we fought. You said you were an agent of Etro, blessed by her and given the power to choose someone's fate." He picked up the photo of Pelna and shoved it in her face. "What gives you the right to do this? To do what you did in Lestallum, or anywhere?" She remembered waking up in Lestallum, her entire body covered in her victim's blood, and she shuddered. "Give me one reason why we shouldn't kill you, Miss Interitio."

"Perhaps we could use her as a bargaining chip for Nifelheim," the President suggested.

Drautos shook his head. "That's exactly what they'd want us to do. She may be the General's daughter, but she's still the sorceress they unleashed."

"NO!" Atra yelled, the chair shaking under her. "I don't want to go back there! My life there would be worse than death by your hand." She rocked back and forth in her seat. "...But I still don't want to die. I swore to dedicate my life to helping people, and I want to continue doing that."

Frons scoffed. "The witch who kills people wants to save lives. How ironic."

"Why do you think they want me back so badly?" she growled at Frons, whose guards inched closer to him. "Iedolas knows what my elixirs are capable of. And I'm sure that he somehow knows the King is alive, thanks to me." Her gaze shifted to Cor. "I saved your Prince's life. He was poisoned, and I saved him - someone the empire so desperately wants to see dead."

"Then why change your name?"

"I wanted no connection to General Interitio. He's as bad as General Glauc, probably worse." Her
eyes became fierce as she dug into her memories and thought of her father. "When he learned I was a mutant, he wanted to kill me himself. And sometimes, I wish he did so I wouldn't be this walking omen." She huffed a sigh. "But something left me alive, and I knew I had to make up for all the shit he and the rest of Nifelheim did to the world. So I left. I changed my name and started a new life in Duscae. And if any of the Imperial Forces somehow found me..." Atra pointed her chin to the photos of Pelna and Senator Venenum.

Cor shifted his weight and leaned close to Atra again. "From the sound of it, it seems more likely that your guilt of killing all those people caught up with you." His voice lowered. "Face it, Atra. No matter how many lives you save, you'll always find more to take. You can't control yourself." She pulled her head as far away from him as the chair would allow, eyes squeezed tight.

"I know what I did. Every time someone dies by my hand, I can remember the sounds of their screams, the terror in their voices when they plead for me to spare them..." She finally broke down, her voice hitching as she cried and hovered her head over the table. "...I wish I could've saved them. They didn't deserve to die..."

Cor scowled and turned his back to Atra. "I'm done with her." Frons motioned his hand for the security guards to take her back to her cell. They grabbed her by the arms again and Crowe followed behind them. As she was led away and passed by her interrogators, Atra's eyes connected with Cor's. All time seemed to slow down around them as they only saw each other. It was a tiny, microscopic spark, of sorrow and guilt, regret and fear. Cor had to force himself to turn away before something erupted in him. The long stare didn't go unnoticed to the President, who whispered something to one of his guards before they left the room. Atra was thrown back into her cell and chained up, the barred door slammed shut. As the guards left her alone, she felt the presence of another person lingering on the other side of the bars.

"Why are you still here?"

Crowe leaned against the opposite wall. "I'll be watching you until your sentence is decided. You need someone to make sure you don't try to use magic."

Atra scoffed. "Oh, really? So having me bound like this isn't enough?" She rolled her eyes. "Now I know why I never like the idea of imprisonment."

"You speak like you've thought of it before."

"Have to be prepared for anything when you're Lamia." Atra stared at the floor. "...I want to speak with Noctis."

"The official death toll stands at fourteen," the reporter said, "and at least thirty have been injured. The culprit's identity has been confirmed as twenty-four year old Doctor Nebula Ardere of Duscae, who is originally from the Empire of Nifelheim. No other details have been released at this time, but we'll stay with you for continuing coverage on the massacre at the Presidential Palace. Henry? Aida?" The video feed switched to the co-anchors reporting from their newsroom, but everyone in the suite ignored the words the reporters had to say. All they could think about - from the night before to that very moment - was how their friend, the person who helped them in their battles from Duscae to Altissia, was now their enemy.

"I can't believe this," Gladiolus sighed a third time as he sat hunched over in his chair. He had so many questions. How could he have not seen her for who she really was? How didn't he realize it sooner when she killed the three Nifeli soldiers with a Thundaga spell? How could he have let her touch Noctis? "Dammit!" His fist knocked on the top of the coffee table.
"We were all deceived, Gladio," Ignis said to him. "I should've said something when she casted magic."

Prompto lay against the wall. "So...when we were in Lestallum and that guy died-

"That was her doing," Noctis finished, still unable to fully grasp the truth. "Now I know why Cor was so desperate to get us away from her." He grabbed Luna's hand and held it tight.

"It's a sad turn of events," she said. "What do we even call her now?" The men shrugged their shoulders. Luna stared at the television as she replayed the scene on the balcony in her head: how the doctor's face scrunched in agony when she held her head; the way her gaze magnetized to Cor when he came to the Princess' rescue; and the despair that swam in his eyes when he saw what she'd become. His stare told her a silent story, one the Marshal didn't seem to want the world to know. "Call me crazy, but when we were fighting on the balcony...it almost seemed like he knew who she was."

Prompto's head perked up momentarily. "Yeah. He created the Shadow Agreement with her."

"Not like that. I mean he seemed to know her - who and what she really was."

"You really must be crazy if you think that," Gladiolus replied. "The Marshal wouldn't put our lives at risk like that."

Luna's fingers squeezed her fiancé's hand. "I don't know. I saw them dancing last night, and the look in their eyes wasn't one of annoyance. If they were together at one point or another, perhaps they got too close, and..." Her words trailed off. "I'm not sure if that had any correlation with what he did and didn't know about her, but from what you've told me, he's been quite bitter towards her for your entire journey here. You don't develop negative feelings such as his from a simple affair." Noctis began to understand the words the doctor had said to him on the ferry. Saying Cor's attitude towards her was justified didn't merely serve as a way to shut him up; she'd been warning him of a potential danger, herself. His eyes widened at the realization and his free hand curled into a fist, and as the information sank in, Clarus and Cor walked into the room.

Everyone stood up when they approached them. "She gave us a lot of information," Clarus started. "She seemed quite willing to cooperate, especially when Nifelheim came up in conversation." He cleared his throat. "Her name is Atra Interitio, and as you're all well-informed, you have an idea of who her father is." Ignis sucked in a sharp breath. "She's taken full responsibility for the deaths of Pelna and Senator Venenum."

Noctis held his arms out in question. "So what now?"

"Next is her sentencing. She'll be put before Accordo's highest judges, and they'll decide if she lives or dies." Cor turned away from them. "Though the probability of her remaining alive after this is close to zero." He marched to the buffet on the wall and poured himself a glass of water. As he walked by them, Luna could tell something was off.

"Can we see her?" Luna asked, knowing she spoke for all of the young royals.

Clarus shook his head. "That's not a good idea, Your Highness. Though we have Crowe monitoring her, we still can't say that's enough to keep her in check. Atra is a dangerous person, too dangerous to allow you to see."

"I'm with her," Noctis filled in. "We deserve a chance to hear her explanation for ourselves before she's executed." Clarus met each of their gazes, stopping on his son's, who remained hardened like
his friends. They were giving him the same look he’d given in the hotel, when they first convinced him and Cor to let the doctor accompany them to Altissia. He turned away from them as Cor did, his lips drawn into a line.

"Did you know?" The question left Noctis as more of a demand as Cor raised the glass to his lips, and he halted his actions. "You've been around her longer than any of us. What did you know about her?"

A long sigh left Cor. He set his glass down and gestured to the seating all around the room. "What I'm about to tell you is classified, Noctis. It can never leave this room, and the President can never know. Do you understand?" The tone in his voice dropped as he laid his hand on Noctis' shoulder and gave him a quick squeeze to indicate the seriousness of what he was about to tell them. When everyone was seated, Cor rested his katana between his knees and folded his hands atop the hilt. The Marshal drew in a second deep breath. Telling Clarus the truth was difficult enough, and now that he was going to tell the future King and his court about the top-secret plan that had been set in motion ten months before, he felt his nerves act up. "As you now know, Atra Interitio, the woman contracted with our kingdom in the Shadow Agreement, is not who you assumed she was. I knew exactly who she was after a battle against an Imperial squadron, where she killed them all. I won't deny that she's a skilled medical professional. Her knowledge in treating the human body and crafting such an effective assortment of elixirs is invaluable to the Lucian army. But the woman is also a threat to the safety of our men and the crown." Delivering the news had suddenly become much more difficult than Cor had imagined. Tightening his hands around his weapon's hilt, he readied himself to just let everything out in the open. He didn't repeat Atra's title to them, but as he watched their faces transform from calm to anxiety, he knew they already had it stapled into their minds. "Bringing her to serve Lucis was a risky move, one your father didn't completely agree with at first, Your Highness. She's a cursed figure. I only convinced His Majesty after tensions became worse between Lucis and Nifelheim. The benefits outweighed the risks at the time, so long as she was kept a long distance away from our borders, and we were desperate for anything that would turn the tide in this war. We had her elixirs tested and Atra was fully interrogated before anything was put into motion. He approved of the usage of her elixirs as an emergency resource soon after, and you know the rest.

"Originally, we hadn't planned to reveal the truth to you until His Majesty was safely in Solheim's borders, but the situation may have been compromised." Just thinking of Atra's mydriated eyes sent chills down his spine, remembering that to be the last sight he took in before she killed him, and he decided not to divulge that potion of the story to them. "Our research department created a special ring for her to wear, which would seal off her powers when it was time to meet in person for the next delivery." The men all remembered the ring from the package she'd hidden in the door inside her house. "But after our encounter with the enemy on the freeway the diamonds in the ring cracked, and now it's useless." Cor still wondered why she'd worn it to the gala the night before. Staring at his hands, he recalled holding Atra's as they danced, emotions rising as the music consumed them and they spun together. Her question continued to ring in his head, a single inquiry that dared to swallow him as her presence once had. Luna, ever vigilant, picked up on the emotions running rampant in his eyes.

"You don't want her to die." Her sentence stung the Marshal's chest, earning his attention. "I see it in your eyes, Cor. You care for her just as much as we do."

Clarus stepped forward. "But she's-"

"We know what she is," the Prince interrupted. "She's the Duscaean doctor who saved mine and my father's lives." He found himself fighting the hard evidence of the murders she'd committed the other night. "If she were really this evil entity, I'd be dead right now, and the crystal would be in Iedolas'
hands!" Noctis shot out of his chair. "I'm not assuming anything until I talk to her for myself."

"Even though she attacked you and your friends, too?" the Marshal asked. Noctis sucked his teeth and scrunched his eyebrows. He crossed his arms and paced the floor. He couldn't forget the force of the Thundaga spell she threw at him after knocking Gladiolus into the wall. It was the first time since escaping from Insomnia that he felt such a force go for his throat. He didn't want to remember the glare she gave him as they battled for control over their spells, forcing one another backwards. She looked at him like she wanted him dead; and if it hadn't been for the others, he told himself, he might just have suffered that fate.

Noctis halted his pacing. "That wasn't Nebula - or Atra - we fought last night. Whoever she was is not the same person I met back in Duscae, and I want to talk to Nebula."

"The President won't like that," Ignis added. "Once someone's a prisoner of Accordo, they're only allowed interrogation and a sentencing. Their method of handling judicial outcomes are unfair, even for a situation like this."

"Then we have to act fast." Prompto joined Noctis near the door. "There has to be something we can do that could lighten the sentence, at least allow her to live."

"He won't like it," Luna said, "especially since most of last night's victims were members of his security team." Her hand fell into Noctis' again.

"Wouldn't you like to return to Gentiana, milady?" Clarus asked her.

"The doctors said she'll be alright as long as she gets some rest. She also wanted me to go see Nebula, to be honest. But I didn't want to go without you."

"Just be ready for what you're about to see," Cor warned, no longer bothering to try and stop them. "Atra doesn't look like the same woman she did twenty-four hours ago. You may be shocked when you see her for yourself."

Despite the President's strong reluctance to allow the Lucians to see his prisoner, Frons' secretaries of defense persuaded him to allow her visitors. "May Etro protect you when in Lamia's presence," he told them as they were escorted into the basement level of the building. They descended down two flights of stairs and walked through several hallways, the conditions in their environment quickly deteriorating. Webs hung from the corners which the walls and ceiling met, and when the escort stopped and pointed to a cell at the end of the hall, they continued on without him. They noticed the rapid shiver that claimed his body and the horror on his face, even so far from Atra's cell.

Crowe heard the drone of footsteps coming toward them and looked over her shoulder. "Your Highness..." She jumped out of her chair and saluted Noctis. "I didn't think you'd be able to come. President Speculo was firm about keeping you from seeing her."

"Yeah, well he forgets who he's dealing with."

Prompto inched past the mage and stopped in front of the metal barred door, glancing at the figure who sat inside, hunched over and hair obscuring her face. "Nebula? It's us." The gunner did his best to brush away the shock of seeing her for the first time since battling against her. She was still in her party dress, a torn shell of its former self, and her hair was knotted all over. She looked painfully uncomfortable with her arms tied behind her back. He knelt to her level and laid a hand on the bars. "Can you hear me?"

Slowly, her head turned up. She shook the hair away from her face and met Prompto's gaze. Her
eyes lit up at the sight of him. "Prompto..." They darted around when she saw everyone else.
"Gladio, Luna, Ignis, Noctis!" Her gaze landed on Clarus and Cor, and the second a smile worked its way on her face it faded, the memory of what she did to them swirling back. "...You shouldn't be here."

Crowe gave her a side glance. "But you were just asking for him."

"I realized the error in my decision." Atra adjusted her position on the floor and backed away from them. "Please leave. I don't want to hurt you."

Luna crouched beside Prompto. "Gentiana's alive. She's recovering in the hospital, but the doctors said she'll be alright with a little rest."

"Can't say the same about Pelna or the Senator."

The Princess turned to Noctis, who joined them by the cell door. "Nebula, please look at me." Reluctantly she did as the Prince requested and met his gaze. Dark circles were under her eyes again, the sclera red from her crying, and mascara and blood soiled her skin. It was painful for her to look at him and vice versa. "What happened to you last night?"

He was the first person to ask her since her arrest. "I was stupid to think my feelings would be reciprocated," she began to ramble. "I was right when I told you he and I were too different from one another, Your Highness. Yet I still tried to convince myself that somehow, even with the knowledge of who I was, that he could love me." Even with everyone knowing who she was talking about, she refused to mention Cor by name. "I became flustered. My head was already throbbing from so many busy days, and when I returned to the ballroom, a waiter offered me a glass of water." Her gaze narrowed. "I thought I'd seen him somewhere before, but now that I try to think about it, I can't recall where from." She looked at the concrete beneath her. "I'm positive he fed me a drugged beverage."

"I've found myself reaching the same conclusion," Luna said to her. "You probably don't remember, but I found you crawling on the balcony floor. You looked very ill. Your body was hot to the touch." She shifted her focus to the strategist. "What symptoms come about when someone's drugged another's drink?"

"Many of the ones you described to me this morning," Ignis replied. "Confusion, dizziness, difficulty walking and communicating, loss of consciousness, loss of control of one's movements..." His eyes widened. "Marshal, a word." Ignis took Cor to the far side of the hall and shared a whispered conversation with him while the others continued to speak with Atra.

"There's one thing in particular I remember about that waiter," Atra told them. "He said something to me, something that Imperial captain said when we were engaged in battle on the highway. 'The will of Etro must be upheld'. I don't know what it means, but when either of them said it, I felt all control over myself be thrown away."

Prompto held his chin. "It sounds like whatever they drugged you with made your body think it was in danger, and then...you went berserk..."

"What did he look like?" Gladiolus asked her. Atra bit her lower lip as she fell deep in thought, but no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remember the waiter's face.

"Nebula..." She couldn't believe Noctis was still calling her by her pseudonym. "...Why did you save mine and my father's lives?" He needed to ask her, to make sure he wasn't vouching for someone who really wanted him dead.
"It's my job to save lives, Your Highness. Every time I watch the news or read the paper, all I see is war: the destroyed cities, the prisoners, the victims. I became a doctor to not only atone for my crimes as Lamia, but in the ridiculous hope that maybe one day, my actions could make up for all the destruction Nifelheim has caused." She paused to suck in a breath. "When I hid you in my basement that night, out of sight of those Imperial soldiers, I had a gut feeling they recognized me. But I didn't want to drag you down with me. If they arrested me and took me back to Nifelheim, I would've been okay as long as they didn't get you." Atra found the confidence to stand up, even with the chains pulling her backwards, and took the few steps she was allowed closer to them. "I'm going to be remembered for being this hideous creature who killed people wherever she set foot. My hope was to at least be remembered by some as a person who brought joy and relief into their lives."

The second her speech was finished, members of the Secret Guard stormed into the prison block and marched up to Noctis. "Your Highness," one of them said to the Prince. "I'm sorry, but you need to come with us. President Speculo wants to speak with you immediately." He opened his mouth to protest. "I'm afraid it can't wait." The guard turned to Crowe. "The President has decided her sentence. It will be carried out tonight."

"What?" There was no room for questions as Noctis and his group were led away from Atra's cell. She forced herself forward, struggling against the chains. "Wait!"

The Lucians were brought back to the conference room, where President Speculo was already seated, his fingers pressed together and his elbows propped up on the table. The tension in the air was so thick one could grab it and pull until it was a tightly drawn rope. He didn't say a word to them as they were invited to sit and refreshments were handed out. Once the servants left, Frons let out a sigh. "Highnesses, Marshal," he started, "do you think of me as a just leader of my country? Someone able to handle the responsibilities required in times of war?"

Cor raised an eyebrow, unsure of what kind of question he was asking. "Well, of course, sir. You're more than capable of leading Accordo."

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Leonis," Frons put some sugar cubes into his tea and stirred. "Tell me something. When someone asks for your help in a serious matter, you would welcome them with open arms, right?"

"Of course." Noctis exchanged a glance with Ignis, hoping his advisor knew where the President was going with the left-field questions.

"Even if they lied to your face?"

Clarus stood up. "Would you care to explain why you called us here, Mr. President?"

"Sure. Why did you bring that witch into my country?" Frons' hands tightened into fists and gave the Lucians a hard stare. "I offer you a place for your King to recuperate, and you repay me by letting that THING run loose in the palace?"

Cor shot out of his seat. "With all due respect, we didn't know she was Lamia until she went berserk last night!" A lie the Lucian court swore to go by for the remainder of their time in Accordo.

Frons leaned back in his chair. "And I suppose that longing gaze the two of you shared after the interrogation was a mere coincidence, too, Mr. Leonis?" Cor sucked his teeth. "I know that look. Nothing says, 'I wish things between us had been different', better than an extended stare. Don't play me for a fool."

"We had nothing to do with that!" Noctis exclaimed. "We spoke to her, and she said someone spiked
her drink-"

"Placing blame on a mere waiter won't change the fact that Lamia was a part of YOUR convoy, Your Highness. It was your plea to have her rushed over here to save your father's life, and look what she does." Frons folded his hands on top of the table. "Are you sure you're at war with Nifelheim, Prince Noctis? I haven't heard anything about a war from the media outlets. Only from the mouths of Lucians. Last I spoke with Emperor Aldercapt, he said your nations were about to declare peace."

"Are you really going to believe Iedolas' lies?" Noctis exclaimed. "And it's not my fault you've decided not to allow reports on the invasion of Insomnia over Accordian airwaves." None of them could understand why the President was suddenly turning on them.

As the conversation became heated, the Accordian defense secretaries and cabinet members filed into the conference room. "Everything is prepared for tonight's event, sir." Confusion mounted on Ignis' face. "When shall the prisoner be delivered to the square?"

"Nine tonight sounds good. Release the information to the media." The cabinet members took their seats, and all but one defense secretary stayed in the room. As the newcomers got situated, Frons decided to fill the Lucians in on the upcoming event. "So sorry you'll be missing the execution, Your Highness."

Luna jumped from her chair. "You can't do that! She didn't even get to stand trial!"

"Yes, well, desperate times call for desperate measures, milady." Frons stood up and folded his arms behind his back. "I've opened my heart too many times, and have received nothing but terror and deception in return. It's time I put my foot down and became firm." He walked to the sole window at the back of the room. "Atra Interitio will be executed in the Altesian Main Square tonight. Tied to a stake and burned alive. A perfect punishment for a witch, no?"

"Please, Mr. President," Ignis pleaded. "There has to be some other way around this."

"Sorry, Lord Scientia, but she's guilty as charged. We don't have time to sit through a trial. I have a country to run...unlike your Prince." Noctis growled and Gladiolus' arm quickly pulled him back. "Your time in Accordo has come to an end, dear Lucians. I expect you to be on your way to Solheim by dawn. You're no longer welcome in Accordo." Frons Speculo's security forced the Lucians out of their chairs and escorted them out of the conference room, making sure they stayed far away from the President. Frons waited until they were in the elevator to relax. He called for the phone to be brought to the conference room, and when the base was laid on the table, he dialed a number on the receiver. It hummed when he laid it on his ear, and when the person on the other end of the line picked up, Frons cleared his throat. "They're in Altissia. You'd better hurry if you want to get your hands on them; they'll be gone by dawn. No, just a pit stop. Their next stop is Solheim. The witch? Why yes, she staged an attack last night in my estate. She'll be dead before you get here." The President let out a sardonic laugh. "Well, I'm sorry, but I can't just release her to your custody. I have to make an example out of her for my people." A long pause. "Okay. Alright. Hope you make it in time, Chancellor Izunia. The Lucians won't sit still for the Imperial Forces."
Chapter Summary

I know all your reasons
To keep me from seeing
Everything is actually a mess

But now I am leaving
All of us were only dreaming
Everything is actually a mess

-Dream, Imagine Dragons, Smoke and Mirrors

Chapter Notes

'Dream' definitely fits very well with Atra contemplating the approaching end of her life.
And the intro music to Kingsglaive: FFXV is perfect for when she's spilling her heart
out to Crowe, the last person she'll ever talk to.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Breaking news - we've just learned that Lamia, the witch of Nifelheim, has been living under a pseudonym. Twenty-four year old Doctor Nebula Ardere's real name is Atra Ardere Interitio. We've learned that she is, in fact, the daughter of infamous Nifelheim general Callisto Interitio. President Speculo's spokesperson has told us that he and the cabinet have come to an agreement on the sorceress' sentencing. She will be burned alive in the plaza in front of the Presidential Palace at nine tonight. The public is allowed to attend, but security will be kept extremely tight, and citizens will not be allowed within thirty-five yards of Lamia for safety reasons. The cabinet has asked that all children be kept at home and their access to social media be restricted until after the sentence is carried out. We'll keep you updated on the situation as more information becomes available, and a crew will be at the Presidential Palace when the sentence is carried out."

The radio clicked off as Crowe turned a dial on it. She didn't want to hear anymore reports on what happened the night before, and when she glanced through the bars of the cell door, she knew the prisoner on the other side had heard enough. Atra hadn't said a word since Noctis was dragged away by the President's security, having understood full well what one of the guards meant when he said her sentence was decided. For a decision to come about that fast could only mean certain death. There was no need for a trial when everyone at the gala saw her throw such powerful spells, and when those who stayed behind to fight witnessed her claim thirteen innocent lives. One of the President's defense secretaries entered the basement and approached her cell. Glaring down at the bound woman, he explained to her the details of how the guards protecting Frons Speculo died. One had a broken piece of chair through his skull, at least five were struck by her Thundaga spells and burnt worse than the Nifelheim Imperials, one had a slashed throat, two suffered burns that ran down their tracheas and scorched their lungs, and the rest had a curse of doom cast on them - something that was difficult for the coroners to determine until they saw the way each person's heart had
exploded in their chests. He went on to patronize her, spat in her direction, and cursed her existence until Crowe stepped in and made him back away. “Protect that creature while you can,” he said to the Kingsglaive mage. "She's got six hours until we torch her." He spat at her again and sneered when he finally turned down the hall and marched to the lift.

When the elevator door slammed shut, Crowe let out a heavy sigh and returned to her chair. "You don't deserve to be treated like this," she finally said after minutes of silence, crossing her arms. "I've seen men try to assassinate my King, and even they were treated with some form of dignity when tried for their crimes. What President Speculo is doing is barbaric..." Her eyes, clinging to the concrete floor, drifted to Atra's kneeling form, her head hanging and back hunched from being unable to move her arms. "You at least deserve a fair trial-"

"I deserve nothing." The sentence came out with disgust for herself, a sour taste on her tongue as she spoke. Crowe took notice of the food tray that had been thrown into the cell, its contents spilled all over the floor and the remains of her dress. "I'm lucky they're even offering me food. What's the point of feeding someone when everything will just end up burning up anyway?" Her lips were dry; they stung each time she licked them. She didn't want to close her eyes. Every blink left her in a void coated in darkness, a black that quickly turned red. The air would grow thick and damp, and every bead of sweat that rolled down her skin felt like every one of her victims' blood splattering all over her body, leaving her the same as she was when she woke up on her last day in Lestallum. She probably looked like that now, she assumed, after slaughtering so many people.

Crowe got up from her seat and knelt as close to Atra as the bars would allow. She brought a glass of water through the bars and reached toward Atra's lips. "Drink a little." Atra stared at the glass, the image of the waiter offering her one the last clear memory she had of the previous night. She bit her lower lip and drew blood, her body shuddering. "Nebula..."

"Please stop calling me that." She finally looked up at Crowe and met the mage's gaze. Brown started into gray marred with reddened veins. Her eyes were empty, devoid of any glee she'd seen on the doctor's face days before when they agreed on a student-mentor relationship. "I've lived under the lie of Nebula Ardere for too long now. I thought that if I changed my name and hid my scars, I could live a normal life in seclusion. But meeting everyone in Duscae, meeting you and the Glaive, meeting Noctis...Cor... It's all shown me how impossible it is to run from my past." She leaned forward, knocking the glass out of Crowe's hand with her chin. "I'm Atra Interitio. A native of Nifelheim, daughter of a tyrant - I'm Lamia!" Water swam out of her eyes and down her cheeks. "I've tried masking it, I've tried controlling it, but there's nothing you or anyone can do to stop me! There's no place for me here if I'll just be this...thing that takes people's lives!"

"Yes there is," Crowe cut her off. "If you let them kill you, you'll never be able to atone for the lives you stole." She reached further in and grasped Atra's shoulders, forcing her to keep eye contact. "Remember what you said last night? You told Noctis you wanted to be remembered for bringing joy into people's lives. How are you going to continue to help the sick and injured if you're dead?" Crowe expected some degree of realization to dawn on the doctor's face, for something to click in her mind, that would make her fight for her own life as hard as she had for that of King Regis. But Atra's gaze remained clouded, her mouth without curves in the corners. Crowe cupped her cheek, rubbing away any dirt she could from the doctor's skin. "Whether you're Nebula Ardere or Atra Interitio doesn't matter anymore. A name is just a label. It's what you do with that label that's important, and I know you're too smart to just give up on all those patients still waiting for you to save their lives."

Somehow, through all the turmoil churning in her mind, Atra smiled. Relief washed over Crowe for a moment as she assumed the woman finally came to her senses, but when she read the smile further, her hand dropped from the doctor's cheek. "You're right, Crowe. I'm too smart to give up on
everyone. I could never leave all those people waiting for someone to heal their wounds and cure their illnesses. But it can't be done by my hand, not anymore. Now that the world knows who I am, it'll be impossible for me to continue my work without people living with the fear that I'll slay them. My work has to be passed on to someone who can bear the weight of a doctor's shoulders on their own."

Atra averted her gaze. "I heard Sonitus wanted to to learn how to craft elixirs. It's a shame I won't be able to teach him anything. Hopefully my books will be enough for him to use."

Crowe knew at that point there was no convincing her. Atra had comes to terms with her impending death, even with the knowledge that Noctis was determined to fight it to the very end. "Don't worry about me," she added as she changed sitting positions. "I know it'll be painful at first, but once I lose consciousness, it'll be like a warm blanket embracing me on my way to Infernum." Atra pushed herself backwards. "Can you promise me something?"

"What is it?"

"When I'm gone, deliver a message to Noctis and the others. Tell them I'm so grateful for the time we shared since they stumbled into my home on that stormy night. Fighting alongside them, cooking dinner with Ignis, hunting with Gladiolus, having Prompto as my assistant, Noctis looking out for my well-being... It's all greatly appreciated. Let Ignis know I'm sorry I couldn't share my stew recipe with him; I'm sure they would've loved it on the road to Solheim." Atra rested her back on the wall and tucked her legs to the side. "Give Sonitus my medical bag and the elixir textbook in my suitcase. Tell Lunafreya I give my best wishes and deepest congratulations on her wedding, and I'm sorry I won't be able to make it. She helped make my night at the gala as enjoyable as it could be." A tear trickled down the side of her face. "Tell the Kingsglaive they're a brave bunch, and let them know how sorry I am for taking Pelna away from them. Tell the King how grateful I am for when he allowed me to serve under him, even if it was for such a limited time. Let him know how happy I am knowing he'll be safe from me." Her teeth dug into her lip again as her emotions became erratic, and her breath hitched in her throat. "And Cor... Tell...tell Cor I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused him since we met. Tell him I said thank you for letting me help the Lucian people as much as I was allowed. Tell him I said thank you for trusting me with King Regis' life, even for a second. And tell him..." Her head lowered as she fought against her emotions when she tried to speak. "...Tell Cor I don't have any regrets with how I feel for him. He's a man dedicated to his King and his people, and I really admire that. I just wish it could've ended differently..." Atra lost all control over her emotional state and let everything pour out. Crowe jumped to her feet and laid her hands on the cell door's lock. "Go," Atra ordered her. "Please... Tell them before it's too late." The mage took off in a sprint, knowing there was no longer a need for her to keep watch over the prisoner. She wasn't a threat to anyone's lives anymore.

Five-thirty came too fast. After delivering the news to his comrades in the safe house, Noctis rushed to check on his father. The aging monarch could tell something was amiss, and his son put no effort into hiding it from the King. There was little time for them to come to terms with Atra's reveal and impending death. Her death was to be broadcast for all of Accordo to see at nine that night, leaving them with four hours to figure out how to stop the President from burning her alive. "Isn't there anything we can do?" Noctis pleaded to his father as he helped the older man get up from bed and stand.

"This has become a matter of international safety," Regis explained to his son. "The President is taking action against not only Miss Interitio, but the whole of Lucis as well. He's come to the conclusion that we brought her here with full knowledge of who she was, with the intent to bring harm onto him. Seeing how we're in his territory, we've been deemed trespassers in Accordo, and therefore have no say in the sentencing of Atra Interitio. Even looking past the conflict of interest, the rest of the world would no doubt side with President Speculo on disposing of her before she can hurt
"anyone else." Noctis cursed under his breath as he led Regis out of his suite and down the hallway.

"She didn't even get a trial."

"Another problem with Accordo's judicial system the world will ignore in this case." He was slow in his walk, having grown used to a certain gait gained from issues with his legs and the need for a cane; now, with no need for a leg brace, he found walking a skill he had to re-learn to keep himself from falling. "President Speculo has already made up his mind. If we were to go against that, or even behind his back to save her, he'd see us as traitors, and would no doubt reveal our position to the Imperial Army." They slowed when they reached the stairs, pausing momentarily to allow Axis to pass them. "As much as it pains me to say, the only thing we can do is pray her journey to Etro is as painless as possible."

That was the logical thing, Noctis told himself as they descended to the first floor at a snail's pace. They'd been kicked out of Accordo due to a political misunderstanding; they didn't want to cause anymore problems that could hinder their chances of making it to Solheim in one piece. They only had a narrow time frame to work with to get their entire group out of Altissia in one piece. Ignis and Astrum had hinted at suspicions Nifelheim may have had of Accordo hiding them since President Speculo cancelled their meeting, and they knew how much of an ass-kisser the President was when it came to the Empire. Accordo was the only nation willing to put up with Nifelheim's ways, and only offered aid to Lucis as a sign of neutrality in the war. Lucis took as much as they were offered; they didn't want to bite the hand that fed them those precious moments of peace. Looking around when they reached the bottom of the stairs, Noctis saw all the Kingsglaive members - with the exception of Pelna and Crowe - scrambling to get everything they owned packed and ready for another long journey. Commander Drautos and Ignis were on the phone with the King, Queen and Ambassador of Solheim, setting up the terms of their arrival and lodgings. Without the promise of aid from Accordo, they had to look other places for support in terms of soldiers, and were weighing their options. Nyx made sure everyone's belongings were stacked in the sitting room on the first floor and clearly labeled so nothing was lost. They could all feel the panic pressing down on them, though no one spoke of it. or of the two people missing from their household.

Leading his father toward the kitchen, Noctis spotted Cor in his peripheral vision. The Marshal was in the library, one door opened halfway, his back angled to the corner of the room, his katana spinning between his fingers. His head hung low as a trio of voices conversed with him, all with a tone of worry lingering in them. Noctis got his father into a chair and promised to return in a moment, grabbing a passing Glaive member's arm and asking them to keep an eye on the King. With company secured for the King, the Prince made his way into the library. "...really just going to sit there and accept this?" Luna's question finished.

"We don't have a choice in accepting the sentence," Cor said to the Princess. "If we rush into the plaza and sabotage the execution, we're as much Speculo's enemy as Nifelheim is ours."

"And he won't listen to reason," Gladiolus added, leaning his lower body against the desk behind him. "He won't listen at all. I tried to ask him something, and one of his bodyguards shoved me away like I was some commoner." His eyes were drawn to the footsteps that entered the room. "You and His Majesty manage to come up with anything?"

Noctis shook his head. "It's hopeless. We can't lift a finger in helping her."

"But how could he just forego the trial and tell us she'll be executed?" Prompto asked. "I've seen worse criminals get treated much better."

"He's a President who thinks he's King. Nothing that can be done about it." Noctis sucked his teeth. "This is exactly why I was against us asking him for help."
"He was all we had at the time," Luna replied, sighing. "It's not like we had a choice."

"Haven't had much of a choice with anything happening lately." It was an awful truth to accept, having been dealt a terrible hand when the treaty signing blew up into a disaster, then the King and his son being separated for nearly a month. Atra and Accordo were supposed to be their beacons of hope. And now... "Everything's a mess..."

A knock on the door broke their trances. Sonitus walked into the library and saluted Cor, then bowed to Noctis. "Your Highness," he started, "we've received a message from Crowe. She says it's Atra Interitio's final testament." He handed the Prince a sealed gray envelope. He immediately took it from the Glaive's grasp and pulled the envelope open, ignoring the three bodies that hovered around them to read her last words. "Another message, Your Highness...from President Speculo."

"He just doesn't know when to stop, does he?" Prompto commented.

"The President has requested one last meeting with Your Highness and His Majesty before your departure. He's asked that Your Highness and everyone else go to the Sacri Lumine Waterfall Tour dock in no less than an hour." Gladiolus raised an eyebrow.

"A meeting at a tourist attraction?"

"Everyone in Altissia will be distracted by the execution," Cor told them. "No one will be near the docks if it means missing a live witch-burning."

The Prince grit his teeth. "Whatever he has to say to me better be good."

Her cell was cold. She had no idea what time it was. Atra found herself holed up in the corner, leaning her head on a brick that stuck out farther than the others as she stared at the ceiling. She found herself in a strange plane of existence between sleep and alertness, a state in which she found herself standing between two paths. The path on her left was the life she'd lived: escaping from Nifelheim, hiding her true identity from the world, starting a practice in Duscae, meeting Cor and the other Lucians, arriving in Accordo - everything she'd done and lived through up until the very second she landed in the cell. It was an adventurous life, for sure, with its many ups and down, successes and regrets. She recalled the first month she started running a clinic out of her home. Jupiter had come in, nearly nine months pregnant, complaining of strange stomach pains. It wasn't even three hours later that Atra was delivering her daughter in the back room of her home. It was the first time she'd ever witnessed the birth of a human life. She'd never forget how white her wife had turned when she came to check on Jupiter and found a baby in the woman's arms. She nearly had three patients that day. Remembering the sound of the baby's cry made Atra smile wide. The darker memories of each time she was forced to fight off Imperial troops invaded her mind, ripping her smile off. The one clearest in her head was the incident that nearly killed her, months before she'd met Cor. After refusing the Emperor's offer to serve under him in the Imperial Army, members of the squadron that visited her home broke in in the middle of the night. The vase Jupiter and her wife had given her as a thank-you for delivering their daughter was smashed to bits. Two-hundred elixirs were destroyed as Atra chased down the troops to get them back, thrown when she tackled one of them to the ground. One of them slashed her lower stomach open and almost killed her. The next thing she remembered after being cut open was waking up in Cid's home, her torso wrapped in bandages and the old mechanic wondering how the hell she managed to kill all the troops with her intestines leaking from her body. The scar still stung when she thought about it, and the more her mind lingered on the line permanently sewn into her torso, the more she began to recall the night she and Cor shared in her bedroom. Atra quickly shook the thought from her mind, finding it useless to remember something that was never meant to be.
She wondered, for a moment, about the path on the right of her mental purgatory. She wanted to know where it led, what she'd see, and the more she thought about it, the more she yearned for her life to have been different. If she had been born in Lucis instead of Nifelheim, she never would've been treated differently from anyone else, never dubbed a mutant by the Emperor. Her magical abilities would've been embraced by the Lucian people. Atra might have worked to serve the royal family as a doctor, or perhaps her magical abilities would've been honed, and she'd be in the Kingsglaive like Crowe. Atra Interitio would've been Atra Flumine instead, a respected member of the Lucian guard, a doctor nationally praised for her elixirs and the miracles they brought about.

She'd see Cor more than once in the palace, passing by one another, but never communicating more than what was necessary. Their meeting could've been different: the Marshal may have noticed her more than once due to her close work with King Regis and may have commented on her skill. They could've spent time together patrolling the gardens behind the palace or the streets leading up to the plaza leading up to the palace, preparing for King Regis and Prince Noctis to greet the people. They could've protected Insomnia from Nifelheim, attended Noctis and Luna's wedding, possibly had a romance bloom between them... Perhaps he could've loved her at one point instead of falling victim to a blade in her hand. There would've been no Lamia, no sorceress to torture the world with her presence. There'd be no war, no famine, no disaster tearing their world apart. There would only be them protecting their King side by side. Atra closed her eyes and drew in a breath. She imagined herself in Lucis, no war destroying the capital, no smell of smoke and burning bodies in the air, no cries of children who've lost their parents to the Empire's wrath. It was a perfect dream filled with smiles and celebration and new life. Her head swayed from side to side as she listened to the music in her head that played in her dreamscape. She wanted to live in the dream - her final dream - forever, even as she burned at the stake.

Dangling keys echoed through the hallway. Atra broke out of her trance and rolled her head to the right to see who was coming by. Crowe hadn't returned since leaving to tell Noctis her last words, and at that point, the doctor was sure that that mage had given up on her. She expected as much; all she was doing for nearly twenty-four hours was staring at the chained-up witch who killed her fellow Glaive and her Senator, and nearly ended the life of the Tenebraen Princess' guardian. If Gentiana had died, Atra was sure her death would've come much sooner for killing an Astral. They were sacred beings who housed the Archaeans' spirits until they were called upon to protect the world. Why the Archaeans would house their spirits in mortal bodies was beyond understanding. Atra kept her eyes on the hallway as the jingling grew louder. She could barely see in the darkness of the basement; someone had turned the lights out after Crowe left, as if there wasn't someone down there. One set of footsteps turned into two, drawing her attention further, and her mouth fell open when she saw a familiar crop of black hair stop in front of her cell.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

A security guard unlocked her cell door as Noctis smiled and waved at her. "You really thought I was just going to leave you to die here?" he asked her. The door unlocked, Noctis hopped inside and crouched in front of Atra. "Come on, Nebula. You've gotta give me more credit than that." The lights in the corridor turned on and the security guard marched behind her. Her arms were freed from the chains, and after they were unwrapped and untied, the Prince pulled Atra into a hug. "Don't you dare scare us like that ever again!"

Her arms shook violently as she got feeling back in them. "I... How did you..." Her mind was racing too fast for her to comprehend. "You shouldn't be here, Noctis. The President's already in a bad mood; I don't want you losing a potential ally."

"To hell with the President." The Prince held her out at arm's length. "He already kicked us out of Accordo. You're my friend, Nebula, and I'm not leaving here without you." She opened her mouth to protest. "No buts. You're coming with us to Solheim." His hands lowered to hers and he looked...
over his shoulder to the guard. "Give her the clothes." The Accordian guard handed Atra a set of folded clothes to change into and the men stepped out of the cell to give her space to change, their backs turned to her. It took Atra longer than normal to dress herself in the pants and tank top as she flexed the muscles in her hands and arms to regain feeling. She slipped on the sandals she was given and took a step toward the cell exit, stopping herself at the edge of area. Sensing she was finished, Noctis reached for her hand. "Come on. Everyone's waiting for us."

"Where?" She didn't lay her hand in his.

"At the ferry terminal. All our stuff is there. They're just waiting on you." He motioned for her to take his hand, and after a minute more of wrestling in her head, Atra laid her hand in the Prince's.

The guard began to walk first, then Noctis, and Atra followed behind him down the long corridor. The two men stayed silent for the majority of the walk to the elevator, and the quiet bothered Atra.

"How did you get past the guards?"

"Prompto provided a distraction - a very nice one, I might add." The security guard pressed the call button for the elevator.

"Gladiolus?"

"He and Ignis are taking care of the President." The elevator door opened and they walked inside.

As the lift pulled out of the basement, Atra couldn't help her eyes frantically wandering around the small space. They first went down to the sandals on her feet, then to a strange dark stain on the floor near Noctis' foot. She followed the stain to the shadow his arm cast on the floor, and her eyes drew upward to his right arm. He'd been bitten by a venomous creature the first day she met the Lucian quartet. She remembered the nasty bite clearly: a pair of puncture holes in his upper forearm, dropping diagonally near a vein. The creature that bit Noctis was notorious for leaving holes that took months to heal, even with the elixirs and antidotes she made, and when she stared at his right arm, she found no evidence of a bite. In its place was flawless vanilla skin, and a knot settled in her gut.

The elevator stopped on the ground floor and everyone stepped off. "We should hurry," Noctis said as he pulled Atra along. Halfway down the first hall from the lift, Atra let go of Noctis' hand and halted her steps. The Prince, feeling the absence of a hand on his, skipped to a stop and turned to the doctor. "What's wrong?" She didn't say anything and took a step backwards. Noctis sighed and walked closer to her. "Nebula, we don't have time to dawdle. We have to catch up to the other-" His head whipped to the side. His cheek reddened, he watched Atra lower her hand and take another step away from him.

"Who are you?"

As expected, the tour dock was deserted. Most families had either retired early for the night or made the trip to the Presidential Palace plaza to watch Lamia be burned alive. Many businesses closed by sundown as a result, leaving the most popular tourist site in Altissia empty. The only sound in their surroundings came from the Sacri Lumine Waterfall, its rushing water providing an eerily calm aura to the vacant streets. The Lucians were lead to a boat at the end of the dock, where President Speculo stood with two guards flanking him on either side. His lower lip was drawn in, his mouth forming a pout that the Prince assumed could only mean more bad news. "Your Highness." The President's eyes shifted to Regis. "Your Grace. Good to see you up and about."

"Why the sudden meeting, Frons?" Regis asked. "I assumed after you banished us from your
country, you wouldn't want to see our faces again."

Frons stepped forward and gestured his hand to the boat. "There's been a...change of plans," he started. "Shortly after the news reported Lamia's execution, I received word from Border Control that there was an airship sighting thirty miles to the west. It's Nifelheim. They're on their way here."

"Nifelheim?!" The Kingsglaive quickly formed a circle around the royals.

Drautos led the pack of fighters. "Why are they coming?"

"It's not clear yet," Frons replied, "but I assume they're coming to negotiate the release of their precious witch. Nevertheless, it's no longer safe for you here. You have to-" A building nine blocks away exploded, shaking the ground beneath their feet. "GO! The boat will get you out of here before they can find you!" A second building, five blocks from their location, erupted in flames.

The Kingsglaive didn't waste any time loading the royals onto the boat. "How are we supposed to get out of here?" Noctis yelled over the flames breaking free.

President Speculo's men unhooked the rope holding the boat to the dock. "There's a passageway behind the waterfall. Nifelheim doesn't know of its existence. You'll be safe there!" A third explosion went off. "Get out of here now!" He urged the captain to pick up speed and watched the boat pull away from the dock. On the boat, Ignis ran to the stern and looked down at Frons. Noctis followed soon after and met the President's gaze. He didn't know why the leader suddenly wanted to help them again, but didn't question his decision as they sailed closer to the waterfall. The waters pouring from Sacri Lumine's edge suddenly halted, revealing the rocky surface of the cliffside. A portion of stone sank into the cliff and slid out of the way to show a darkened passageway, which the boat went into. Something bubbled under the surface of the water and Leviathan's head poked out. She watched the Prince's boat disappear behind the waterfall. The last sound he heard before the water poured down again was a low growl from the Archaean, followed by a nod.

"Why did you change your mind, sir?" one of the Accordian guards asked when the passageway was sealed again.

Frons folded his hands behind his back and drew in a long breath. "Call it a hunch, but when I saw the Imperial airships flying in, I knew it wasn't going to be good. I won't have my country become like Insomnia." He looked down at his watch. "We should gather the council before the Imperial Forces make it to the palace."

The shaking reached the Presidential Palace, immediately alerting Atra, but she kept her focus on the person in front of her who looked eerily like Noctis. "You're not Noctis. Who are you?"

"Nebula, what are you talking about?" the Prince complained. "Look, you've been locked in a dark cell all night. It's getting to your head. We have to get out of here before something bad happens!" He reached for her hand again and Atra grabbed his wrist, flipping his forearm face-up.

"When I first met him, Noctis was bitten by a poisonous lizard. A bite from that animal leaves a scar that takes months to heal. He was bitten on his right arm." She yanked at his limb again, then let him go. "Where's your scar, imposter?"

The person who resembled the Lucian Prince's appearance stayed quiet for a second. The realization came that he'd been found out, his cover blown, and another sigh escaped his lips. "I guess you're not as stupid as you look," the man said, the accent in his voice suddenly changing to that of the Nifeli tongue. He waved his hand to the Accordian guard behind him. "Lift the cloak, Lex. It'll do us
no good now that she knows." The guard skipped next to the pseudo-Prince and snapped his fingers. A buzzing yellow light surrounded them, starting from their feet, and zipped upward around each of their bodies. Their appearances changed dramatically as the light ran over them. The Accordian guard's tall, stocky build was replaced with a thin, long-legged feminine frame draped with black hair and a ghostly grin upon her face. Creeping away from them, Atra watched the man wearing Noctis' face for a disguise transform into a tall blond-haired man, his blue eyes stopping her breath. The way he stared at her sent chills down her spine, and she lifted a shaky finger to point at him.

"You're..."

"You're looking much better, Miss Interitio," he said to her, "much better than you did at the gala last night. I hope I brought you enough water." The memory flooded back into Atra's mind. This man, with his uncanny stare that could pierce a person's soul, was the same man who'd taken her luggage on the ferry from Caem; the same man who served her a glass of water at the gala after seeing she looked unwell; the same man who drugged her drink and whispered those strange words in her ear, triggering the side of her the world knew as Lamia to reveal itself. "His Imperial Majesty needed someone to keep an eye on you," the blond man began. "You rejected his previous invitations to return home, so he was left with no other choice but to have a spy track your movements."

She started to understand it all. "So when the Chancellor was at the ferry terminal in Caem..." Her eyes widened, pupils retracting. She'd led Nifelheim all the way to Altissia. Another explosion rocked the palace, shaking the chandelier above their heads.

"Did you really think he'd let you go so easily, Lamia? With your immense powers and your extraordinary elixirs?" The blond Nifeli ignored the next pair of explosions. "Of course, while you're a top priority, we didn't come just for you. We heard there were some Lucians party in the palace last night."

"No... Noctis!" Atra turned on heel and dashed down the hallway, never looking over her shoulder to see if the Nifelis were following her. She rounded the first corner to the left, and immediately skid to a stop at the sight of a line of Magitek troops with their guns and crossbows drawn. She spun around and bolted down the opposite hall, and nearly tripped over a body on the ground. Her eyes landed on the form and she sucked in a gasp. "No..."

The blond man easily caught up to the doctor and saw her weeping at Crowe's bullet hole-riddled body. "Shame, I know. She was a skilled mage. But she was in our way, and, well..." He shrugged as his words trailed off. "This sort of thing happens when you get in Emperor Aldercap's way." He grabbed a fistful of Atra's hair and yanked her head backwards, forcing a grunt from her mouth. "I hope you're not the type to get in His Imperial Majesty's way, otherwise this going to be really annoying."

"...Get off!" Atra fired a Fira spell from her hand at the blond man, forcing him to let go of her to evade the doctor's attack. She rolled sideways and grabbed a dagger she found on the ground - Crowe's, she assumed. She was amazed at how fast she'd managed to pull off the spell, but didn't her hesitation of her own powers be known to the enemy. She jumped into a run again, not knowing which direction to go. She narrowly avoided several squadrons of Magitek troops, ducking when they opened fire on her. A few bullets grazed her arms and back, leaving a thick blood trail with gradual drips that let the blond man know which way she was headed. She was only able to climb higher in the palace. All the lower exits were blocked by Magitek troops. Atra knew everyone on the first two floors was dead, and she squeezed her eyes shut when she envisioned the massive piles of bodies littering the estate. She sent fire into whatever group of robotic drones she encounter as she climbed higher in the building, and before she knew it, Atra found herself on the roof.
"Please stop running." Her head whipped around to see the blond man and his associate exiting the roof access stairwell. "Why do you have to be so difficult, Atra? I'm trying to help you get home."

"Stay away!" Atra stepped backwards, drawing closer to the edge of the roof.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Atra," the man told her with open arms. "I know you're scared. Your life was threatened by Frons, but we've come to put a stop to that. You're not going to be executed."

"Only if I go with you, right?" she snapped, feeling the edge of the building under her heels. There was nowhere for her to run; her only choice was jumping off the palace into who knew what kind of landing.

The blond man sighed and scratched his head. "I really didn't want to do this, but you're leaving me no choice." He dug in a holster strapped around his waist and spoke into a long-distance receiver. "Aim all cannons at the safe house."

Atra jumped forward. "No, wait!" The black-haired woman stood between her and her commander, staying silent as the doctor struggled against her. "Leave them out of this!"

"Oh, so you actually care for the well-being of the Lucians?" He saw the fear swimming in her eyes. "How about this? You come with us, and we spare your little mutant friends. They live to see another day and everyone's happy."

"But you'll still go after them." Atra shook her head. "Even if I agree to go with you, you'll still hunt down the Caelum family until every trace of them is exterminated."

"What can I say?" He shrugged his shoulders. "It's business." Atra's weight shifted slightly backward, causing her body to sway on the roof's edge. She looked over her shoulder to the chaotic scene below. There was nothing soft for her to land on, but she was sure she could make it by the skin on her teeth. Glancing at the blond man and his associate again, she readied herself to jump off the edge. "The will of Etro must be upheld." Her body froze, and before she could tip over, the black-haired woman seized her wrist and pulled her in. "There. Was that so hard?" He lifted the communicator to his lips again. "Atra Interitio's secure. Bring the caravan to the Presidential estate."

"And what of the Lucians, sire?" the voice on the other end questioned. "Oh, relax. She's not going to kill you."

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Highness?" Atra stared at the leader of her captors, watching the way everyone on the ship showed their highest respect for him, even though he wasn't in uniform.

The black-haired woman released Atra's wrist on command and stepped away. "How rude of me. You've been gone for so long, and I haven't had the decency to introduce myself to General
Interitio's daughter." Her commander took Atra's hand into his and laid a light kiss on her knuckle. "I am Velox Nifel Aldercapt, firstborn Prince of the Empire of Nifelheim."

Frons found his path back to the Presidential estate strangely quiet, even with the fires burning and the airships humming in the night. The plaza in front of the palace had been evacuated mere moments before Magitek troops stormed the building, gunning down security and anyone else they saw as they searched for the President and the Lucians. Each additional body he saw lifeless on the ground made the veins on his temple pulse with anger. "Damn it," he said to his security team as he rushed up to his office. "Any response from Javier?"

"None, sir," one of the security team members replied. "Last communication with the General was forty minutes ago."

"Damn it!" Frons slammed his fist against the wall. He tiptoed over a fallen Magitek soldier's armored husk, the metal plating and inner wiring fried by fire damage. He didn't question how any of it happened; he knew the Nifeli Forces were here for the witch. His footsteps grew heavier as he approached his office, and when he turned to march into the room, his skin went white.

"About time you showed up, Frons," the man sitting at the President's desk said to him. "I was beginning to get a bit bored waiting around for you."

The President's eyes jumped to all the Magitek troops lining the walls. "Chancellor Izunia," he exclaimed. "Why are you attacking my city?"

"For the same reason we decided to move up our schedule. Time is of the essence." Ardyn retracted his folded legs from the tabletop and stood, brushing some hair from his shoulder. "I thought you liked me, Frons. You and I had a great business relationship."

"We still do. And you're wasting your time looking for the Caelums here. They're-"

"I know full well where they are," the Chancellor cut him off. "We found Miss Interitio, too, and are in the process of reclaiming her. She should be with Velox around now."

Frons grit his teeth. "So he's the spy she was rambling on about." He approached the desk and laid his hands on the surface. "Iedolas must be really desperate to send his own son to fetch your witch for you. Which brings me to my next question...why are you here?"

Ardyn chuckled. "Why, because you called me! Don't be coy, Frons. You should've just handed over Miss Interitio if you were going to turn your backs on us." Frons parted his lips to protest, but the Chancellor wagged a finger in his face. "Velox has been here for much longer than you may realize. He's kept us informed on the events leading up to tonight, including that wonderful meeting you shared with Prince Noctis." He pressed his hands together and leaned his nose against them. "You, of all people, should know Iedolas Aldercapt doesn't take kindly to backstabbers, especially when they cancel conferences on such short notice." A bead of sweat rolled down Frons' forehead. "It pains him to know that his closest political ally has chosen to take Lucis' side in the war. It's such a disappointing turn of events." The Magitek troops changed positions at the motion of Ardyn's hand, standing in a combat-ready position. The Chancellor stepped around the desk and neared the office's doorway as the armored husks forced the President to back further into the room, his legs stopping when they hit the table. "One more thing, Frons. I spoke with General Javier shortly before coming to see you." Ardyn's eyes narrowed as he grinned at Frons. "He says he's sorry for being unable to speak with you one last time, but wanted you to know that the Lucians made it out safely." Ardyn turned his back to the President and left the room with a wave, and the Magitek troops cocked their firearms.
The airship flew high above the buildings and made its way to the Altum Magma Sea. Atra stared out the side window and down at the water, praying to Etro that the Lucian royals made it out of Accordo safely. She rested her hand against the glass as she watched fires burned all over Altissia. She could only imagine the shrieks of fear and agony leaving the Accordian citizens, and hoped as few as possible fell victim to the Imperial Forces. "I must say," Velox said when he entered the small room she'd been given, "your powers are astounding. I've never seen a mutant perform such advanced spells before. You're really something else."

"You mean aside from a witch?" she inquired, not paying him any mind. She didn't want to think of anything having to do with Nifelheim, and the Prince was making it increasingly difficult for her to ignore their approaching destination.

"Atra, you're more than a simple witch." Velox took a step closer to her and laid his hand on her shoulder blade, which she instantly shook off. "You can do great things for Nifelheim. With your abilities, you can help us put an end to this war once and for all. And you want nothing more than for the war to end, right?" He pat her arm to get her attention, and gestured for her to follow him out of the room. He led her down one of the many hallways in the airship, and when they reached the outer bridge, they stopped. "When was the last time someone thanked you when you used magic?" She raised an eyebrow at his question. "For all these years, you've been feared by the entire world - so much that you had to isolate yourself in Duscae and change your name. You won't have to do that when you're in Nifelheim. The people will embrace your true self, praise who you really are. And all you have to do is swear your life to my father."

"That tyrant is lucky I haven't gotten anywhere near him yet," she replied, "otherwise he'd be in the same boat as Senator Venenum." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I was better off in that cell."

"With no human contact and recognition that rivals worms? That's no life for a general's daughter." The Nifelheim Prince gestured his hand to his right. "When you ran away, your father was devastated. I'd never seen Callisto so distraught. His daughter - his only family - was gone, and the only thing he desired was to have her in his arms again. We haven't just been searching for you because of my father, Atra. It's because of General Interitio that so many soldiers have pursued you."

Velox's receiver buzzed against his waist. He lifted it from its holster and laid it on his ear. "Your Highness, we've found the ship the Lucians are using. They're headed north."

"Keep an eye on them for now. If they decide to change course, bomb them 'til there's nothing left." He put the communicator back into its pocket. "It appears our little bug problem will be taken care of shortly. We should celebrate this victory. Dine with me tonight. I'll introduce you to my associate."

Atra didn't reply as they walked back inside the airship and to the lower level. They passed by a window which she glanced out of, and she spotted a small craft in the water far out in the sea. An airship followed after it, several barrels aimed at the boat. Atra sucked in a gasp. She waited until Velox rounded the right corner of a dividing hallway, then sprinted down the left side toward the hatch. The doctor dashed past patrolling Magitek troops, who stared at the running woman, and quickly realized she was trying to escape. Shots were fired at her. Swinging her hand behind her, Atra summoned a barrier to protect herself from the bullets whirring in the air. An alarm sounded through the airship, alerting all personnel of her escape, and soldiers scrambled to the back. Atra found her way to the exit and pulled a lever to open the door. Wind spiraled inside as the door slowly lowered, sending any loose cargo flying out to the sea below. "Stop her!" she heard someone yell. She ran to the edge and forced herself to balance on the edge of the door. She saw the airship far off
preparing to fire at the boat. Atra raised her hand and pointed her palm at the flying craft. Panting, she forced a large lightning bolt out from the center of her hand and sent it into the airship. The engines on the left side exploded and the craft began to swirl out of the sky, drawing further away from the boat she assumed belonged to the Lucians. A bullet drilled through her shoulder and knocked Atra off balance, tipping her body over the hatch door. She spun in the hard-hitting wind and stared at the boat that had been followed, then shifted her gaze to the nation of Accordo. Even in the darkening environment and from so far away, the twinkling lights of the capital city glistened against the flames that danced off the Presidential Palace, illuminating the sea with a reddish glow. It was a beautiful sight, one she took in for as long as she could before her body plunged into the water.

"Frons!" the First Lady cried as she searched the estate for her husband. "Frons, we have to get out of here! The Imperial Forces are invading the city!" Her leg wounded from a bullet, she limped to his office. Lillium pulled herself inside, her eyes squeezed shut from the pain in her leg. "Frons, please say something!" She opened her eyes and immediately let out an ear-shattering scream. The President of Accordo lay flopped backwards on his desk, his limbs splayed out, his face and body destroyed by the impact of hundreds of bullets that filled his chest cavity and skull. Their three children - a son and two daughters - were scattered all over the room, having suffered the same fate as their father. Lillium dropped to her knees and held her face in shaking hands as she choked on the tears that fell down her face. She didn't hear the gun being cocked behind her, nor did she feel its barrel be pressed to the back of her head.

Chapter End Notes

Definitely play Luna's Kingsglaive theme at the end of the chapter when Atra makes her bold move.

Also safe to say that the story is (at least) halfway over as of chapter 25. I have NO idea how much longer it'll go on for. I only know there will be at least ten more chapters (at the minimum), but expect this story to go up to 50.

One more thing. Sorry, Crowe. At least you weren't the first Glaive to die this time. No hard feelings, right?
"Dammit!" Velox growled as he ran to the still-open hatch of the airship. Several Magitek soldiers stood at attention upon his arrival with the silent, expressionless masks they were designed with, staring at their Prince. "Why didn't any of you stop her?" he yelled at the robots, despite knowing he wouldn't get an answer. He stomped closer to the opening and stared down at the water in search of a body, but the only thing he could see was smoke that blew in his direction from the fallen airship which poked out of the water that quickly swallowed it. "Shit!" The Nifeli Prince grabbed the nearest Magitek troop and threw him out of the airship in a fit of anger, then marched back to the control room. The human crew were silent as he settled into his seat and reached for the ship's landline, dialing a number and huffing when he brought the receiver to his ear. "She escaped. Jumped right into the sea. She couldn't have survived that."

"You forget who we're dealing with, Your Highness," Ardyn's voice said from the other end of the line. Lamia is much more durable than you give her credit for." The Chancellor didn't need to see Velox's frown to know he'd submitted to the understanding. "Worry not. This is why your father entrusted the whole of Nifelheim to me. You still have a lot to learn, Velox, and I'm here to teach you."

"So what do we do now?"

Ardyn hummed to himself. "For the time being, there are some Lucian rats that need exterminating. Take care of them first. I'll be heading to Lucis to check on General Glauca. We shall reunite in our borders when the time comes."

They all witnessed the lightning strike that soared from one airship to the other, striking the latter's engines and bringing it out of the sky. The craft turned back to land in a rush, possibly in the hopes of salvaging whatever Magitek troops and the few soldiers were on board, but had no time to make it. The fires that engulfed Altissia were difficult to ignore, no matter how many times the boat's passengers looked away, unable to hide themselves from the heat and smoke surging off the buildings. Laying their attention back on the surviving airship, the passengers on the boat watched as
a human-shaped figure suddenly fell from the open hatch and hit the water hard. "That's got to be Crowe!" Libertus shouted, his hands wrapped tight around the boat's railing. "We have to save her! She won't be able to fight off Leviathan's currents!" He raised his voice further to draw in everyone's attention, but a quick look on their faces told him what they believed to be the truth. He stumbled over to Drautos, who remained close to the King's quarters, and grabbed the Captain by his shoulders. "Sir, we have to rescue her! Who knows how long those armored husks will-"

The Kingsglaive commander knocked Libertus' hand off of him. "She's dead, Libertus," he told the Glaive while averting his gaze. "If she were alive, she would've established communication with us when Nifelheim attacked. Crowe would've left a signal, a message to let us know her status. But she didn't. Whoever we saw fall out of that airship wasn't Crowe." Libertus curled into himself. The agony he felt lingered thick and heavy in the air; everyone on board the boat could feel it weighing down on them. "Just remember that she died with honor, protecting her King and her Prince, just as Pelna did."

"...She deserves a proper burial."

"That will have to wait," Nyx intervened, "until we reclaim Lucis and liberate Accordo." He raised a hand to his chin, lost in his thoughts, and bit down on his palm. "Let's hope she's still in one piece by then." The guilt of not being able to save his friend pushed down on Nyx's shoulders, and being around the mourning Libertus didn't make dealing with the truth any easier. "I'll, uh...go check on the Princess." Drautos didn't stop the Glaive from leaving the stern. He, too, wanted nothing more than to lay down and wake up to find their reality to be nothing more than a bad dream: no Glaives dead, no war between Lucis and Nifelheim, no sorceress attacking them. He was just as tried as the royals were, though he'd never admit his exhaustion to his King. He retreated to the bridge to check on Luche, who was steering the ship, and the remaining Glaive members that helped him command the vessel. "How soon will we reach land?"

"It'll be another two hours," Luche replied. "That airship going down shaved off a lot of time. We'll pull into the East End port, then head for the trains in the next four towns. It'll take us longer than our original plan, but we'll be safer and out of Nifelheim's prying eyes."

"Knowing them, they'll be waiting for us once we make it shore."

Luche flipped a switch on the control panel. "We'll have to worry about that when the time comes." His gaze focused on the water again. "How is His Majesty?"

Drautos began to pace in the bridge, folding his hands behind his back. "He's very good at concealing his emotions. Unlike the Prince, he has kept a calm demeanor throughout all of this madness. A little too good a suppressing his emotions, if you ask me."

"It IS his job to keep a level head in times of crisis."

"True..." He glanced at the remains of the still-burning Nifeli airship that stuck out of the water. "But after everything that's happened - especially with him - I fear he'll far apart before we find peace again." His hand rested against the wall. "If Lucis is to become whole again, we need His Majesty around as long as possible so Noctis may be fully prepared for the responsibilities he's to take on as the next King."

"And what of the witch?" Both pairs of eyes switched from their focus to Axis, who entered the bridge and saluted his captain. "We haven't confirmed what happened to her in Altissia, and her belongings still reside with ours."

"So long as she isn't in disguise on this ship, she is the least of our concerns. We don't need another
obstacle in our path." Drautos' response was harsher than either of his subordinates expected, and they both knew why. Cor, usually a resilient man who mocked the face of danger with his katana and a cold stare, was taking a surprising amount of time to recover from his battle with Lamia. She'd cast Blind on him, and while spells usually had little to no effect on him, his eyesight still hadn't fully returned. Ignis tended to the wounds Lamia left on him, as well as the ones that plagued Gladiolus, Prompto, and the other Glaives. A doctor from the President's secret guard had joined their caravan to continue looking after Gentiana, who remained unconscious since being stabbed by the witch. They were some of the worst injuries the tactician ever saw, he told Drautos, comparable to what he saw from the King's injuries. "She's been a hindrance on us since she joined the Prince." He repeated the sentence in his head, imagining the woman's kind eyes and nervous smile as something more sinister, more believable for the title of Lamia. He hadn't seen her when she rampaged through the Presidential estate, but the aftermath left her a shell of her former self when he attended her interrogation. And even with all of that, he knew in his heart that it was Atra who brought down the second airship and ensured their escape from Accordo. He didn't dare tell the others their enemy did one good deed for them; though, it didn't matter anymore.

Noctis was as impatient as ever. Fleeing yet another country was taking its toll on his relaxed demeanor, and he couldn't sit still as he watched Ignis check on Gladiolus' wounds. He paced the floor, unable to rest for even a second, and his gazed bounced from one person to the next. Ignis didn't have to be looking at him to know the expression he wore. "Pacing won't speed up the boat, Highness," he told the Prince as he dabbed the wound with an alcohol-soaked cotton swab. "You should conserve your energy. Once we dock, we'll be on the move."

"You mean on the run." The tension from his thoughts dispersed to the others. "We were so close to securing some form of reassurance, and what happens? Nifelheim shows up and fucks us over."

"Language, Noctis," the King said from his chair. "We are all stressed from the recent events. You must calm down until we can sort this out."

"Sort this out?" Noctis' footsteps pressed harder on the floor as he approached his father. "We just lost what may be our one chance to ensure a little security in our fight. You weren't there when Frons sat there and accused us of purposely bringing Lamia into Accordo. This isn't a problem we can just sort out."

"Noctis," The Prince's words ceased, as did his pacing. His hands dropped to his sides, fists balled tight in refusal to fully relax. "I know you're scared. We all are. But in times of crises, we must stay calm. That's the only way we can ensure our survival in the matter."

Finished with Gladiolus, Ignis trotted to the buffet on the other side of the room and prepared Noctis a cup of tea. "His Majesty is right. We'll only be able to figure this out if we keep our heads together and our emotions in check." He handed the cup to Noctis, his hands lingering on the Prince's for a moment longer than necessary.

"I know there's no need for a third voice of reason," Gladiolus added, balancing his arms on his knees, "but you know it's the only choice we've got right now. Between East End port and Solheim is a lot of road we have to cover, and we can't do that if no one's on the same page." He glanced down at the wound Atra gave him. He was completely taken off guard during their battle when he sent her through the wall. She was quicker than he thought she'd be, resulting in him having no warning when her Flare spell shot him into the opposite wall and left him wedged for a while. The spell had only burned a small portion of his uniform; it was the impact with the wall that tore a line into the flesh on his chest and arms, bad enough where he required stitches to close one of them. Ignis tossed a potion bottle his way once Noctis was settled in a chair. "Thanks." He popped the cork off, and as he raised the bottle to his mouth to drink, the scent of the green liquid swam into his
nostrils. Sweet and flowery, the smell made his eyes widen for a moment, and he lowered the vial. "...It's hers."

"They were the only ones we had left," Ignis explained. "Sorceress or not, her concoctions never poisoned us."

"Don't call her that." Everyone's eyes fell on Prompto, who'd been quietly laying on one of the beds in their suite. "I know her name isn't Nebula, but please...don't call her by that name. It's...scary." He tucked his hands behind his head.

"It's the truth, Prom. No debating that."

The gunner shot up. "Yeah, but we don't have to call her 'Lamia' or 'Sorceress'. She has a name." He swung his legs over the side of the bed and hunched over. "We all agreed that the person we fought wasn't the same one who took us in. She's still our friend..." Even he was beginning to find his own words hard to believe. Reaching to the floor, he picked up Atra's medical bag. "You think she made it out?"

"With her resilience," Ignis answered, "I'm sure she escaped somehow. But there's nowhere for her to go. Whatever town she sets foot it will recognize her now that her face is on the news."

"And what if she were with us?"

Before Noctis could give his opinion, Gladiolus stepped in. "Prom, you know that's not possible anymore. Cor and the Kingsglaive won't allow her anywhere near Noct. She's a threat to him."

"She had chance after chance to do something, and she didn't do anything." Prompto stood up, holding the medical bag tight in his grip. "We all heard what she had to say when she was locked up. You know she would never hurt us." His pleading was met with averted gazes and silence. He knew they knew the truth; even if the Glaives were reluctant to say anything good about her, the royals had knowledge of the doctor's kindness.

"Regardless," Regis told the younger men, "Miss Interitio's time with us has come to an end. Even if the whole of Lucis were to owe her a debt for saving the lives of myself and my son, recent events have proven that she's too unstable to be in our presence." His eyes fell on Noctis, who grit his teeth in frustration, knowing nothing could be done. "We must all move past from the brief period she resided with us and, from this moment forth, focus on to saving our kingdom. We must reclaim our home."

"Agreed," Noctis muttered, finding himself beside Prompto to look through Atra's belongings. Everything she'd brought from Duscae was in their possession, mixed with their bags when they scrambled to prepare from their departure from Altissia. He found a magic textbook buried underneath all of her equipment. The cover was very worn down, the pages burnt around the edges and torn in some parts, and when the Prince flipped it open, the book instinctively stopped at the beginning of a chapter that covered the Cure spell. It was much more worn than other sections of the book, the first ten pages covered in green and gold fingerprints; residue from working with her elixirs, he assumed. Some of the pages were glossed over with tape, allowing him to see the visible rips and damage she did her best to repair. For a moment he imagined seeing her flip through it, studying its words and practicing the given techniques to achieve the perfect spell. The doctor had been so desperate to rid herself of the Lamia curse that she resorted to learning magic so she could attempt to control herself - and it seemed she was willing to do so no matter what the cost. She probably let Cor use whatever torture methods he wanted to on her after he still agreed to go through with the Shadow Agreement to gain as much trust as they would give. He couldn't imagine what she endured on her escape from Nifelheim, even with the story Luna heard from her lips. And yet she
Luna was back to the way she was when in Altissia. She didn't want to leave the room for anything-not food, not to stretch her legs, not even for her fiance. She wanted to remain by her guardian's side at all times, not wanting to miss the moment she awoke, if it came tonight. She caressed Gentiana's face as her guardian lay unconscious on the bed, her hands neatly folded across her body, covering the bandages that kept her wound from bleeding. The black-haired woman's slumber mimicked that of princesses from the stories her mother told her as a child: people waiting for their beloved to rescue them as they sat in their towers, hoping their savior would come soon. Gentiana didn't fit the bill of a helpless princess; she was too tough to wait for anyone to take action for her sake. The princess ran her fingers through her guardian's hair, her stare stuck on the motionless form. "We'll be in Solheim soon," she told the unconscious woman. "A few more days of travel, and we'll be safely in their borders. It won't be like when we ran to Accordo; we have Noctis and the Glaive this time. We won't be alone in the cold ever again." She didn't mind the presence of her guardian Glaive lurking in the corner of the room. As he had in Altissia, he was there to make sure she ate and drank and functioned as normally as her emotions would allow. He kept his eyes on his charge, her blond locks hanging loose and falling out of her ponytail. The braids that were usually pinned atop her head fell limp on either side and tangled with her earrings, bringing about occasional annoying fits of freeing the hairs from her jewelry.

Nyx couldn't deny that she was a beautiful individual. He'd thought so since the day he was designated her protector when Gentiana wasn't in Lucis with her. Guilt settled in his soul when he couldn't keep her safe during the Nifeli invasion, and he swore to never falter in his duty again when the woman stumbled into the safe house gardens, her body bloodied and bruised from her journey on foot. Gentiana gave him glares through that first night in Altissia, but even that - or the Princess' sudden distance from everyone and everything - couldn't deter him from checking on her every hour, asking if she needed food or a drink, or if he had things his way, a shoulder to lean on. Drautos had warned him not to grow close to the Tenebraen Princess, to keep his distance and keep any relationship at a protector-protected level. The captain must've known Nyx too well to exclusively give him that warning; then again, the Glaive questioned if the captain knew him well enough to trust him in the presence of Lunafreya. Even from the distance he sat away from her, Nyx could pick up a faint scent of the shampoo she often used when washing her hair. Every lock dripped of the smell, and it drove him crazy that he couldn't act on the urges that drove him to be closer to her. He opened his mouth, about to ask her if she was hungry or thirsty. He asked her countless times in Altissia, less for the actual answer and more just to hear her voice. The tone rang like gentle chapel bells in his ears, and like her scent, he craved it more every second. Hearing her speak was the closest the Glaive knew he'd ever be able to get to the Oracle without breaching his professionalism, or worse, disrupting the royal order. She wasn't Noctis' wife yet, but she wasn't a territory he could attempt to claim. Crowe and Libertus listened to him talk about her night after night when they'd be off duty and relaxing at their usual eatery, and both knew he had it bad for the Princess. Seeing the mask she wore over her despair saddened him; he knew there was nothing he could do to alleviate her pain. He wanted to break the silence that ate away at their calm. "Has Leviathan spoken with you since our departure?" he asked, resting his forearms on his knees.

"No, not since. My communication with her has been silenced, almost cut off. The other gods assure me that she's alright, but I can only believe so if I see it for myself." Gentiana looked pale to Luna, paler than normal. Her cheeks appeared slightly sunken in, and her veins lacked the vibrance they usually held. She almost looked dead, a thought the Princess immediately shook from her mind. "Speaking of the others, they say the nights will grow ever longer the more this chaos consumes the earth. She can only take so much before she collapses."
"How long do you think we have?"

Luna shook her head. "It's difficult to say. I only know that the world is in grave danger, and if it falls into eternal darkness, nothing will ever be the same." Her hand trailed down Gentiana's body and stopped at her hands, and her fingers curled around them. "The Astrals are dying. Gentiana's stone is losing its glow. The time for the King of Light to save us is growing short." She closed her eyes and hunched forward, leaning her forehead against the mattress. Luna whispered a plea to the gods to herself, not wanting the Glaive to hear her desperation. Her jaw pressed harder as she did her best to contain her fear of what could come if things went wrong. "Please..." Nyx heard when her voice cracked. "Save us from the shadows that threaten us..."

In the middle of the night Luna finally came out of her room. Nyx had departed for his quarters some time ago, allowing her space to think and talk to Gentiana, who remained comatose. The doctors had reassured her the woman would awaken again in due time, but they spoke as if she were any other human being. Things were unpredictable with Astrals; they could either be sturdily built and last through decades of war without aging, or collapse at the tiniest prick of their finger. Gentiana hadn't aged a day in fifteen years, since she was appointed as Luna's guardian after becoming the youngest Oracle in history. Watching her in her unconscious state was the first time any signs of deterioration or aging were shown in the woman, and it scared Luna to the point where she began to overthink things. Needing a moment to collect herself she kissed Gentiana's forehead, promising to come back soon, and left her suite. The night air on the water made goosebumps form on her arms. She hugged herself, and when she turned around, she wasn't too surprised to find Nyx offering his uniform jacket to her. "Your Highness looks a bit chilly."

"Thank you," she replied as he draped it over her shoulders. "I thought you'd turned in for the night."

He shook his head. "Couldn't sleep. I tried for thirty minutes before I settled on patrolling the ship. Haven't gotten tired yet." In his other hand he had a glass of water, which was also offered to her, and she took it from his grasp. Their fingers brushed against one another's and Luna quickly retracted her arm.

"Will we reach shore soon?"

"In an hour and a half. East End port should be clear by the time we arrive." Nyx looked around at the open waters that surrounded them. "It's too quiet..." He squinted and leaned his hands on the guard rail, staring as if he were searching for something. "They're probably waiting for us to dock. We can't let our guard down when we reach land." His eyes fell on her again. "When we get to the port, we'll have to move quickly. The trains don't come as often during the late hours." His hand rested on the knife that sat in its holster, his knuckles white under the quarter moon's light. "I'll keep an eye out for you and Gentiana."

"And yourself. We can't lose another Glaive." It stung like an open wound. They were a party of three less people, and the loss of them weighed heavy on everyone aboard the ship. She looked down at his hands, seeing the tension in the muscles that flexed in his tight hold of the handle. He was scared of what the future held. Against better judgement she reached out and took it into her own, catching the Glaive off guard and drawing his attention. She stared into his eyes, gray meeting blue, and for the first time since all the chaos was unleashed, he felt a sense of calm wash over him. She wasn't ready for him to throw away his life so easily. "Your safety is just as important as mine or the King's. The Lucians must stick together if we're to make it out of this mess alive."

He couldn't help but flash a half-smile in her direction. "Of course, Your Highness. But your well-being is why I put mine on the line." Better judgement was cast aside once more as, caught up in the moment, Nyx's fingers intertwined with Luna's. He raised her hand to eye level and gave her a gentle
bow as he left a feathery kiss atop her knuckles. "I swore my life to serve His Majesty, and in doing so, have also sworn it to you. What becomes of me is pointless if you aren't protected." He didn't want to let go, but his senses came back and told him he was treading on lava, and he reluctantly released her hand. "Hold onto the jacket for as long as Your Highness needs." Nyx stepped backward with a bow and turned on his heel, marching away before someone saw them together and grew suspicious.

She didn't turn in after Nyx's departure. Her mind was still racing a mile a minute, and walking helped to ease her troubles. Her footsteps were light against the wooden deck to keep those who slept from waking. Luna watched the stars in the night sky blink and hide behind the thin clouds that intercepted their path as she walked. She soon found herself at the front of the ship, and as she rounded the corner, she saw the King facing the sea. "Your Majesty is still awake," she said just loud enough for him to hear without being startled. He gave a momentary glance over his shoulder in the direction the voice came from, then returned to watching the water.

"I must confess something to you, Lunafreya," the King suddenly said to her. She found his need to confess confusing, but approached him still and settled next to him on the guard rail of the ship. "When I made the decision to hold the signing of the peace treaty in my borders, I knew nothing good would come of it. Iedolas Aldercapt isn't the type of man who willingly talks about making peace with his enemies. He wants them crushed under the weight of his will; that is how he's ruled his empire for decades. Many of Nifelheim's past monarchs have acted in a similar manner, as history will no doubt tell you; yet even as I witnessed and lived through the events of the past, and the time came for me to determine the future of Lucis, I fell short on protecting my people." Regis laid a shaky hand on the guard rail and looked down at the ring on his finger. "The kings of the past scolded me for my actions, but I stood firm in my decision to accept the Empire and discuss terms of peace. And when my decision proved to be wrong, the kings looked down on me with shame as everything they'd built was torn apart in an instant." His gaze drifted up to meet Luna's. "Three days before the treaty signing, I experienced a premonition of the future. It told me chaos would swallow the world and bring about the end of light." The hand that held his cane shook. "I saw everything that was to come: the invasion, the fall of Lucis, the battle that would consume Accordo... I saw it all in the crystal." Luna's eyes widened. "And I still allowed it all to happen. May the gods have mercy on me..."

"But why?" she asked, her voice holding no tone of malice. "If you knew of the dangers to come, why did you go through with your plan?"

Regis shook his head. "I thought I could change the future, for you, and for my son. I had hoped that if I were to somehow convince Iedolas to accept peace between our nations - or find a way to defeat him - that we could bring an end to this war." He began to walk and Luna followed. "I am too old to keep fighting, and I wanted a brighter future for the next King." His head hung low and his steps slowed. "I...saw something else." He met the Oracle's gaze once more, only for a brief second. "Chaos shall not only consume the world should he fail, Lunafreya. You must be there to guide him on his path."

Luna's head tilted to the side. "What do you mean?"

He wouldn't elaborate. "Should that time come, you will understand... But I pray it never does."

Regis ceased his footsteps and reached for his ring, placing it in her hands. She stared at him, bewildered as to why he'd give her Lucis' most treasured possession next to the crystal. "And if it does, Luna, please give this to Noctis. I sense I'll be unable to give it to him myself." He continued to walk, knowing Luna would be too stunned by his request to follow after him. The King returned to his quarters, where Clarus sat sleeping in his chair in the corner, and Cor kept his chin rested atop his katana as it stood balanced between his knees.
"I hope you know what you're doing, Your Majesty."

"It is the same as what you knew of the future when you found Atra Interitio," Regis replied, quickly silencing the Marshal. "The future is uncertain, but if we will it and try with all our might, we may just be able to shape it as we see fit." The King sat down on his bed. "You've seen many uncertain futures, yet you remained by my side for many years. What uncertainty will be the one to draw the line for you, Cor?"

The Marshal bared his teeth in frustration. There were plenty of times when he wanted to call it quits, but no matter how hard her tried, life and other circumstances refused to let him throw in the towel. It was because of those circumstances that he was known as Cor the Immortal, feared throughout the world for his resilience and skill on the battlefield. His name was as infamous as that of Lamia, and he balanced the spectrum of power in the world with his prowess. When Regis asked him what it would take to finally stop him, he already knew the answer. It came when Atra stopped his heart from beating in a single motion. It was his first death in the one-hundred and fourteen years he'd lived, longer-lasting than any Astral the world had knowledge of. And on that night, for the first time in his life as Etro and Chaos reached out to caress his soul, he considered closing his eyes and allowing death to take him from the world.

But not even death could stop him, it seemed.

Chapter End Notes

That Omen trailer... Holy crap.

And I have to say, LuNyx has grown on me so much.
Running

Chapter Summary

The times of calm are over.

Chapter Notes

NaNoWriMo has begun, and I'm in deep! I'm using my personal novel for the event along with this fanfiction, which is why updates to this story will be a little more frequent. And once FFXV comes out...geez, I have no idea what'll happen xD Obviously this story won't be done in time for the game's release, but since it's basically AU at this point, it's fine. I can't wait to cry OAO

There was no time to waste as the ship approached the docks at East End port. Running on very little sleep, the Kingsglaive made sure the royals made it off the boat and onto dry land as swiftly as they could move. Cars were waiting at the port, thanks to an emergency maneuver on Solheim's part, giving them a thread of hope on their journey to asylum. A three-hour drive was their first course of action, followed by one of four train rides that would bring them close enough to Solheim's borders where they could walk. It was too dangerous now to travel through Lestallum, which had remained out of the war for nearly two decades. Imperial Forces now marched through the city and worked patrols day and night for anyone suspicious or remotely resembling the appearance of Lamia. Lestallum was now as much of a war zone as Altissia.

The party divided into four groups to fit into the cars. Noctis remained with his friends, Cor, Libertus and Clarus stayed with the King and Commander Drautos, Nyx rode with Luna and Gentiana, and the rest of the Glaives piled into the last. The King's vehicle led the other royal caravans while guarded behind the Glaives' car. Communicators allowed the security detail in each car to speak with the others in case of an emergency, and they would update their statuses with each other every ten minutes to ensure there were no problems with their journey to the first train. A half hour into the car ride, Noctis leaned his head against the window's cool glass and groaned.

"You okay, Noct?" Gladiolus asked. The Prince had barely slept on the boat, which was highly unusual for him. He was notorious for sleeping through alarms - an even a surprise attack from the Imperial Army when they fleed Lucis - so to see bags under his eyes and the veins easily visible in his sclera was unsettling to the bodyguard. "Try and rest a little. We've still got a long way to go before we reach the first train."

"I'm fine," the Prince grumbled, but Gladiolus and Prompto knew he wasn't. He was a terrible liar with a deer-in-headlights kind of stare that either one of them could see through with little effort. Staring at his friend's eyes, Prompto couldn't help noticing the violet glaze that washed over the normal cerulean of his irises, and flecks of silver which flashed in the crevices.

The gunner tapped the bodyguard's arm and gestured to the Prince. "He's not okay, Gladio. His eyes are way off."
Gladiolus immediately shook off his seat belt and slid closer to Noctis before Ignis could ask him to
examine the monarch. Noctis was too exhausted to push the guardian's hands away as he seized his
face to examine his eyes. The hue of the violet was brightening, borderlining the transition from
purple to red. The silver was more concerning than the chance of red appearing. Curious, one of his
hands left Noctis and tapped the communicator in his ear. "Libertus."

"Something the matter, Gladiolus?"

"Noct's eyes are showing signs of another crystal attack. Not only that, but they've nearly gone red. I
need a check on the King's eyes." Libertus gave the okay and fell silent for some time as he
inspected the monarch, leaving Gladiolus biting his inner cheek as his nerves became jumpy.

"No, His Majesty is completely fine. Perhaps you saw something reflecting from your window?"
The bodyguard shifted toward Noctis again and held his eyelids open. His first concern was the lack
of fight the Prince had when his eyes were peeled open. Noctis absolutely hated having his face
touched, and it was rare to see him calmed if someone laid a hand to his forehead or cheek. The
second sign of something being wrong was the color. Prompto had been correct in seeing a change
of hue in Noctis' irises, and as the seconds ticked by, the purple took on a more magenta shade and
crept closer to redness. Silver shimmered in strands throughout the irises. And as he watched his
friend for longer, Gladiolus noticed crystallized particles beginning to form on the Prince's shoulders.

The bodyguard pressed the button on his communicator again. "There's no mistaking it. He's got
crystal dust on his clothes." His hand slid down to Noctis' cheek, and when he earned little reaction
from the Prince, the corners of his lips curled up in concern. "We need to find a doctor. He doesn't
look good."

"Pull over, Ignis," Prompto told the strategist. "I'll drive so you can help Gladio take care of him."
None of them were sure what Ignis could possibly do to combat the mysterious force plaguing their
Prince. The message was relayed to the other vehicles as Ignis turned to the shoulder and switched
sides with Prompto. He helped Gladiolus shift Noctis to the middle section of the second row so they
could both keep an eye on him.

The tactician took off his gloves and rested his palm on Noctis' forehead. "Are you alright,
Highness?"

"Mmm..." he grumbled. "I'm just tired... Can't fall asleep..." He seemed half-aware of everyone
staring at him, and the longer his lack of complaining lasted, the stronger the group's concern grew.
Whatever ailed the Prince wasn't something Ignis could treat.

"We should have Lady Lunafreya take a look at him," he suggested, and the guys knew that meant
he had no idea what was happening. "Let the others know."

Gladiolus' communicator was connected to one Glaive in each of the vehicles, allowing open
communication with everyone with little interference. Nyx, Luna's escort, glanced over his shoulder
at the Oracle and her unconscious guardian. "We'll have to pull over for a bit," he informed his
charge. "Something's up with the Prince. Ignis needs you to look at him."

"Is he alright?" she asked, already knowing the vague part of the answer. She hadn't heard any of the
details of Noctis' ailment, but if she was being asked to see to his care, it was a bad sign of the
crystal's current situation. Gazing at the sky, the moon was but a sliver of a crescent as it set in the
early morning hours. Clouds obscured the stars, and a knot settled in her gut. King Regis' words still
rang heavy in her head, and as she looked down at the box she'd placed the ring in, the gods' silence
began to bother her greatly.
In her turmoil, she almost didn't notice Gentiana's eyelids fluttering. "...in danger..." she mumbled, hissing from the pain that surged out of her stomach. "Must...stop him..."

"Gentiana!" Luna cradled her guardian's face and brushed hair away from her eyes. "You're awake...How are you feeling?"

Her eyes open, Gentiana stared at Luna with a heavy breath. "Noctis is-" The car hit a bump in the road, jerking her body upward and shaking her wound.

"Sorry!" Nyx apologized. "Okay, we're stopping here." The moment all vehicles came to a halt, Gentiana forced herself to sit up and got out of the car, despite Luna's pleading for her to stay inside. Holding her stomach, she limped toward Noctis' car with her charge in tow.

"Gentiana, please, you need to rest." She ignored Luna's pleas and continued toward him. King Regis, accompanied by Clarus and Drautos, met her halfway to the SUV. "Your Majesty."

"Something has plagued my son," Regis informed them, resting his weight on his cane. The silence looming over them told the monarch of their amazement that it was only his son - and him, too - that were effected by what looked like another reaction from the crystal. Gentiana bowed her head to him as she passed by the King, her eyes lingering on his for too long for no one to not notice. Luna watched the stare between them break as she pushed forward and rushed as best as she could to Noctis.

Luna's hands laced together and she bit her lower lip. "Your Majesty... What did you see?"

Prompto caught Gentiana's arms before she lost her footing and helped her to the car. "I thought you'd still be knocked out."

"How is he?"

He shed the hopeful mask as the grim nature of his friend's condition returned to mind. "I don't know what's going on with him. It's nothing like what happened on the way to Altissia. He passed out two minutes ago, but the crystal pieces are still hanging around him." The door to the back seat was open. Gladiolus leaned against the car, his eyes glued to the Prince seemingly asleep on Ignis' lap. "He still knocked out?"

"Nothing's changed," Ignis replied. "There's nothing physically wrong with him, but he's unable to respond properly." Gentiana ducked her head and slid into the car as much as the young monarch's unconscious form allowed her to. As Prompto described, silver and blue particles had built up around him and his advisor. It was as if the two had been caught in a blizzard, the latter caring for his Prince until the storm let up. "I've given him an elixir in case there is something wrong, but I can't find anything to indicate illness."

"It's not a sickness," Gentiana informed him. She carefully leaned forward, sucking in a sharp breath when another painful sting took over, and peeled one of Noctis' eyes open. The redness in his irises had brightened, opposing the green in her own eyes, and the closer she looked, the more she began to notice the hue transforming into orange. Her hand shuddered as she pulled away from him. She didn't hear Ignis or Gladiolus' question of what was causing their Prince to act this way, nor did she register the sudden strengthening of the pain in her gut. Gentiana collapsed to her knees and stared up at Luna, who knelt beside her and cradled her head. "Luna...only you can restore him."

She had no idea what Gentiana meant. "Please, explain it to me!"

"It is...the Oracle's duty..." Her own words were losing their understanding as the agony of her
wound took over, and she passed out in Luna's arms. Nyx was immediately at the Oracle's side and he scooped Gentiana into his arms. Clarus joined him in making sure the guardian was alright while Drautos remained outside to keep an eye on the King, who'd drifted over to the car his son was in. He offered his hand to Lunafreya, and when she took it, she felt it tremble against her touch. No words needed to be said as she got to her feet and sauntered over to Noctis. She nodded to Ignis and slid inside, her eyes drifting to her fiance. He mumbled words she couldn't comprehend in his unconscious state, too quiet for her to try and decipher.

Gentiana's last words before she fainted danced in her thoughts. The Oracles were sworn to serve the Kings of Light, those chosen by he crystal. While he wasn't a King of Light yet, Noctis was close to that road; such was confirmed when Luna learned she was betrothed to him. She was the link between the gods and the humans, and he was the one who could use their powers if they allowed it. After their battle against Atra in the Presidential Palace, Luna had lost all communication with Leviathan, and while the other Archeans assured her things would be alright with her, the longer she stared at the darkened sky, the less she believed them. It was almost like Leviathan never existed with how quickly the other Archeans brushed away the subject of her. The news disturbed her, and she shared her concerns with the unconscious Gentiana on the boat. She wondered if she'd ever see Leviathan again. She thought about it for a moment longer, and realized how quiet Noctis had been on the boat as they sailed away from Altissia. At first she'd assumed it was due to the sudden ambush, or the still-sinking knowledge that the one he'd befriended was now his enemy. But as she pondered, Luna remembered how restless he'd been. The circles under his eyes told her of his lack of sleep - an abnormality for the Prince. Whatever was plaguing him had something to do with Leviathan's fall.

Luna leaned over Noctis and laid her hand on his forehead, brushing off the crystallized particles that gathered on top of his skin. "Noctis," she began, giving Ignis a nod, "it's Luna. I don't know where you are right now, or why you're suddenly not well, but we need you here. You have a kingdom to fight for. We're all very worried about you..." 

He didn't know why he was in Lunafreya's room, all the way in the castle in Tenebrae. Noctis walked through the room, observing each aspect of its decor. He hadn't been in her home since they'd first met after his horrific injuries earned from the serpent monster Nifelheim unleashed. He'd slept the entire journey to Tenebrae, and when he woke up, he was meeting the young Oracle, Lady Lunafreya Nox Fleuret. Her brother Ravus joined them shortly after to introduce himself, though he seemed distant in comparison to his sister. Queen Sylva was delighted to have the young Prince of Lucis visit, having known his mother since she'd been crowned Queen of Lucis. She'd been saddened by the news of her sudden death, and wanted to make Noctis feel at home for the duration of his stay. He'd been hesitant to remain in Tenebrae without his father around, but Luna did her best to make Noctis comfortable as Gentiana and the specialized team of doctors helped his body and mind heal. The moment he fully warmed up to the Tenebraen royals came when Luna read her Cosmogony book to him, which told stories of the Archeans and their supposed descendants, the Astrals - a tiny group of people born into Eos who were thought to be immortal. Luna hoped to be able to meet one someday, and Gentiana assured her that as an Oracle, she had a great chance of meeting an Astral in person. When she asked how they could possibly be immortal, Gentiana would only say that their origins were found in the Astral shards that fell to the earth when the Archeans brought it to life, and that only they held the answers. The idea of an immortal human fascinated Noctis, more so than the stunts he learned from some Kingsglave members after combat training with Gladiolus when he was on his feet again.

Noctis remembered one particular conversation he and Luna exchanged with Gentiana toward the end of his stay in Tenebrae. "The Oracle and the King of Light must always be together," she told the children, for it's the King's duty to protect this world from the darkness, and the Oracle's to guide
"What's that supposed to mean?" young Noctis had asked, raising an eyebrow at the green-eyed woman.

She smiled at the Prince and laid a hand on his cheek. "It's been that way since the Archeans built this world. As water rains from the heavens and the seasons change, so should the fates of the King and Oracle be intertwined. You'll come to understand it when you're of age, dear Noctis." Gentiana kissed his forehead, bringing about a blush over the entirety of his face, and Luna giggled at his embarrassment. "Do you think you can do that, Your Highness?"

Noctis pressed a finger to his lips, his eyes staring at the ceiling. "...I guess I could try."

"That's all I ask you do." Gentiana ruffled his hair.

With a light-hearted chuckle Noctis gave them a nod. "I won't let you down."

Luna pat the top of hand. "I know you won't."

He stopped in front of a mannequin positioned in a corner of the room. Luna's wedding dress hung on its shoulders: white and silver with black lace and detailing sewn into the skirt and veil. The design resembled his mother's wedding dress, which he'd seen in pictures in his father's study. It was a bittersweet tribute to her, one that brought a tear to his eye as he turned away from it. His gaze was drawn out the window of her room, where a bright light consumed his attention. One glance turned the sunlit field outside into a raging inferno in a single blink. Noctis stepped away from the window, mere seconds before the glass shattered and something roared beyond the smoke and flames. A growl followed suit and a dog's head poked into the room. A Cerberus, Noctis was quick to recognize as he summoned a sword and warped away from the beast. Its mouth opened and he shielded himself from the fire it released. His eyes widened at horror when he saw Luna's wedding dress go up in flames along with the rest of her belongings. He darted around, looking for anything to salvage for her, and found the Cosmogony book resting next to his foot. Noctis scooped it up and ran out the door, his stance freezing when he was no longer in the Tenebraen palace.

The new surroundings were much more familiar than Lunafreya's quarters. The fields of Duscae were no stranger to Noctis. He and his friends would spend many night camping under the stars in the countryside, and crammed together in a single tent when they made their escape from Lucis following the invasion. He wondered why they weren't there with him, why he was still alone. Not even the Regalia was around for him to drive in search of anyone he knew. The solidarity was beginning to irk him. As he started to walk in circles while thinking of a plan, a bark captured his attention. The Prince turned left and stared at an opening next to a tree, where a white dog stood and watched him.

"Pryna!" As the name left his lips, the air above him whirred. Engines bellowed in the clouds, and six airships appeared from the wisps. Noctis had only seconds to react as the caravans fired their artillery at him. He ran in Pryna's direction and skid to a stop behind a boulder that jutted from the ground at a slope to shield him. "Pryna, come!" he called to the animal, but it didn't listen and sat next to the tree. "Pryna!" The dog remained still, unfazed by the bullets flying around it. As the bullets collided with the ground Pryna turned around and trotted away, ignoring the war zone unfolding in front of him. Noctis couldn't fathom how the dog could act so casual with war ships hovering overhead, but the way he looked at him told him to follow the animal. When the bullets calmed for a moment Noctis revealed himself and ran after him, keeping one hand raised to create a shield in case the Imperial Forces fired again.

The environment changed again. Grass wilted, trees died, and the lakes of Duscae drained into sand.
He found himself and Pryna nearing the edge of a desert, one he suspected held life long ago when he saw a capsized boat in the distance. Something on the boat glowed, pulling him and the dog closer to it. As his foot lifted and hovered over the wooden frame, Noctis' heart leaped in his chest. His foot lowered onto the sand again and, as if someone were calling to him, he turned around and saw another light on the opposite side of the desert. Pryna barked at him, encouraging him to continue forward, but something in the Prince's head told him to investigate the light shining further away first. He stepped toward it, laying a hand over his eyes when it grew too bright for him to see through.

"Noctis! Noctis, wake up!" The Prince groaned at the voice calling to him, pushing away whoever's hand was on his forehead. His eyes peeled open and he blinked twice to adjust to the darkness of his surroundings. Ignis, Luna, Gladiolus and Prompto were around him, the tactician acting as his pillow and the Oracle staring down at him. "Welcome back."

"Mmm...what happened?" Noctis sat up and yawned, suddenly feeling much better. "We still on the boat?"

Ignis and Gladiolus exchanged glances. "We docked at East End port almost two hours ago, Highness. You departed the ship and came in the car with us." He turned the Prince around and stared into his eyes. "Do you not remember?"

Noctis shook his head and shuffled away from the advisor. "You sure? Last thing I remember is talking to you and Gladio on the boat."

Gladiolus opened his mouth, but Prompto got in front of him and covered the elder's mouth. "Oh, don't worry, Noct. You passed out before we docked, so Gladio carried you into the car. Not really surprised you slept through the whole thing." He elbowed the bodyguard's side when the former readied a protest, and a shared gaze with Ignis told him to go along with the story for everyone's sanity.

"...Yeah, Prom's right. Guess I'm so tired I had a lapse in memory." Gladiolus helped Luna out of the car and took her seat. "You were asleep for so long your fiance got a little worried."

"Well I'm fine now." Noctis stretched as much as the car allowed him to while Ignis returned to the driver's seat.

As the quartet returned to normal and relief was restored to the group, Nyx escorted Lunafreya back to her vehicle. Midway they were stopped by King Regis, to whom the Glaive bowed. "May we speak privately, Lunafreya?" he asked, giving the Glaive a signal to wait for her at the car. He saluted his king and walked away, giving the two a moment of silence. Their conversation was hushed, watched from a distance by Noctis, who wondered why his father suddenly looked so worked up. Ignis reassured him that everything was fine, and when they finished speaking, the caravans continued to drive.

Three hours passed without incident. They were forty minutes from the first train. Noctis fell asleep - in a manner that his guardian was much more comfortable with - which left Ignis relieved. The orange glow that bounced from the Prince's eyes earlier left a chill that shocked all his nerves at once. He was glad Prompto came up with a cover to prevent Noctis from having a meltdown, and though Gladiolus was reluctant to play along in the beginning, the story helped calm his nerves as well. Everyone agreed to stick with it until they could figure out what had really happened; but four of them already suspected what was going on. Regis, especially, had his suspicions confirmed when Luna told him the ailment was cured only when she used light on the Prince, something she only used to banish relentless spirits whose physical bodies had passed on long ago. It was a bad sign, and
Regis wanted the matter resolved before it spawned into something worse.

Gentiana fell into another spell of unconsciousness. The stress of the situation combined with her injury drained the woman of the little bit of energy she'd used to stay awake, and Luna was unsure of when she'd awaken again. She hoped Gentiana would fully heal before regaining consciousness, but when it came to the Astral, whatever happened next was unpredictable. Luna held Gentiana's hand tight and closed her eyes, and beckoned for Leviathan to offer her hope in their difficult time.

Bullets rained down from the sky, causing all four vehicles to swerve off the road. "Whoa!" Luna's head jerked forward while her body was pulled back, twisting the muscle under her skin and leaving pain behind. "You alright, Your Highness?" Nyx called to her. He unbuckled his seat belt and reached to the back of the car for her. She nodded and showed Gentiana was unharmed from the sudden stop. "What the hell-" A second wave of bullets quickly followed and penetrated the windshield. "Shit!" Nyx summoned a shield around the car and kicked open his door. He rushed to the back door and ripped it open, moving faster as cracks formed in his shield, and pulled Luna and Gentiana out. "We're being ambushed!" He shuffled the Oracle's guardian in his grasp and pressed the communicator in his ear. "Is everyone alright?"

"We're pinned down!" Gladiolus yelled over the artillery. "Your Majesty?"

Static built up in the communicator. "King's fine, but our shield won't last forever!" He could hear the faint twinge of fear in Drautos' voice. "We could've really used Crowe right about now!"

Nyx stepped away from the SUV with Luna, and seconds later, the car exploded. "Well someone's gonna have to share a car if we're going to make it to the train!" A second explosion followed, and he knew they were targeting the cars in an effort to take out as many people at once as they could.

"They're trying to blow us up!" he heard Prompto's voice yell through Gladiolus' communicator. "One, two, three...there's seven of them!"

"We shouldn't be surprised at how quick they found us," Sonitus told his brothers. "But we should count ourselves lucky we're close to the train-" The reception died with a third explosion. Nyx tapped the communicator frantically to try and restore the signal, but with so much interference and so close to them, it was pointless to use the ear pieces.

"Shit..." His gaze landed on Luna. "Stay close to me!" he told her, and she grabbed his hand to ensure no separation. Nyx restored the shield and unsheathed one of his knives. Seeing through the shield was difficult enough with one layer; the hexagonal walls were like thick frosted glass. He had to look hard to spot their allies, and shortly before he marked a target to move to, shadowed figures dropped from the sky. He could hear doors unhinging above them and metal clanking as it hit the ground, and he knew the next attack was coming. "Looks like we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way." The grip on his knife tightened. "Can I ask you to do me a favor?"

"Of course-" The bullets that rained from above were replaced with those at eye level, and they knew the Imperial Forces had switched their strategy. Luna ducked out of instinct, watching cracks form in the shield's second layer.

He took her hand in his, being careful not to cut her, and pointed her palm to the shield. "Think you can maintain that?" She nodded without a moment's hesitation and kept up the shield for the Glaive, who guided her through the battle zone. Having Luna help him made protecting her and Gentiana much easier on Nyx, who could now focus on offense rather than defense. He made sure to have a secure grip on Gentiana with both hands and position his right to shoot spells; diving in with physical attacks was too risky with Gentiana in his care. More explosions erupted in front of them, and though it was difficult to see in detail, the all-black clothing told Nyx that the Prince was trying to clear the
field for them. He was sure Regis was held back and defended by the elder guardians of Lucis, so he had no need to focus his worries on the monarch.

Their advantage was dwindling. For every ten soldiers that would go down, thirty more would take their place. "How many more drones do they have?" Luche yelled as he took out another Magitek troop.

"This is ridiculous!" Tredd agreed, kicking a crossbow from one of the robot's grasps and cutting its connective wires apart. Another knocked him backwards, and as it prepared to strike him down with its halberd, Axis flew in with a kick and sent it flying into a line of more troops. "Thanks." Axis replied with a nod and dove into the battle again.

Libertus worked with Ignis to try and take out one of the airships flying above. Their Thundaga spells seemed to bounce off the shell of the nearest ship. "It's like they've got magic-resistant casing on them all of a sudden!"

"We have to keep trying," Ignis told him as he kept an eye on Noctis and Prompto. They were back-to-back, Prompto shooting out the Magitek husks' faces and Noctis slicing off robotic limbs. They already looked exhausted, even as Gladiolus and Clarus stepped in to support them. Broadswords clearing lines of the soldiers did little to keep them away.

"Dammit..." Nyx sent another Magitek troop flying away, and aimed a Thunder spell at one of the airships. An engine finally exploded and the ship descended sideways before it crashed into another, and their chances of survival grew by a slight margin.

"'Bout time you did something, hero!" Libertus commented as he evaded a katzbalger swipe aimed at his throat.

Cor stepped in and destroyed a group of Magiteks that attempted to surround the Prince. "We need a path through these drones," he told them. "If you and the Glaives can create one, we can still make it to the train."

"And if they follow after us?" Noctis warped out of the way of a soldier and reappeared behind it, slicing its head off.

"I never said we'd all make it for the same one." Noctis froze momentarily, only regaining his focus when he spotted a small squadron of Magiteks attacking his father's barrier. He stabbed his greatsword through the torsos of the troops and kicked away their remains, laying his hand on the barrier.

"I'm not leaving without you!"

"This isn't a choice we can afford," Regis told his son. "You must take Luna with you to Solheim."

"Not without you!" He struck another husk with the butt of his sword.

Clarus ran to Noctis, knocking more troops away. "Your Highness, it's imperative that you and Lady Lunafreya make it to Solheim. You two are the only hope for Lucis, and if you die here, all is lost."

Noctis grit his teeth and, in a state of anger, threw a fire ball into a circle of Magiteks. The ball erupted and took out all fifty troops congregating and attacking the barrier that kept Luna and Nyx safe. "...Just get there by the time I make it."

Regis placed his hand on the inner wall of the shield, mirroring his son's pose. "May the gods grant you protection on your journey, my son..." As his sentence ended, Cor and Clarus cleared a path for
the younger members of the Lucians to escape through. Gladiolus grabbed Noctis' arm and yanked him through the opening, pushing the Prince behind him to knock more Magiteks from the clearing. Prompto took up the back and fired at the troops that followed him and Nyx, who'd handed Gentiana off to Ignis and helped the gunner fight off the approaching soldiers. As they drifted further from the battle they picked up the pace in their run, knowing the train would have a scarce schedule at the time they planned on making it by. Noctis kept looking over his shoulder, seeing the blue glassy shield that protected his father grow smaller and smaller, until it was a faint twinkling in the distance.

As the train station came into view, Nyx came up front and walked beside the Prince. "He'll make it to Solheim by the time we get there," he assured Noctis, who regretted leaving his only blood-related family behind. "I've fought for your father for years, Your Highness. If there's one thing I know, it's that he doesn't give up easily. He's more of a fighter than any of us."

"...Thank you." His words did little to alleviate the Prince's worries.

Ten minutes away from the train station, Nyx took the lead in escorting everyone toward its entrance. He felt the air was too quiet, following the battle they barely made it through. "Keep your eyes peeled," he told them. "I don't like how quiet it is all of a sudden." Gladiolus had his sword ready in case anything went wrong, and Prompto stared through the cross-hair on his gun. The station was empty, devoid of any workers, and they began to wonder if they had the right location.

Silence lingered until they heard movement on the tracks. The locomotive rolled in shortly after and screeched to a halt. A serviceman opened the door to one of the passenger cars and everyone loaded inside. No conversation was exchanged between then and the train worker as it pulled out of the station. Everyone sat down and stretched out. A slight sense of calm washed over them, knowing they'd made it through the first part of their long journey to Solheim. Gentiana was laid on one of the benches and Luna acted as her pillow, patting her hair and humming a tune to soothe the guardian. Noctis and Ignis sat across from her while Prompto sat on the opposite side of the car and watched the world pass by out the window, and Nyx discussed their next course of action with Gladiolus. They removed the communicators from their ears, having no need for them since the static destroyed any reception they had.

"They should be with us," Noctis finally said, breaking the silence.

Luna looked up when she heard his voice. "He'll be with us again soon." She reached over and laid her hand on his. "We must all make sacrifices in times of hardship. This is a small thing, Noctis. We must be patient and have faith in him."

"Yeah... I guess you're right-" The train car shook, knocking Propmto out of his seat and sending Gladiolus flying across the pathway. Nyx skid on the floor to keep his footing and rushed to the back door. One glance outside the window had him cursing under his breath.

"Bastard sent some troops after us!" He turned on heel and ran to Luna and Noctis. "There are troops on the back of the train. They're searching each car."

"They're what?" Before anyone could repeat the answer a blast knocked Nyx forward. The train car's door had been blown off, and troops poured in, guns aimed at the Lucians. Luna and Ignis had magic barriers up before they fired. Noctis broke through an opening provided in the shield and warped behind the furthest two Magiteks, slicing their torsos open.

Gladiolus picked up Gentiana and gestured for everyone to follow him toward the front of the train. "This way!" Noctis and Nyx were the last to leave the train car, the latter shooting flames into the car to keep the troops occupied.
Three cars closer to the engine, a shake knocked Luna to her knees. Nyx got to her before Noctis and pulled her to her feet again. Without asking he tore the bottom of her dress off up to her ankles, and cut slits into the sides to allow her more movement in running. No one protested his actions as they moved into the next car, and took a moment to rest. "It looks like we've given them the slip."

"For now," the Glaive told them. "We should make sure they're not in the front, either."

"Leave it to us." Prompto and Gladiolus volunteered to go first and carefully tread into the next car, both aiming their weapons ahead of them. It was two minutes before they deemed the next car safe enough for them to stay in. Nyx lifted Gentiana as Ignis followed his comrades into the next car, and as he stepped over the connectors, he noticed a pair of metal hands poking out from underneath the train. They fiddled with a blinking device that wrapped around the connecting legs-

"Highness!"

Ignis' cry was enough to gain everyone's attention. Noctis ran to the doorway and laid eyes upon the bomb strapped to the hooks holding the card together. It let out a high-pitched whir as he sucked in a breath.

"Noctis!"

The Prince was knocked out of the train car and into the next mere seconds before the device exploded. Luna and Ignis had their hands up, both creating barrier to keep the explosion from entering their cars. The cars separated, the further ones screeching as they shook and ran off the tracks. Gladiolus had to hold Noctis back as they were forced to watch the car holding Nyx, Luna and Gentiana veer off course and into a ditch. The rest of the train continued forward to its destination, with no Magitek troops of human Imperial Forces lingering.
Chapter Summary

The hunt begins.

Chapter Notes

Started playing FFXV after my UCE came in the mail on the 28th. I'm in love with everyone and their quirks. Aranea's already my favorite villain. And WHY does everyone have to be so hot? OAO

UPDATE: I beat the game on Dec. 12th. I have very mixed feelings on the story, though the ending made me cry a lot. Those who finished the game will understand what I mean.

Commander Caligo Ulldor was growing frustrated. The Lucians were as elusive as ever, avoiding capture at every instance by the skin of their teeth. Though his irritation was nowhere near General Glaucal's level, the middle-aged commander was annoyed with how slippery the rats were. He envied Glaucal, who was still stationed in the remains of Insomnia and trying to get the crystal free from its chamber. And he was left with the daunting task of rounding up the fugitives and delivering them to High Commander Ravus Nox Fleuret - a man who got his position out of convenience instead of working for it as he had. Caligo gave years of his life to the Imperial Forces, enlisting as a teenager along with hundreds of other adolescents, and breaking free from the crowd to rise higher in command. He'd never been one to complain until Ravus came into the picture. The King of Tenebrae was slain and the blame left on Lucis' shoulders for not providing aid when they'd taken in the young ailing Prince. Queen Sylva, ever resilient, stood her ground to the end and died a fiery death in front of her son. And in the void left by the lack of leadership in the green province, Ravus - with no military experience and very little time learning how to rule his people - was whisked away from Tenebrae and given a position of command above Loqi and Caligo. He was on par with Aranea Highwind and given free reign over the Magitek troops with no argument from General Interitio. The lack of resistance from his superior left Caligo shaking his fist and cursing under his breath whenever the High Commander was in his presence. He could do nothing but listen; thus was a direct order from His Imperial Majesty.

His current task was to dig through the remains of Altissia and find any clues that would help them track the Lucians. Something had to have been left behind, Ravus was sure, and if it meant finding Luna and returning her to Tenebrae until her fiance's lineage was dealt with, so be it. "Don't return until you've found something," the young Commander had the nerve to say to him - a twenty-year veteran of the Imperial Army. He bit his tongue for the time being and brought some troops into the city, targeting the Lucians' former hideout in the outskirts of Altissia. The building had been ransacked plenty of times: the drapes torn apart, the marble flooring cracked by countless robotic drones marching through. Caligo was sure there was nothing to find at the hideout, but did as Ravus commanded with reluctance and inspected the remains. His soldiers dug through the piles of debris he was sure had been checked again and again, and when they found nothing, Caligo huffed.
"There's nothing to be found here, sir," one of his subordinates reported. He grit his teeth at the repetition, which the soldier was quick to notice, and he took his leave before Commander Ulldor reprimanded him. While not as vicious as the generals, Caligo nearly matched Glauc in temper control, his rage the reason General Interitio had him command a garrison away from the others. But not even the generals could override Chancellor Izunia's orders that allowed Ravus to roam free, sometimes beyond the reigns even Prince Velox pulled. The reasoning behind this was left unexplained to them, and Emperor Aldercapt never shared his opinion on the matter. "Perhaps we should move on to the Presidential Palace, sir. Captain Tulmett is unable to commence a search of the manor. He's been reassigned to assist His Highness with the expedition to find Lamia."

"...Very well," Caligo agreed. "Move all units to the Presidential Palace. Leave no room unchecked." The Commander was escorted out of the mansion and led by his troops down the winding roads and waterways through Altissia. The city wasn't the easiest to navigate, lacking the underground reinforcement to support the machines Caligo usually traveled in. He was forced to move by foot through the city and by makeshift bridges that connected one building to another once they reached the inner parts of Altissia.

"There's more news, Commander."

"Out with it, then." The subordinate swallowed hard at his commander's tone, sensing the annoyance that surfaced through the man's squinted eyes.

The subordinate drew in a deep breath. "...Reports from His Highness confirm that Lamia has escaped." A fist slammed into the already crumbling facade of the nearest structure. "His Highness was left in charge of her transport to Insomnia, but she was left unsecured and jumped from his airship. She was last seen landing in the Altium Magma Sea."

The news brought Caligo's step to a sudden halt as he looked over his shoulder to the reporting officer. "And the Chancellor is doing nothing about this? She was supposed to be the one to free the crystal from its chamber!" He let out an enraged groan. "She was the reason he had that little doll by his side! Why wasn't she stopped?" Caligo had never been a fan of General Interitio, despite his respect for his superior officer, and his dislike for the General grew further when he learned the man's daughter was not only a mutant, but the very Lamia the world feared for the past five years. If it were up to him the girl was better off dead instead of being returned to Gratea or handed off in Insomnia; if finding an securing her was that much trouble, he could only imagine how it would worsen once they had control over her.

"There's no word yet on her status or what will be done to retrieve her, but if the High Commander or General Glauc appear to be in a bad mood, you know why." They all knew they would never hear the end of it once Ravus found out. While Ardyn was a calm individual who planned for situations like theirs, the former Fleuret Prince was hot-headed and would immediately tell the Emperor, and all who were involved in the siege on Accordo would suffer whatever judgement he passed down.

"Lamia is that naive Prince's problem, not ours. Our task is to find clues on the Lucians' whereabouts." Caligo strode ahead of his men as they entered the remains of the Presidential Palace. Blood stained the carpet that ran across the floors through every hall, trails leading to the palace staff whose bodies littered each passage further and further in. The Magitek infantry had done more than a number on everyone they encountered, and the Commander was sure he'd find the President dead alongside his entire family at some point during the search. There was one body that didn't fit in with the others, and upon closer inspection, he noticed the familiar details of her Kingsglaive uniform, and paid her no additional attention.
An hour passed with nothing to report. Caligo did, indeed, find the bodies of President Speculo and the rest of the First Family in his office, all five of them sprawled out with a message on the far wall, written in what he was sure was Frons' blood. 'The Empire Gives No Second Chances,’ it read, a mantra that was true to Niflheim's actions. "Nothing in here," he told himself, and turned on heel to check on the rest of his squadron. As he paced down the hall that led to the elevator, his reporting officer rushed after him with a huff and called his name.

"Commander Ulldor!" Caligo turned at the sound of the young man's voice and raised an eyebrow. "We've...we've found something! In the basement garage." He handed the commander a photo and stood at attention. Caligo brought the photograph close to his face and squinted, doing his best to read the information in the grainy exposure.

"What is this?"

"A car, sir. That of Crown Prince Caelum. It's parked next to the President's. And look." He ushered Caligo to turn the photo over and read the back, having found words scribbled on it and a smaller photo attached. "The handwriting doesn't resemble that of His Highness, but it tells of their next possible locations. The routes they must use to reach Solheim are mountainous and pass by two of our garrisons." The information intrigued the Commander, and as his eyes drifted to the smaller photograph attached, they widened beyond what was normal for him. "Sir?"

"Get me a phone immediately." When his subordinate didn't move, he raised his voice on the second issue of command. "Now! I must speak with the Emperor and Chancellor at once!" As the officer rushed away to find a phone for his commander, Caligo held his chin in his free hand. His eyebrows scrunched as he continued to stare at the small picture of the Lucian Prince and his blond friend smiling without a care in the world, the Citadel of Insomnia acting as their background.

"Still no answer," Ignis informed his friends. "If they haven't answered by now, the line's been completely severed." Three hours had passed since the train cars were separated by the explosion. Passengers loaded on from many stops since their first, and they appeared none the wiser to the identities of those clad in the black fatigues or the missing back half. All contact with Nyx, Libertus and Commander Drautos was lost, replaced with dead silence whenever the tactician tried calling them. He set his phone aside and sighed. "I'm afraid we're on our own from here."

"Dammit, I knew something like this would happen!" Noctis slammed his fist against the train wall with bared teeth. "We wouldn't have lost Luna if we'd all stuck together!" Gladiolus was in agreement with the Prince, sharing not only his opinion, but his distress over being separated from the rest of the Lucians - including his father. Both their families were broken thanks to the war - Noctis separated from his only blood relative, and Gladiolus' either in battle or hiding. "We have to find a way back to them."

That was one thing the bodyguard couldn't agree with. "Out of the question. It'd be more dangerous to turn around than to continue forward."

"But we don't even know where we have to get off." The Prince barely paid any mind to Prompto, who'd distracted himself with taking pictures of the passing scenery to document their travels. His photos were the only thing they had to show the Solhemnian royals the routes the Imperial Forces used to follow them, so even Ignis said nothing as the gunner aimed his camera around, then his actions were fine. "All we know is that this train leads to another one, and two more we'll have to take until we're remotely close to Solheim...unless you or Ignis happened to ask the Commander anything before we got separated." He crossed his arms, his patience growing thin.

Gladiolus rested his back on the bench cushions. "Look, we're all exhausted. We need to take a deep
breath and clear our heads before we go any further." Reluctantly, Noctis drew in the breath his bodyguard asked him to. "Before we got off the boat, Commander Drautos gave each of the caravan guards a copy of the map he used to route our path to Solheim. It says what stops to get off for each train and the location of the next. We'll be fine, so just calm down."

Before Noctis could utter another word in protest, Ignis' hand on his forearm silenced him. "Please, Highness. Stressing ourselves in an already tense situation will do us no good." He looked into Noctis' eyes, searching for the colors that swirled him earlier as a precautionary measure, and was relieved to only see blue. "We're all worried about His Grace and the Kingsglaive's survival, but you must lay your trust in them as they have in you."

"All they keep saying is that it's 'up to me'. No explanation as to why, not even a shred of confidence in their tones. Every time they speak, they're talking through fear...like they know everything's going to shit in the end." Noctis slumped into the bench. "I can't let them just sacrifice themselves like that."

"Then don't think of it as a sacrifice." Everyone's attention switched to Prompto, who slid onto the bench next to Noctis. "Think of it as family and comrades helping you, just like we're always here for you." He snaked an arm over the Prince's shoulders. "You already know we'd do anything for you, Noct. And if that happens to entail some scrapes and bruises, we'll grin and bear it." He offered Noctis a smile, to which the raven-haired royal turned away, and shrugged his friend's arm off.

Gladiolus stood up and scratched the back of his head. "I'm going to take a look outside," he told the guys. They knew it was code for the bodyguard needing some fresh air before his annoyance grew any further. "Be back in a minute." His footsteps were hard as he walked down the center aisle and opened the door that separated one car form another. There were times that, despite being Noctis' shield, Gladiolus couldn't stand the Prince. He was too hot-headed when something bad happened and would often refuse to listen to reason. The outright stubborn nature of the Prince made him want to pull the kid by his collar and slam his back on the wall to force him to listen for once, and when those thoughts came about, he knew he needed to step away and get some air. He loved him like a brother, though that love usually meant they'd end up arguing over minute issues Noctis was quite resistant on. Being caught in the grips of war didn't help either of them.

He couldn't recall how long he'd been outside, but the sun finally rising told him of light's quickly decreasing existence. Luna had been right about the nights growing longer, and as the light's influence weakened, it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the demons that lurked outside the safety of the train walls. Gladiolus hoped Luna and Gentiana had made it somewhere out of harm's way; with the Oracle's guardian still injured, they had to rely mostly on Nyx for protection. He wished the same for his father and that of Noctis, who he was sure were still together with Cor and Commander Drautos. He wondered where they were, what hiding place they'd managed to find, and how long it'd be before all of them were reunited once more. And like his friends, he hoped for a permanent reunion.

The train came to a sudden halt that left the shield scrambling to find his footing again. "What now?" he grumbled, opening the door to the car where his friends sat. "The hell happened? The train stopped."

Prompto shrugged. "Things were going smoothly until a second ago. Then the train just screeched to a halt." They heard the murmurs of the other passengers - most likely refugees from Accordo - and all were as confused as the Crownguard. "It's probably nothing," he told himself in a hopeful tone, though he as sure something would happen at any moment.

And to answer that gut feeling, the train shook after a bang sounded outside, knocking everyone out of their seats. Ignis peered out the window and saw a line of Magitek troops aiming their guns at the
train. "Gladio!" He didn't need to give the rest of the instructions for the bodyguard to know what to do. Gladiolus pulled Noctis onto the floor and laid his body on top of the Prince's seconds before bullets rang through the car, shattering every window and drilling through the metal wall. Prompto and Ignis hid behind a secure portion of the wall, evading the artillery barrage. When the bullets died the gunner settled himself in a corner and began to fire at the enemy, ducking when they retaliated. "It's not safe in here! We need to find a way out before the entire car is destroyed!"

"Easier said than done!" The second wave ended, allowing the passengers to make their getaway onto the next car. Prompto shot out an adjacent window and observed the ground below for landing, flashing a thumbs-up when he determined it was safe for them to proceed. Gladiolus pushed Noctis ahead of him, then Ignis, before he leaped through the window as a rocket flew into the train several cars down. Orange clouds erupted through the train as passengers tried to escape, some being swept back into the flaming vortex before their family members' eyes. The royals could do nothing but run away as another squadron of Magiteks descended onto the train and fired their guns into the vehicle.

It hurt Noctis to stand back and watch more innocent people die. He wanted desperately to help them, but knew his chances were better if he made it to Solheim and reunited with Luna and his father. The journey had already started to take a toll on the young monarch, whose movements were sluggish as they climbed up a hill into a wooded area. "I'm tired," he complained with no answer from his friends. They were all exhausted, but lodgings in the mountainous region were unknown, and the more the Prince expressed his sluggish feeling, the deeper his words bothered the shield.

"You know we've sacrificed a lot to help you," the shield suddenly thought out loud. "Maybe show some appreciation instead of complaining."

"Maybe stop trying to parent me," Noctis mumbled back, igniting an uncomfortable thickness in the air.

The bodyguard turned on heel and marched to the Prince with heavy footsteps. "You've got something to say, Prince?"

The emphasis he laid on the last word irked the young monarch. As he parted his lips to speak his mind, another blast shook the ground, and all four men lost their footing. Ignis motioned for them to stay down as he crept closer to the top of the hill, and as he looked ahead from behind a rock, the tactician discovered robotic soldiers patrolling the area. Ahead of them was forty meters of woodland swarming with Magitek forces, and at the end, a wall separated the land from whatever was behind it. Ignis lowered behind the boulder again and brought his voice to a whisper. "A garrison is nearby. The area is under heavy guard. If we're to advance, we'll need to get through the fortress and acquire transportation." Noctis and Gladiolus were still grumbling about each other, until Ignis cleared his throat to silence them. "You'll need to put your quarrel aside until we make it to the next train. Do you still have the map, Gladio?"

"Right here." The bodyguard pulled the folded paper from his back pocket and handed it to Ignis. The sprawled it on the ground and found their location and marked it with a pen from Ignis' inner blazer pocket. "So we're somewhere in Cleigne now?"

"It appears that way. The next train is much farther north than our current location and will take too long to walk. Our best course of action is to acquire one of the Nifs' vehicles and use it to reach our next mode of transportation."

"Which means we're infiltrating a Nifeli base. Great." The Prince crossed his arms. "Guess we could use a workout-"

"But doing so without the cover of night could prove much more dangerous."
"But we can't wait around for it to get dark," Prompto interjected. "They're already hunting us. We have to act before we're found." Ignis was relieved to have another level-headed person in their party, more so that person being the emotional support of the group. "I can create a distraction, if needed. Draw the Nifs away from a hole in the wall."

Ignis nodded. "That seems to be the only plausible thing right now. We should divide into two groups to ensure our safety." They plotted the best route into the garrison - through a drainage system on the western side - and Ignis sided with Noctis, while Gladiolus and Prompto tred toward the eastern end to create a distraction subtle enough where alarms wouldn't be triggered. The tactician waited until the patrolling Magiteks were drawn away from the drainage hole before motioning for the Prince to follow after him. Their voices remained hushed as they halted their steps halfway when a lone robot husk was seen moving through the area. Ignis instructed Noctis to track it from behind and perform a silent warp-kill, which he did without flaw. The body began to disintegrate as Noctis stabbed his blade through the breastplate to destroy the tracking and recording systems inside, and Ignis crept to the bars blocking off the inside of the fortress from the drainage hole.

Noctis laid his gloved hand on one of the bars. "Allow me," he told his bespectacled friend as he froze the bar solid. Noctis summoned his sword again and knocked the hilt into the bar, cracking it. Two more hits caused the frozen bar to crumble, allowing them enough room to sneak through and take cover behind some crates. "Let's hope they're having as much luck as we are."

"Prompto and Gladio are smart; they wouldn't let themselves get spotted so easily." There was no need to scold Noctis on whatever quarrel he and Gladiolus were caught in; that was a matter they could tackle once they were on the next train. "We should reunite with them soon enough."

Crawling behind the crates, they saw many of the Magiteks walking their routes without noticing the intruders. There were very few human soldiers in the compound, programming new orders into the Magiteks as they walked by and surveyed the area. One finished her work and jogged past the units Ignis and Noctis hid behind, not seeing them, and saluted a human walking down from a scaffolding. Ignis pressed a finger to his lips to silence Noctis, who nodded, and they listened in on the conversation that began.

"High Commander Fleuret. We've just received a report from Commander Ulldor regarding the search for clues in Altissia." He remained quiet, eyes forward as he walked without an acknowledging glance to the subordinate. "The vehicle used by Crown Prince Caelum has been located in the former President's garage below the estate." She flipped through a small pack of papers in her hand, held together by a staple in the corner. "And there is word of some...bad news on the part of His Highness, Prince Velox. It appears Lamia has escaped from his hold."

Ravus bared his teeth and scoffed. "As if he was ever able to follow an order in the first place..." He swept his hair back with his right hand. "I'll have to take on the task myself to make up for his insolence. How long ago did she escape?"

The subordinate flipped through the report. "Approximately nine hours ago, sir. She fell into the Altium Magma Sea after setting an airship ablaze." Her voice halted when she noticed his left hand - cast from metal and machinery - ball into a fist. "Chancellor Izunia has called off a search for her in place of finding the Lucians. He believes they're headed to Solheim to reunite with the Oracle Lunafreya and King Regis." The mention of the two names brought a vile taste to the man's mouth. His sister had chosen the Caelums over her own flesh and blood years ago, and Regis did nothing to help when Queen Sylva sacrificed herself to save her children from the Empire's wrath. Niflheim had brought the attack, but Lucis showed their true colors to him when they fled the scene without a single hint of remorse.

"Inform the Chancellor I'll be seeing to Lamia's capture myself once the Prince's vehicle has been
retrieved," he told her. "As for the sorceress, she can't be far from the southern shoreline if she's on foot. Send word to the nearest garrison and commence a full-scale hunt." The subordinate nodded and saluted her commander before running off to a small building in the garrison. Ravus paced the floor aimlessly, his arms folded behind his back and eyes drawn to the ground. "Foolish sister..." he muttered to himself. "I told you time and again the King's fate wasn't yours to follow..."

As he began to wander into the memories he shared with his sister, another human soldier ran to the High Commander and saluted him, out of breath. "There's been a breach, sir! The front gate is under attack!"

"By whom?" Ravus' hand drifted to a sword sitting by his hip.

"The culprits' descriptions match those of two of the Lucian royals-" His scowl deepened and he ran forward without another word, and the soldier followed after him with a frantic step. With the High Commander gone and the area temporarily empty, Ignis gestured for Noctis to warp to a higher vantage point to help locate a vehicle. The Prince found an abandoned scaffolding near the wall and threw his sword toward it, his body vanishing in a blue glow. He could see some of the commotion which distracted Ravus' men from his perch, and gunshots were more than audible.

"Sounds like they're having a hell of a time," he mused to himself as he sneaked across the scaffolding and scanned the immediate area for a vehicle. The sun was already setting - a bad sign of the future in his book. The cover of night would help him, but he wanted to get out of the base sooner rather than later. He could no longer locate Ignis, and assumed the advisor had found a new hiding spot. It pissed him off that the Regalia had to be left behind in Altissia, knowing that could've been their mode of transportation rather than needing to wait for trains to possibly drop them off at the correct locations. His frustration was set aside as he spotted a car mid-kneel on the other side of the scaffolding. An old pick-up truck, rust-worn but still appearing in working condition. "That could work." He found another perch to warp to, and as he rolled to a landing, an alarm sounded. "Shit!"

The searchlights flashed across the entire grounds and caught Noctis before he could move again. A manned MT walker burst through a gated area and aimed its guns at the Prince, who prepared a thunder spell to fire at it. He destroyed the guns before they could spray him with bullets and the front end burst into flames.

Noctis dashed down the scaffolding and spotted Ignis, caught in between several Magitek drones, and warped to the tactician's side. "I thought we had the element of surprise on our side!" the Prince exclaimed, ramming the blade of his sword into a drone's face.

"As did I," Ignis answered while he pulled a dagger free from the enemy soldier's breastplate. A robotic hand from a half-destroyed drone scurried to the Prince and grabbed his ankle, pulling him across the floor. "Noct!" The tactician tossed one of his daggers into the drone's arm as he summoned a lance and ran it through an approaching soldier. He spun around and caught two others in his path, pushing forward until the bladed tip crushed the control systems inside of them. Noctis shook the hand from his leg and grabbed Ignis' hand when offered assistance to stand. "We should regroup."

"What about the car?" Noctis sprinted ahead of Ignis.

"We'll have to find another method of transport. There's a hunter's hideout not too far from here. If they've managed to keep their stronghold running, I'm sure they'll assist us." Noctis nodded to his idea. "Let's find the others before things turn sour."

The two were caught in more fights against Magitek soldiers on their way to Prompto and Gladiolus, and each time they made it through by backing each other up. Ignis insisted on holding up the front to make sure the path was clear or plan for a detour through the entire trek, and when the others were
in their sights, nearly all the soldiers had been dealt with. Noctis ran ahead of him again, eager to speak with his friends and get out of the fortress, but as he neared Gladiolus, Ignis noticed something from the corner of his eye. An airship, settled just outside the top of the wall, opened its hatch and snipers poured out from it. They lined the wall and aimed their guns at them. "We have company," he said loud enough for them to hear, and as the sentence left his mouth, the High Commander came marching into the spotlight.

"Crown Prince Noctis," he began. "It's been some time since we've last met. If I recall correctly, the last time we saw one another, you were running like a coward as my mother was slain right before my eyes. Your kingdom never sent any form of condolences, not even so much as a bouquet to lay on her grave when we were finally able to bury her." None of them could register how Ravus suddenly ended up in the middle of the grounds, his blade pointed at the Prince's throat. "Twelve long years. That's how long it's been since I've felt the last embrace of her. Have you known loss, Your Highness?" Gladiolus summoned his greatsword, but mid-swing Ravus' sword switched targets, and rested on the bodyguard's neck. "Perhaps I should show it to you now and cut your shield's throat open so you can feel a fraction of my pain...or better yet, wait until you can witness your own parent's demise." A gut-wrenching growl, half-gurgling, cried out from the still-parked airship. Something inside shook the vehicle and slithered out. A daemon - a white-scaled Naga - lunged itself at the Lucians, completely ignoring Ravus. Its snake-headed tendrils hissed in unison with the main head as it stared down the Lucians. Ravus turned around and began to walk away from them. "Keep them busy while we locate the King."

There was little time for the quartet to prepare themselves for the next battle. They were exhausted, having fought for hours just to find themselves in need of retreat. The Naga was the biggest part of their new problem, its long body and tail threatening to coil around their bodies and asphyxiate them while the fangs aimed to poison them. The snipers only made defending themselves more difficult, bullets cutting lines into their skin as they did their best to dodge every attack. Noctis took full advantage of his warping skills and took out many of the snipers, but more continued to appear, and his anger over the failed ambush grew stronger. He spotted Ravus as he landed on top of the wall and took out another line of snipers. The High Commander strolled toward the entrance in a nonchalant manner. A thought of ending the siege quickly came into his mind, thinking it would all stop if Ravus was taken out, and he aimed to warp to his location. The two drones which flanked him fell apart upon Noctis' landing and their swords collided.

"You knew."

"Of course. When you're chasing rats across the world, you have to take precautions and lay your traps everywhere." Ravus forced hard against his opponent, bringing Noctis to skid back. "It was just a matter of luring you in. And what better way to invite you to my base than taking a few innocent lives?" The mention of the lives lost from the train enraged the Prince further, and he summoned weapon after weapon to use against Ravus. An axe swipe was missed when the High Commander stepped out of range just fast enough and swiped Noctis across his back with the dull end of his sword. "I heard you've been separated from my sister. She's better off without you, really, though getting her away from that meddlesome Glaive has been a problem." Another parry from the Prince's greatsword. "I can only imagine what your face looked like when you saw her guardian's gut cut open by the country woman you befriended. You never suspected she was the enemy." He pushed again, knocking Noctis down to a knee. "I see the internal war tearing through your eyes. You don't know who you can trust anymore." The Prince fell backwards and rolled away when Ravus swiped down, cracking the concrete floor. "Especially now, as you and your court lay in harm's way, you're unsure of what to do next." He barely dodged a swipe at his torso. "You'd better get your act together, Noctis," Ravus warned the young monarch, "because you never know who you're going to lose next."
His heart froze at Ravus' words. At the same moment, he heard the shrieks of pain and exhaustion from his friends nearby, who were losing the upper hand in their fight to escape. Ravus took advantage of the Prince's distraction and grabbed his throat with his metal hand. Noctis clawed at the appendage to free himself, only feeling relief when he was thrown into the path of a mobile MT unit. It aimed one of its rockets at the staggering Prince and fired.

Noctis had no idea how he escaped the robot's path, nor did he realize he hadn't suffered any damage from it, until he opened his eyes. His body was cast in a shadow, that of Ignis, who shook and screamed like he never had. Gladiolus and Prompto heard him and rushed toward them. "Iggy!" they yelled, the gunner sliding in just in time to catch the falling tactician. Gladiolus cut down the weakened mobile unit, which had been shot with a powerful Thundara spell, and destroyed its legs. Prompto pulled Ignis' arm around his neck and helped him move away from the battle field, stopped in their tracks when the Naga blocked their path out of the garrison. It snarled and lurched back in preparation for another attack, but the daemon suddenly shrieked and fell dead as it was split into two halves. Behind the beast stood Cor, with Clarus not much farther.

"Get off your ass and run!" he ordered the Prince. When he didn't immediately respond he seized Noctis' shoulders and forced him to stand. "We have to move!" Noctis could only nod and follow the Marshal's order. The six men ran for the entrance and piled into a car, its windows blasted out from who knew what, and sped away from the garrison. Ignis was laid in the back seat with his Prince and their friends, the only sounds from him bearing extreme agony. Noctis laid eyes on his face for the first time, and saw the horrendous set of injuries sprayed across his neck and face, the majority of the damage on his eyes.
A Dented Shield

Chapter Summary

There are times where sacrifices have to be made, as the King's men knew. But no one is truly prepared for when the time comes.

Chapter Notes

Remember when I said this story was halfway over around chapter 25? Yeah... I think it'll be over 50 chapters by the time it's completed. I no longer have a solid plan since I've played through the game and found canon elements I want to incorporate. And there's still plenty of surprises I've yet to reveal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She didn't want to complain, but time had caught up to Luna and wore the Oracle down. She didn't know how long she and Nyx had been walking since they crawled out of the derailed train car, unable to establish contact with Gladiolus or any of the King's soldiers. It was a miracle they'd survived. After the explosion their car and the eight behind it veered off the tracks and ran into a low-lying ditch nearly a kilometer away. There was little time for them to mull over their injuries as Imperial soldiers and their drones filed into the ditch to check for bodies. Gentiana, still healing from her injury, had been tossed like a doll to the other side of the car. Nyx sustained basic cut and bruises, the worst of it coming from a window he'd flown through, a jagged shard stuck in his thigh. He hissed as he rolled over and crawled to the Oracle's guardian, gathering her in his arms. His eyes darted frantically through the remains of their transportation in search of the Princess. "Highness!" he yelled, his throat already raspy from the fire that started to burn in the corner. The smell of fuel was unmistakable, and there was no answer from Luna. "Dammit... Luna!" Nyx forced himself to stand, his thigh pulsing with pain in every step he took. Balancing himself with the shard sticking out and scraping against his good leg was difficult enough, and with Gentiana in his arms, he had to be careful to keep the both of them upright.

"Luna!" Nyx screamed again through a cough from the developing smoke. He ducked his head under some loose wires, his movement quickening when they sparked, and he kicked the half-destroyed door open. "Luna, if you're nearby, answer me!" Still no reply or sign of life from the Oracle. "Shit..." The Glaive fixed his grip on Gentiana's suddenly heavy body and marched to the outside. A Magitek trooper stood waiting for someone to come through, and when it spotted Nyx, its hand unfolded to reveal a flamethrower. The mechanism inside wasn't quiet and allowed him a short second to trip the robot before it roasted him and the guardian alive. Fire flew into the air above him and Nyx bolted away from the soldier, ducking under a second's blade swipe and tripping a third when it tried to grab him. "Luna!" His leg pulsed again when a fourth soldier fired its gun and bullets grazed his skin, bringing the Glaive down in the side of the ditch. Sand filled his mouth as he turned over and reached for one of his knives, tossing it over the ditch wall. It caught itself in the bark of a tree and he warped to its location, dodging the squadron that reached for his hair and uniform. Flaming ashes danced off his skin as he tore the knife free and jumped over a piece of train debris to continue running, yelling Luna's name every minute without so much as a response. "Where do they
keep coming from?" Nyx skid to stop when another line of soldiers blocked his path. "Luna!" He couldn't perform magic with Gentiana in his grasp, and switching her to one shoulder was too risky with her injury. It would take too long for him to warp to the other side of the soldiers with the lack of an opening, and with his own injuries getting worse with each step, it was something he knew couldn't be done without hurting himself and the guardian any further. The Glaive took a step backwards and chuckled to himself, already tasting the demise of his own death.

Something whirred past his ear and penetrated the line of soldiers, knocking half far away and leaving the others on their backs. A trident stuck out from one of the drones' bodies, and the second he laid eyes on it the weapon crystallized and returned to its owner's hands. He followed the crystal dust to Luna, her hair free from its ponytail and a large gash on her shoulder. She grasped the reforming trident and slashed through another approaching armored husk as it readied to swing it sword through her body. Breathing heavily, she half-limped to Nyx, ignoring the pain that shuddered through her spine. Nyx couldn't help letting out a low whistle. "And I thought I'd be playing the hero today."

"Thank the gods you're alright," she told him, and laid a hand on Gentiana's cheek. "What happened?"

"Nifs fucking bombed us, that's what. They probably thought it'd be the easiest way to kill us all and get their count of seven." He observed the now motionless bodies of the Magiteks. "And they almost did."

The Oracle's hand drifted up his arm and rested on his shoulder. "Don't speak of such things. We still have a mission to accomplish." She began to pull her dress away from her breast momentarily, to which Nyx's eyes looked away with embarrassment, and reached in to grab something. Unfurling her fingers, she showed the Glaive a black and gold ring of tungsten and precious metals. His gaze landed on the jewelry and immediately withdrew, knowing full well what it was capable of.

"Why doesn't His Majesty have it?"

"Because he knows this is one of the things they're after. The Ring of the Lucii is the key to controlling the Lucian crystal." Her lips parted to explain more, but her voice fell short when she heard the familiar buzzing of the Imperial Forces' airships approaching. Luna hid the ring again. "We have to hide." With a nod Nyx pressed forward, his step swiftly disrupted when his injury forced him down to a knee. Luna spot the glass sticking out of his leg easily.

Seeing distress rise on her face, Nyx gave the Princess a sharp grin. "Don't worry about me. Little piece of glass can't stop me."

"Then at least lend me one of your knives," she insisted. "You can't play the hero all the time."

She was a confident one, he admitted to himself in silence. Nyx lowered his arm to grab one of his knives and handed it to Luna. "S'not the same as a trident."

"I'm sure I can manage."

They walked for what felt like hours. They counted themselves lucky there were no other Imperial Forces tracking them down through the empty grass-covered fields. Their trek was relatively silent, with the exception of Nyx occasionally grunting when another wave of agony spawned from the glass in his leg, and Luna did her best to support both the Glaive and her guardian through each step. After an eternity of watching their environment pass with little more than animals and daemons as signs of life in the area, Nyx's eyes squinted when he noticed light. "An outpost," he told the Oracle, and both sighed in relief they'd waited for too long. He found a sudden bounce in his step and
marched ahead of Luna, keeping an eye out for anything that even remotely resembled a threat, his right hand ghosting over the hilt of his second knife. Luna stayed no more than an arm's length behind him and held her knife close as they approached the lights, which revealed a small outpost with beds and a restaurant. The Glaive hid the abatement Luna didn't bother to conceal and was cautious with each step closer to the compound. The area looked secure at first glance, but his gut still didn't trust what was presented to his squinted gaze, until a woman neared them and fell to her knees.

"Lady Lunafreya!" she cried, her hands at the Oracle's feet. "You're alive! Oh, thank goodness!" More figures heard the woman's hitched voice and ran to the edge of the outpost, putting Nyx on high alert. He jumped between them and Luna, blade drawn and held backwards, and the woman at Luna's feet lurched backwards with her hands pleading in a manner of innocence. "Please, sir, wait! We mean the Oracle no harm!"

Luna laid her hand on Nyx's and lowered it. "It's alright, Nyx. I sense no malice in them." She gestured her hand to the quickly growing crowd. "These are the hunters of Lucis, defenders of the lands outside Insomnia." She nearly mentioned Nebula's origins hailing from the same grounds as them, but the memory of the doctor's transformation resurfaced, and she swallowed her words. "...I once knew someone from these parts. She's no longer with us, unfortunately."

The woman stood up and gave Luna a proper bow. "I'm Venus, my lady, and I own this outpost. We're more than happy to accommodate you and your guardian until you've healed." She was surprisingly calm for having noticed the extent of their injuries and the unconscious woman in Nyx's arms. Veuns clapped her hands. "Leo, Unda, please show Lady Lunafreya to a room." The latter of the two men offered to carry Gentiana while the former looped Nyx's arm over his neck and helped him walk in the direction of a short building. "I'll send a healer and fresh clothes to your room along with a hot meal."

The luxuries that came with being in the Kingsglaive were far and few compared to the kindness of strangers, Nyx believed. Having the ability to set foot into the royal palace without a suspicious glance was nice, but once he walked out, the Glaive was just another resident of Insomnia. There were no people willing to cater to his needs outside of the military life; he lived alone in an apartment on the west side of town. Even his adoptive brother was often too busy to give the young soldier a call, and his work left him unable to contact their long-retired parents in Leide. It was nice to feel kindness from others out of their good grace rather than their duty, and as he removed his coat and hung it on a hook in their room, he couldn't help the smile his mouth formed.

Luna had gone to the bathroom to change out of her tattered dress. She locked the door behind her, leaving the Glaive alone with Gentiana. Even in her unconscious state her appearance was eerie, and he could only imagine what Pelna saw her do before he died in the battle against Lamia. The Marsha refused to reveal any details of their account, and the only thing Luna mentioned had to do with the gods' connection to her feeling faint. He suspected more was at play with the way the Oracle stared at her guardian whenever things fell quiet while she stroked her ebony locks, murmuring something about Leviathan being strangely silent since the fight. He wondered what Leviathan had to do with Gentiana's well-being, though with the little bit of understanding with the Archeans and their ties to the humans of Eos, it could've been anything. It was weird for them to be in the same room and not have her scold him on how to handle Luna's rare but sudden mood swings - or for that matter, anything having to do with the Oracle. She'd been around to keep an eye on Luna since the latter was a child, knowing every quirk she presented and how to calm her when retaining a smile for the world suddenly became too much to handle. "Could really use your wisdom now," he said to himself more than the sleeping guardian. He wasn't even sure if she could hear him anymore.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. Nyx, pulling off his gloves, opened the door and
stepped aside to let Unda and Leo inside. "Soup and dumplings, courtesy of Chef Marceline," Leo told him as they set the trays on an adjacent table. "Venus has stepped up security 'round the compound to keep an eye out for the Nifs. She's instructed us to keep you up to date on anything that changes." The Glaive nodded, half-listening to the hunter. "The healer should be here any sec. Great lady, she is. Been travelin' the continent and treating people free of charge for years now."

"Really?" The Glaive took a bowl and settled into the chair next to Gentiana's bed before spooning the soup into his mouth. Something about the home-cooked meal sparked memories of the days following his adoption into the Leonis family: simpler times for the then thirteen-year old. Cor looked identical to his past self, save a thin mustache that lined his upper lip, and even back then his parents were considered older than the average mother and father of teen and young adult sons. He remembered his mother cooking something similar, and the familiar taste brought back his smile. "Delicious," he finally commented once his mouth was empty.

Unda opened the door to leave and released a reassured sigh. "Ah, perfect timing! They're ready for you." A woman bowed her head in acknowledgement to Unda and walked in, thanking Leo for bringing the guests their meals. "We'll be right outside if you need us."

"Thank you, Unda." Nyx looked up from his bowl and laid eyes on the healer. In the dim lights of the motel room he was able to make out a heart-shaped face and blue-green eyes, framed by a mess of auburn bangs and hair pulled into a loose wavy bun. She had no supplies with her other than the towels laying near the bathroom door, so the Glaive wondered how she'd treat their injuries. The healer pulled a spare chair next to Gentiana's bed and sat down, facing the Glaive. "I hear you and your companions are injured," she stated, her eyes wandering to the glass still protruding out of his thigh. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to get a closer look." She waited for Nyx to make himself comfortable before laying her hands on his thigh, earning an embarrassed grunt from him, and she took the shard in one. Closing her eyes, a glow took over her hand and green energy seeped into the wound. Nyx hissed as his flesh began to stitch itself back together one muscle strand at a time, and as the wound closed, the healer pulled the glass out of his leg. It felt like forever to the Glaive before it was out, but when it was freed from him relief washed over his face. "There. That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Nyx tilted his head, watching the energy flow from her hand cease. "That's some nice magic you've got there, miss-"

"Flumine." They heard the bathroom door open and Luna joined them in the room, dressed in the clothes Venus lent her. "Ah, Lady Oracle. It's good to see you in good health..." Her gaze drifted to the gash on Luna's shoulder. "Your injury doesn't look too bad, though we shouldn't take any chances with waiting for it to heal on its own." The healer rose from her chair and sauntered to Luna's side, asking for the woman's hand. When Luna laid her palm in the healer's, she couldn't help the familiar aura that encircled her when her eyes closed and the green energy resurfaced. She didn't have to press her hand to the Oracle's shoulder to heal the wound: a feat that even amazed her, and left her mouth agape as the healer stepped back and met her eyes again. "There. You're looking better already, my lady."

Luna flexed her hand and stared at the dissipating aura. "Thank you..." she told the healer, who drifted back to Gentiana's bedside. She watched the healer with curiosity.

"I can already tell this lady has been through some significant trauma. It'll take me longer to heal her than it did you or your bodyguard, my lady." The healer rolled up her sleeves and uncovered Gentiana's torso, quickly noticing the dark red smear that spread through her bandages. Luna wondered how the woman knew the location of Gentiana's injury without having to ask, and she slowly walked beside her as she got to work. She took the opportunity to really observe the healer at
work, keeping her gaze on the woman's hands as she treated the stab wound. With only a single pat to the wound, her hands retracted in a sudden motion, and hovered hesitantly over Gentiana's frame. "Her...she's been infected..." While confusion mounted on Nyx's face, Luna knew exactly what she meant, and she knelt beside the healer, ready to perform her duty as Oracle. "Wait. You musn't."

"If what you say is true, Gentiana's human form has been infected by daemons." There was no point in hiding the truth from the healer if she could easily detect the demonic presence floating through the guardian's veins. "I have to free her from the Scourge."

Nyx sat back and listened, the only thing he knew he could do. "The daemon inhabiting her body isn't something you can handle, my lady. If you were to absorb this Scourge it would leave you unable to meet with the King and Crown Prince in Solheim; possibly even kill you." Luna's eyes widened. "Please, Lady Lunafreya." Not once had a healer ever left her lost for words, and as the woman returned her focus to Gentiana, the familiarity in her aura made sense. The green aura took on a yellowed hue when it touched Gentiana's wound and seeped inside of her. Her veins glowed the same color as it spread through her form, and the Astral was overcome by gold glittering her skin, eating clumps of dark globules that had formed around the wound. The gold separated from the green and was sucked back into the healer's palms, while the green remained in Gentiana and stitched her organs and flesh back together. Any agony on the Astral's face was relaxed, and when the healer stood, she staggered in her step. Nyx was quick to catch her in his arms and steady the woman before helping her back into the chair.

"...You're an Oracle." Gasping for breath, the healer nodded, and Luna laid her head in the woman's lap. "I'm honored to be in your presence." The results of removing the Scourge from Gentiana were evident on the healer's face. Nyx had to take a step back to fully absorb the black blotches that formed on her skin, as well as the darkened sclera and her orange irises. It almost scared him to see a sufferer's symptoms up close.

"Don't worry," she said to him, shocking the Glaive. "The effects are...temporary. It'll vanish in a few hours. But your guardian should be back to herself by morning, Lady Lunafreya." Luna rushed to the nearby table and fetched the elder Oracle a glass of water. "Thank you."

"I should be referring to you in that manner, madame." She knelt beside the healer and laid her hand on top of the other woman's. "What did you say your name was?"

The healer gave her a small smile. "Nebula Flumine, my dear."

The name bounced in her head, her first name feeling like an old friend. She once knew someone named Nebula, and when she stared at the healer's face, Luna swore she looked like someone she'd met. Her lips parted, prepared to lay out the hundreds of questions that had formed, but a shriek of terror on the other side silenced her voice. Nyx jumped from his chair and grabbed his knives as he inched closer to the window.

Voices went in and out, muffling every few seconds while bright lights flashed through his eyelids. He couldn't make out what anyone was saying, or why so many pairs of hands were touching him, but what Ignis did know was that his face hurt a lot.

He didn't know what he'd been thinking. Noctis was taking care of every sniper he could along the garrison's wall, and the tactician had been busy backing up Prompto and Glasiolus on the ground as the Naga and mobile MT unit inched closer to them. Then the Prince was suddenly thrown into the line of the MT's fire, and before he could register what was happening, he'd thrown himself between his Prince and the enemy. Ignis didn't know if it'd been fire or acid that seared his eyes; he only knew the burning sensation was immeasurable. He knew nothing but pain after that. It took over his senses
and rendered all cognitive action useless, and he was sure he passed out once or twice from the agony. At one point he was able to make out Prompto's voice, shaky but reassuring; at another, Cor mentioning something about Clarus sustaining an injury of some sort; and before he passed out again, he heard Gladiolus yell at Noctis for not being more careful, for putting Ignis' life on the line...then he suddenly felt very tired, and his flailing limbs relaxed.

"Guys, he's out cold again!" Prompto alerted the others. "Might want to floor it!"

"We're almost at the hospital, Iggy," Noctis began to sob as the guilt of his stupidity settled in. "Please, just hang on..." Potions did little to soothe the Count's pain or heal his injury. The group was lucky to hear about a nearby hospital an hour's drive north, but when it was discovered that Clarus had suffered at the hands of the Empire, the need to reach their destination was heightened. The elder Amicitia's hand pressed hard on his abdomen in a feeble attempt to clamp whatever blood vessels had been severed. He didn't even know he'd been injured until a sudden onset of cramping took over his stomach, bringing him to look down and see the blood dripping from his gut. The last of the elixirs had been used before the gash was noticed, leaving them strapped for time to get the men to the hospital.

Cor barely had time to park the car before Noctis and Prompto flew out, each with one of Ignis' arms around their necks as they half-carried the strategist in the community hospital's emergency room. Gladiolus' concentration fell on bringing his father inside, and he chose to hoist the elder man bridal-style and carry him through the doors. Their entry brought about a commotion of doctors and nurses who took the patients to separate rooms, and the guys promised to keep each other updated on both men's situations. Cor drifted into Clarus' treatment room to keep his friend's son company, but he soon found himself overwhelmed by the medical staff scrambling to figure out the extent of Clarus' injury, and the Marshal excused himself to the hallway.

He wasn't too surprised to find Noctis and Prompto outside of Ignis' treatment room. "I assume they needed room to work."

"They...said he's hurt really bad," the Prince started, his gaze magnetized to the floor. "From what they can already tell, it'll be a long recovery for him." After a long, silent minute, Noctis met Cor's eyes. "How's Clarus?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "No word yet, but it looks serious. It looks like one of the mobile MT's bullets ripped through him like a pinata." The hospital environment brought an uncomfortable weight onto their shoulders, intensifying the inept feeling between the three men. Shifting his weight to his left leg, Cor cleared his throat. "Why don't we sit down for a bit? They'll come for us when there's an update." The Marshal guided the young Prince and his friend into the nearby waiting room, bringing the cups of coffee to keep them occupied while they watched the news.

It was nearly an hour before a physician walked into the waiting room. He pat Cor's shoulder to wake the half-asleep man, and soon got the others' attention. "You brought in Mr. Scientia and Mr. Amicitia, yes?"

"How are they?" Prompto asked.

"Let me begin with Mr. Amicitia." The doctor picked the file at the top of the stack in his arms and read through the notes. "His son informed us of where you were before he was injured, and I have to say, I'm amazed you three escaped without any severe outcomes. Unfortunately for him, it appears that some bullets pierced his lower abdomen. His liver and stomach were caught in the crossfire, and his pancreas was blown to bits. We've rushed him into surgery to do what we can to fix him internally, but from the looks of it, it'll be a long road to being himself again." The doctor switched files. "As for Mr. Scientia, the outlook isn't good. He was able to briefly describe the battle he was
caught in before the damage occurred. It sounds like whatever explosion took place after he electrocuted the mobile MT happened right in his face. From what we were able to see through the initial exam on his eyes, he'll need extensive future treatment, but right now...it's highly unlikely your friend can see."

Gasps were all that left their mouths. Prompto stepped forward, his hands barely able to lift from the shock settling in. "So he's...blind?"

"We're not sure yet, and we won't be able to tell for some time. His eyes need to heal significantly before we can test his sight." The doctor sighed. "I wish I could give you a more definite answer, but until he begins to heal the damage, we won't know the full extent of the injury."

"...Thank you." Cor was the only one able to utter a reply. Seeing the distress on the men's faces, the doctor gave them the most reassuring half-grin he could offer.

"Get some rest in the meantime. I'll send for you when your friends are ready for visitors." As the physician left, they wondered how Gladiolus was handling the situation, and Prompto offered to look for him. When he left, there was an eerie silence that lingered between the Marshal and the Prince, one that annoyed the older of the two.

"Your Highness." Noctis knew Cor only referred to him by his title in front of strangers or when there was a serious matter at hand; with their current setting and the many missing members of their party still unaccounted for, he figured its reasoning was the latter.

"What happened after we left?" the Prince asked him. "I thought you were with my father."

"I was..." Cor's fingers knitted together. "After you and Luna ran, we managed to fend off the rest of the Imperial Forces. They summoned several more rounds of Magiteks, but we made it out alive, with non life-threatening injuries. And then we headed for the train, and..." A groan escaped his lips. "We found out about what happened. None of us had any idea what happened to you or Luna, and with no way to communicate with either of you, we had to come up with another plan. So His Majesty suggested an alternate route; it was riskier than the trains being closer to the main roads than the trains, but we didn't have much choice." Noctis listened quietly, imagining the looks on everyone's faces when his father made such a suggestion. Even at his age and with so many people ready to fight for him, Regis was willing to stand on the front lines and battle alongside his soldiers. "Along the new track we were spotted again. Clarus and I stayed as close to the King as possible while Commander Drautos instructed his men." Cor grit his teeth. "It's almost like they knew exactly where we'd be. They had twice the amount of MTs ready to take us all out. We scrambled for cover, and by the time the battlefield had been cleared, your father was gone."

Noctis shot out of his chair. "Gone? But he can't be-"

"I'm highly sure he's not dead, or in the custody of Niflheim. But we won't know where he is until we find a way to communicate with each other. So whoever he's with will have to do their best to keep the King safe until we're reunited." The Prince slowly lowered into his seat again, hands clawing at the fabric of its arms. At least with Regis under someone's watchful eye, Noctis didn't worry as much. The King wasn't as young as he used to be, and with his recent health scare and near death experience, just being away from him for more than five minutes made him nervous. Cor saying he was sure the King 'wasn't dead' did little to reassure him. "We just have to hope he makes it to Solheim before us."

"Luna, too..."

Hours passed before they were allowed to see Ignis again. The last image Noctis had of his advisor
in his mind was horrendous, the man's skin burning as electricity danced off of his flailing form. There was nothing left of his gloves, and charring from the fire and lightning dusted his neck and hair. The Prince twiddled his thumbs in his clasped hands, every step heightening his anxiety. "We've given him some pain medication to make him comfortable for the time being," the doctor explained before they rounded the corner of the hallway. "Don't be surprised if he's a little lethargic." He motioned his arm for the men to enter the hospital room. "Your other friend is already inside. He's awaiting news on his father finishing with surgery."

"Thank you." Neither Prompto nor Cor could stop saying the phrase. The Marshal entered the room first, and as Prompto's foot stepped inside, he noticed Noctis hanging back and hugging himself. He reached his arm out to the Prince. "Come on, Noct. I'm sure Ignis would love your company right now." He was hesitant, the guilt riddling within and freezing his joints. Prompto turned his way and laid both hands on his shoulders. "It's not your fault."

"But Gladio-"

Prompto shushed his friend. "Don't think about what Gladio'll say. You're right: he's going to be mad, but that's just his way of dealing with the hurt inside him. The best thing for us to do is be there for Iggy and Clarus 'til they heal up. Okay?" When Noctis denied meeting his friend's eyes, Prompto tilted his head in the same direction and gave Noctis a gentle squeeze. "I'll be alright, Noct. He'll be able to see again." The gunner could think of nothing else to soothe his friend and released him, turning away and walking into the hospital room. "Hey, Ignis," the Prince heard him say. "Gotta say, hospital gowns don't suit you in the slightest."

"...Very funny, Prompto." Hearing Ignis speak for the first time since they escaped the garrison made Noctis' heart skip a beat, and the Prince rushed into the room. Gladiolus sat on the far side, arms crossed and attention purposely refused to him. Cor sat at the foot of Ignis' hospital bed, and Prompto rested some of his weight on the bars connected to the frame. At the sound of new footsteps entering the room Ignis turned his head in the direction the sound came from, his posture tensing. Noctis didn't say a word. "Highness?" the tactician asked. "Is that you coming in?"

He couldn't take the sight of it. Ignis was in the single hospital bed, the frame positioned at an angle to prop up his head. An IV had been shoved into his arm between two sections of bandaging, and when Noctis worked up the courage to look at Ignis' face, he saw nothing but gauze and more bandaging around his head, covering most of the upper half of his face. His glasses and clothes were neatly folded on the table beside him. His voice was raspy, like he'd been screaming against the sound of a rushing rocket to be heard, and a hard cough escaped him. His eyebrows scrunched under the bandages, confused as to what the Prince was doing when he felt a bare hand caress his. "I..." He couldn't get the apology out. Noctis' voice cracked, his emotions getting the best of him, and Ignis felt something wet drop onto his knuckle.

Noctis lost all control when Ignis brought his other hand on top of the Prince's. He sobbed into the bed like he had when his father awoke from his long coma. "I'm going to be alright, Highness."

"This is all my fault," Noctis finally confessed, dropping to his knees. "If I hadn't been so reckless and stayed with you instead of fighting on my own-" He sniffled, unable to form any more words. The others watched them in silence until a knock on the wall caught their attention. The doctor returned, a clipboard in his hands. "Apologies for the intrusion," he began. "Mr. Amicitia, your father's out of surgery and recovering. Our rooms are too small for more than one patient, unfortunately, so he's been placed in a room a few doors down. You can see him whenever you like." Gladiolus was quick to get up and walk out of the room, letting Ignis know he'd be back shortly, and grunted when he passed by Noctis with a
knock of his body into the Prince's shoulder. Cor stood up as well and followed after the bodyguard.

When the doctor left the room, Ignis momentarily let go of Noctis to adjust his position. "From the sound of it," he began, "Gladio seems quite annoyed."

"More like pissed off," Prompto answered, "but you know he's not much of a talker when it comes to his emotions."

"He hates me." They both turned their attention to Noctis, who'd taken up one of the chairs and let his head hang low. "I'm pretty sure he's fed up with my shit by now. If we weren't in this situation, I'm sure he'd resign as my bodyguard."

"Noct..."

Noctis sighed and stood up, wiping a stray tear from his face. "I'm gonna take a walk." Before either of his friends could ask where to the Prince left the room, heading for the nearest vending machine first to get a snack.

Clarus' surgery was a success. The holes left in his stomach by the bullets were repaired; his pancreas, however, was destroyed, just as the doctor had said. The elder bodyguard lost half his liver and came out with five bullets pulled from his abdomen, the last two having exited through his back. From the size of the bullets he was extremely lucky to have not been paralyzed, the surgeon confirmed with Gladiolus and the doctors, and with proper healing, he'd live to see another day. The news was a relief to Gladio and Cor, the latter wondering how his comrade was able to hide such extensive damage from him up to their departure from the garrison. The only downside to Clarus' injury was the needed healing time. A week minimum from the surgery, and once he was released, a few months to be close to top fighting form again. It was time they couldn't afford, not with the delicate schedule they had to uphold, but Gladiolus refused to leave him behind, even as the elder bodyguard pleaded with him to go on ahead.

"I said no the first eight times," Gladiolus told his father, "and I'll keep on saying it. We're staying until you're well enough to come with us."

Clarus laid a hand on his son's cheek. "Think of the consequences, Gladio. The Empire is after our heads, and the only safe haven for us and the King is Solheim." He looked past his son to Cor. "Cor, take him and leave me to heal. You have a duty to fulfill as well."

Cor spun his katana between the floor and his hands. "I'm fully prepared to depart, Clarus. But the decision lies with our future King, and I doubt he'll want to leave without his Shield." The Marshal stood up and walked to Clarus' bedside. "I can't force him to give up his friend, as much as I'd like to get him moving." The conversation went back and forth with no progress, and Cor left the men to settle the argument among themselves...if it was even possible, he wondered. Halfway to the cafeteria to get himself a meal, he spotted Noctis leaning against the wall, staring at the half-eaten granola bar in his hand. The Prince was a pathetic sight" his eyes red and puffy from crying, his stance slouched against the wall, and his frown remarkably droopy in comparison to the sick patients at the small hospital. Cor let out a huff and settled himself next to the Prince. "You know he doesn't blame you."

"I can't help it." It was the first time in almost an hour he heard Noctis speak without falling apart. "I know he didn't instruct me to stay close by him. I was taking out the snipers lining the wall. But then I saw Ravus, and this rage settled in my chest..." He clawed at his own while he spoke, the fabric of his shirt gathering between his fingers. "Something about him really got my angry, and next thing I knew, he had his hand around my throat."
"Sibling rivalry transcends engagements, it seems," the Marshal tried to joke, only to find it in bad taste long before the Prince could say anything. "Even so, don't pull yourself into a guilt trip over this..." What was the right word to use to describe their situation, he pondered. "...Mishap. We make mistakes. That's what makes us human and not one of the gods. We can only take those mistakes and learn from them to prevent future disasters from occurring."

"And Ignis?"

"Ignis was doing his job," Cor explained. "He's good at hiding his real emotions; a useful skill for the future King's advisor. He's doing his best to keep a positive outlook on things so you don't have to worry about him. His main concern is your safety, as is Gladiolus."

Noctis rolled out his suddenly aching shoulders. "He's pissed."

"At least he's not soft like Clarus is." Another huff. "He's got guts to follow the family tradition and swear his life to you. That's why you have to look out for them, too. They're more than brothers in arms, Noctis." A moment of silence lingered between them before Cor moved off the wall and began to walk away. "Give it some thought."

The night fell into the wee hours of the morning. The few times Noctis and Gladiolus walked past each other were either quite or consumed by two-word conversations. Tension turned into a shared pain, and though the latter wasn't willing to budge just yet, he could sense the Prince accepting his anger and agreeing to give him time to absorb everything. The moment a full sentence was finally uttered through the awkward air, Noctis returned from the cafeteria with a cup of instant noodles for his bodyguard, and the elder man gladly took the food.

At five in the morning the nurses made their rounds to check on the patients. Prompto had fallen asleep in his chair in Ignis' room, and the tactician asked for a pillow and blanket for his friend when he was checked on. She agreed to bring the items for him immediately, and when she rushed out, he felt the sudden need to stretch his legs. Gripping the bars of the bed frame, Ignis threw his legs over the side of the mattress and set his feet on the cold tile floor. Even with knowing his feet were on the floor, the dark void he saw under the bandages left him startled, throwing off all his senses even as he remained sitting. It was surprisingly difficult for him to stand, and when he finally found his center of balance, the building shook and he was thrown to the ground. The shaking woke up Prompto, who spotted Ignis on the floor and he jumped to help his friend back into bed.

A second shaking took place, stronger than the first, knocking Prompto off his feet. A blast followed the shaking and both men ducked, the gunner using his body to protect the tactician. "What's happening?" they asked each other, their answer coming when Noctis skid to a halt and fell into the room.

"Magiteks!" he yelled. "They're storming the building! We have to get out of here!" He reached for Ignis and guided him to a standing position. "I've got you, Iggy. I'm not going anywhere." Linking their hands, Noctis grabbed Ignis' belongings and tossed them to Prompto, who stayed behind them as they sneaked out of the treatment room and turned right. Ignis didn't need his eyes to see the chaos unfolding in the hospital; the screams of terror were enough for him to form a mental image. He felt the heat whipping off a fire from an exploded hole in the wall; tasted the charred remains of the paperwork in the shelves behind the nurses' station; smelled gunpowder and the unmistakable stench of blood that built up in the air. They piled into the cafeteria, the one area deemed safe, and Prompto helped Ignis into his clothes while Noctis searched for Cor and the others through the crowd. Security officers guided patients and hospital staff into the cafeteria, and through the people, the Prince spotted a familiar tattoo. "Gladio!" He waved to get the bodyguard's attention and met his eyes, seeing him struggle to help his father into the safe zone. Noctis ran to them and hooked Clarus'
free arm over his neck. "They're everywhere!"

"I know," the bodyguard told him. "We're in the middle of a damn war zone here!" Another explosion sent everyone to the floor. A lone Magitek drone stumbled in, its wires crackling and sparks dancing off its body. Before he could do anything the robot seized a security guard's body and pulled him backwards, blowing up and sending body parts spraying across the room. Gladiolus shielded Clarus with his body, feeling the brunt of the explosion on his back when metal parts scraped through his shirt. Another MT scrambled across the floor, pulling itself forward by its arms, and tried to grab a patient. Its arm was cut off when Cor dashed into the cafeteria, and it didn't live long to witness the Marshal swipe his katana a second time.

"The next train isn't far," he instructed the youth of the group. "We can make it if we run, now!" Prompto urged Ignis forward and Noctis followed behind them, but when Gladiolus told his father to brace for some pain, the elder Amicitia wormed his way out of his son's grasp.

"Dad, what are you doing? We need to go!"

Clarus raised an arm and summoned his double-bladed sword. "One of us will have to hold them off."

Gladio's mouth fell open. "...No. You're not staying here. If you do-

"I know what must be done, Gladiolus." A surge of pain rippled through the elder bodyguard as he felt the staples in his gut pull on his skin, and he hunched forward. "And so do you. You have to get Noctis to Solheim while you still can. Without him, there's no hope for a future for Lucis." Cor stopped a stray robotic husk from making it far into the cafeteria and shut the doors, placing heavy metal shelves in front of it to bar the entrance. "Cor. Take them and go. I'll be with you soon." There was one exit that led away from the Imperial Forces, and Gladiolus stared at it as he bit the insides of his cheeks. Shutting his eyes tight he nodded and motioned for Noctis and the others to follow him. He rammed the door open with his shoulder and cleared the stairwell for passage. Prompto took care of guiding Ignis, being the only one capable of single-handed combat, and Cor brought up the rear to provide necessary backup. More Magitek soldiers found their way to the cafeteria entrance and pushed against the restraints holding it closed. Clarus staggered as he held his blade up to shoulder level, aiming one end at the quickly breaking doors.

The Lucians broke down the last door keeping them from the outside world, and saw just how many troops had been sent to infiltrate the hospital. Four airships hovered on the other side of the building, lights flashing and searching the ground. "Let's keep moving," Cor instructed them, marching slower than normal to allow Ignis time to keep up. The air was quiet the further they inched away, and when they reached the bottom of the hill, something in the building detonated. Chunks of debris flew everywhere and scattered all around the hospital grounds. The men stopped for a moment, Gladiolus losing the grip on his greatsword as he watched outbreaks of spherical flames erupt from the building. A shaken gasp left his throat while he continued to stare at the raging inferno, his world pausing all at once.

Chapter End Notes

At this point in the story, I feel I should lay out some key differences between the true canon and my canon AU so future readers can understand what's going on.

-Magic wielding isn't limited to those who are either connected to the crystal or borrow
the King's powers. Magic is an ability widely seen throughout Lucis, but it's difficult to find the proper training unless you have connections or join either the Lucian military or the Kingsglaive.

- The people of Niflheim are incapable of wielding magic, as nearly all the population lack the gene in a person's DNA to use it. Their science department, however, is above that of Lucis, as proven with the Magitek infantry overseen by Verstael. The small percentage of Nifeli people who possess the gene are seen as less than human and are often kidnapped by the Imperial Forces for experimentation or execution.

- Already proven, but the Empire utilizes daemons for use in conquering other lands. They capture and release their daemons after having their strength enhanced by the science department.

- The power of the Oracle is usually hereditary, but in rare instances, the power can be passed onto someone who's not related to an Oracle by blood. Many sensitive factors have to be completely achieved beforehand, though, and the extensive training an Oracle must endure can take years before any signs show up.
Drowning was painful. The water entering her lungs by force, the inability to expel the heavy matter from her body, the struggle in the fight to keep her suddenly heavy body afloat. It hurt to even blink or contemplate her life as she had in her lowly prison cell; at least in Altissia, she could breathe. Flashes of memory were unavoidable. They came in short, rampant bursts that further threatened what little life she had left in her. Remembering things hurt more than each bubble of oxygen that escaped her mouth and nose. She wished for her eyes to close and never open again so both the flashes of memory and the sudden glowing spots high above the water would stop bothering her, and so she'd stop wondering how the spots looked so bright from way below the water's surface.

One memory clawed at her mind with a coeurl's force. She recalled the pictures that surfaced after the night that followed her sealing the Shadow Agreement with Cor. It'd started to rain when the Marshal stormed into her home and warned her of the impending danger which followed seconds after he urged her to run. The fear in his voice was something she never imagined hearing from him. The power he displayed was far from a match to the freezing corpse she dragged through the rain and mud, pulling him back into her home and throwing all she had into reviving him. She remembered biting her lips until they bled as she waited for the line on the pulse-ox monitor to bounce. He'd been unconscious for several days following his revival, and Atra spent every second of her day agonizing over the man waking up in her bed, looking at her with those cerulean eyes that hypnotized her, waiting to sink to her knees and spill out endless apologies for taking something so precious from him. She didn't care if his reaction was to either accept her words of sorrow and plead for her to stop crying, or to kill her with a silent swipe of his katana, nor did she care which he chose. The only thing that mattered to her was that the man she so unexpectedly fell for awoke and lived to see another day.

Atra wasn't sure when she resurfaced, but her lungs burned as she coughed out whatever water ended up inside her body. Something underneath the water lifted her to the surface and carried her through the Altum Magma Sea until the water became shallow. She staggered to her feet and ran shakily until she fell into sand and rock as she panted, not wanting to lose another breath. She questioned, both out loud and in her head, how she was still alive after falling from so high up, and a sudden stinging tore her thoughts apart. Atra looked down at her shoulder and found a hole pierced clean through. A hiss escaped her lips as both sources of pain intensified and she hugged herself to try and alleviate it. At first glance, there was not a soul around, no houses or buildings to determine a location. She didn't even know what continent she'd landed on; for all she knew, she could've been sent back to Niflheim's shores in an ironic twist of fate. Even if a person were to walk down to the beach, she realized, they'd probably try to kill her instead of informing her where she'd washed up. The doctor's best bet, she told herself, was to tread lightly until a location could be identified.

Rocks and dirt, and barely any trees. That's all she saw the further she walked. Atra began to shiver when the wind hit her still wet clothes. She was amazed they were barely torn from her tumble into the sea; even so, she wished she had something warm and dry to wear. And then it began to rain, furthering the chill that drenched her down to her bones. Tightening her hug around herself, Atra continued her long walk down the road she'd found. The desert surroundings began to feel a little familiar to her, and through the rain and wind, she could smell soot and smoke that flew from the volcano in the distance. "Ravatogh," she mouthed when lights finally came into view. Her stomach grumbled. Her shoulder stung. She was tired and hungry and just wanted to lay down and rest. Against her better judgement, Atra pressed on and approached the quickly approaching shop. "I
shouldn't be doing this," she told herself. She hadn't a gil to her name anymore. Everything she owned was either with the Lucians - if they chose to not burn her bag - or still in her home in Duscae. And even if the shopkeeper was a kind soul, she was sure he'd seen her face in whatever newspaper the people of southern Lucis read, or whatever radio or social media the Lucians used. They'd scream bloody murder the second they saw her. Atra gulped down her nerves and turned away from the door to the shop, sneezing as she took note of the people inside blissfully unaware of her presence, and huddled under the roof for protection from the rain.

She'd sunk to a sitting position, hand curled around her tucked-in knees, when she felt a hand tap her shoulder. The lights around her had blown out some time ago, leaving her form shrouded in the darkness of the storm. A man towered over her, hand on his hip, and knelt to her level. "You alright?" he asked, his voice dripping with the typical southern Lucian drawl. "You look like you've been wanderin' these parts forever." Atra shrugged, unsure of how to answer without using her voice. Her hair stuck to her face and hid it further from the tattooed man's full view. She almost missed the vial he tried to hand her. "If you're injured, I can help."

Stupid her. She'd forgotten about her bleeding shoulder. Atra took the green vial from him and crushed it in her palm. The glass dissolved and mixed with the now gaseous substance as it absorbed into her skin, and she immediately felt the wound seal itself shut. "Thank you," she told him.

"So what leaves you out here when there's a dry room right around the corner?"

"It's...better if I'm alone." A sigh escaped her lips. "People tend to get hurt when they're around me." Tucking her head between her knees, she barely noticed a towel being draped over her body.

The man sat beside her, one leg partially sticking out from under the roof. "Outsider, huh? I get it." Atra observed him from between the soaked strands of her hair. While he smelled of alcohol, he didn't reek of the stench and seemed about his wits. "A lot of us hunters are drifters, just droppin' in to see the next available bounty and what not. You'd be surprised how few of us come from normal lives the war left alone. Most of us are lookin' for a purpose 'sides from taking out whatever's destroying the local habitat." He offered her a bottle of water which she took and cracked open for a sip, followed shortly by half of a sandwich. "Mind me askin' your name?"

Atra barely thought of a cover to replace her former pseudonym. "Violet."

"I'm Dave, leader of the hunters of Lucis." He didn't turn to her and extend his hand for a shake, to her relief, and allowed her to sulk in general peace.

The rain calmed to a light drizzle after a while and Atra stood up, pulling the towel over the top half of her face. "I appreciate your company, Dave," she started, "but it's best if I get going now. I'm known for attracting danger." Atra began to walk before he could say anything, though she told herself not to even if he managed to get a word out. A few yards north from the outpost, she heard commands and yells over the breeze. Atra glanced over her shoulder and saw several people gathering near the shop. Some of them pointed to the sky where a low buzzing vibrated through the air. It increased in volume, and when she followed the sound to its source, she nearly bit her tongue. Three Imperial airships pulled closer to their location and whirred by the outpost in a hurry. They were headed north, and the gales from the last ship's jets kicked up a swift breeze which sent the towel on her head flying toward the gas station. Light peeled the clouds apart and the setting sun shone on the residents of Lucis. Their eyes followed the line the towel flew and landed on Atra. She sucked in a breath and turned in the opposite direction of the ships.

"The witch?"

"Is that Lamia?"
"Holy shit! The sorceress is alive!" She didn't listen to any of the others comment on her appearance and began to run with all the energy in her body. Civilians hid in the store and many of the Hunters who'd gathered to wait out the rain until their next hunt jumped for their weapons. Those with firearms loaded their guns and aimed as best as they could while sprinting. Atra didn't look over her shoulder to see if Dave was among those after her head. Bullets flew and struck the pavement. Atra almost lost her footing and caught herself with a hand laid on the road, pushing up to stand again and lunge ahead. The gunfire grew louder and she could feel the small pockets of air whirring past her, and she raised her arm behind her. A glassy barrier poured out from her palm and crystallized outward, fully absorbing the shock of the bullets that flew closer to her. Retracting her hand momentarily Atra stared at it, wondering how she suddenly had a sense of control over her abilities, but her questioning was left behind when more bullets flew past her, and she recreated the barrier.

She did her best to not attack the hunters and only defend herself, but as the barrier started cracking, a fog began to creep over her eyes. Her pace slowed down and she panted when there was decent space between her and the hunters. Her breath balled in her throat and her steps staggered. She felt like she was underwater again, struggling to find a surface to grasp and pull herself free from the void swallowing her whole. A headache quickly grew and settled in the back of her skull. Atra clutched her skin and hissed, the pain growing to the point where she barely registered a hunter gaining on her trail. She found her footing, but lost it no more than a second later as she jumped to avoid his club. Atra rolled out, her body shaking when she landed upright and skid to a halt. The club came down toward her head and she threw out another barrier, cracking under the pressure as it was struck a second and third time. Atra saw another person approaching from her peripheral vision and formed a new barrier on her right, nearly forgetting about the club coming at her from above. Her forearm collided with it, knocking it into a boulder beside her, and she soon joined the dent in the rock when she leaped backwards to avoid a barrage of bullets. She crawled to the nearest tree, and when she felt a hand wrap around her ankle, she kicked whoever it belonged to and freed herself. The area became hilly and she found no way to advance but up, much like her escape from Niflheim at the Presidential Palace. The voices of more hunters followed behind, deepening the aching that crept up her neck and spread through her skull. As the doctor rounded a boulder she sensed the presence of many souls behind her and turned around. Nine hunters, Dave included, formed a wall several feet nearby, but none dared to approach her. Dave stepped forward, rifle in hand, his head tilted upward. "I see the resemblance now. There's no mistakin' it." Before she could say a word the lead hunter pulled a paper from his back pocket and unfolded it. "Atra Interitio of Niflheim," he read off of it. "Better known as Lamia, the infamous sorceress." Atra wasn't surprised to see a wanted poster of herself so soon after her time in Altissia. "There were rumors of your death following the Empire's invasion of Accordo, but you've clearly found a way out as you had from your homeland." One of the hunters from behind him stepped forward, weapon already unsheathed, and pointed it at the sorceress. "Don't know how you managed to avoid capture for so long, but that ends now." The hunters advanced forward, Dave staying in place to watch. Atra backed up several steps, her hand out in front of her and ready to create a new barrier, then as quickly as they'd begun to stalk closer, the hunters stopped.

"Dave." One of the hunters laid a hand on his shoulder. "We can't-" Atra followed the woman's line of sight to a sign right in front of her, its post hammered into the ground and dirty from years of bracing the elements, the hunter's words as fogged as her sight. 'No Hunters Beyond This Point', it read, though it didn't explain the fear written on the hunters' faces as they stepped away from the path leading to her.

"What do we do?" Another inquired as he pointed his rifle at Atra, who could do nothing but raise her hands in surrender. "I can take the shot. No borders will be breached."

"If it's one of our bullets, it still counts," a third interjected. "Then that other witch will curse us." As they continued their banter with one another, Atra lowered her hands and dove to her right behind a
rock wall. One of the hunters noticed her go into hiding and threatened to shoot her head off with his shotgun, only silenced when someone else yelled at him and - to her assumption - yanked him backwards to prevent him from breaking whatever code had been enforced. They argued among themselves with each tiny step she took in her crouched position.

"So we're just gonna let her get away? Like the other one?" Some shifting of feet. "You can overturn this, Dave. You're the only one who can." Atra poked her head out from above the wall and watched the hunters. The one arguing with Dave caught sight of her and bared his teeth. He pulled a sawed-off shotgun from his satchel and aimed it at her, firing a pair of large red bullets at the wall. Atra shrieked and hid behind the structure again. "Show yourself, you freak!" the man shouted.

Grunts of disappointment rang through the air, and it began to rain again. "So what good is the warrant if we can't get near her-" A second pair of bullets hit the rock wall. "Francis, stop it!"

"We have her in our sights! We can't let Lamia get away!"

"Frank." Dave's single word was heavy enough to silence the hunter. "I know she took something precious from you, but there are borders we have to respect. The Malmalam Thicket isn't hunter territory. We can't just-"

"She took my brother from me!" The hunter known as Francis broke free from Dave's grasp and jumped the rock wall, coming face-to-face with Atra. The doctor backed away on her hands and knees, kicking up dirt and getting caught in spots of mud. The man stood over her, his posture menacing, while the other hunters argued over going after him. "You recognize this face?" He gestured to his own, and the longer she stared at him, the more familiar it rang in her mind. A gasp escaped her when she remembered seeing someone with very similar features back in Lestallum, on a warm, dark night... "He was vacationing there with his girlfriend. He was going to propose to her..." His breath hitched in his throat, his head shook, and when he regained some form of composure, he pointed the shotgun at her again. "Where's that scary side everyone keeps talking about?" he asked, taking a step closer to her. Atra turned over and pushed herself upright to run, only to have her limbs swept out from under her. She slammed into a tree near the wall, the breath knocked out of her. Atra coughed as she rolled onto her side, mud getting into a gash she hadn't realized was on the back of her arm. He kicked her in the gut before she could find her footing again. Her stomach was on fire, her sight falling into the fog once more. A sudden pressure weighed down on her neck, and it took her more than a second to realize his foot was on top of her. It was too similar to when the Nifeli captain had her in his grasp, whispering the words Velox had when she was on the roof of the Presidential Palace. The lack of oxygen hurt all the same, and as she clawed at his boot, she could feel his stare lingering on her. "The world's better off without you and your witchcraft," he commented, aligning the barrels of the shotgun with her face.

Atra couldn't remember what happened next. There were no flashes of memory to guess off of, but when everything was clear again, ice hung in the air. Francis' limbs were trapped in glaciers, splayed out like an animal ready to have its meat carved and sold at the market. The ice crept up his arms and legs, wrapping itself around his torso and creeping ever faster toward his nose and mouth. Atra knew where it was headed next, and when she found herself able to stand once more, she reached a hand out toward him. "Stop!" she urged the ice. "This isn't what I wanted!" Though slow, the ice halted its advance inside the hunter and hardened in place, leaving him encapsulated. The doctor moved just as slow when she leaned forward to pick up the shotgun and backed away from him. "I'm sorry," she apologized to him, and ignored his screeches of terror and wanting her dead as she continued down the path. No other hunters dared to follow her.

When she was sure there wasn't anyone after her, Atra hunched over and let out the contents of her stomach which she'd been fighting back. The pain in her neck heightened with each cough, and the
spots in her vision cleared. Somehow, she knew one of her victims' deaths would come back to haunt her, and she sank to her knees under a tree. The rain had grown unseasonably cold for the time of year, and even as her gaze lingered on the house just a few yard away, she didn't dare to approach and face the possibility of another gun barrel in her face. She tucked the gun under her legs and hugged herself, rubbing her arms to form some kind of warmth while the rain poured around her, and she watched lightning zap through the clouds from between some branches.

"Child?" The voice startled her; she hadn't realized she'd started to doze off. Atra's hand tightened around the shotgun, ready to fight back if a battle was instigated, but her grip loosened when she met the tired eyes of an old woman peering down at her, her back hunched and arms folded neatly in front of her. She held an umbrella over Atra and herself. Her lips were pressed in a hard line. "Hunters are banned from entering these parts," she told the younger woman. "Are you one of them?"

The woman had an eerie presence about her, unlike many of the elderly people she'd taken care of in Duscae and Leide. A smile didn't grace her face once, and her gaze felt like needles being stabbed through the muscle, reading through her facial expressions like glass. There was no point in lying to the woman, Atra knew. "I wish I were," she began, "though I wouldn't be able to take refuge here if that were the case. I'm a witch." It was the first time she'd called herself what others accused her of being for five years, and the word tasted like bile.

"An outsider. I see." The old woman backed up and beckoned for her to follow. Atra stood, surprised with her calm response.

"You're not afraid of what I might do?"

The woman paused momentarily and shook her head. "There's no reason for me to fear my own kind." Atra's eyes flashed wide for a second as the information sank in, and without further hesitation, she followed her.

A house stood in the middle of the woods, a ways off from the dirt path that flowed past the warning sign posted halfway up the hill. It looked very much like Atra's, to her shock, though it lacked the flatter lands surrounding it and the abundance of garula families. The woman invited her inside and offered the doctor some tea and food while she dried off next to the fire going below the chimney. "Thank you," Atra told her, and settled herself in one of the oversized chairs in the corner of the main space. She fiddled with the string connected to the tea bag. "...You said you had 'no reason to fear you own kind'. What did you mean by that, miss-"

"Kimya." The old woman set her cup down on a side table. "You didn't mishear me. I, too, am a witch." Atra's mouth fell agape as she studied Kimya. "And what do I call you? Though you seem to have a name throughout Lucis, I keep to myself and am often oblivious to news concerning the world."

"Atra." She waited for the uncomfortable vibes to settle in, for the so-called witch to realize just who she was dealing with and kick her out before she attracted any danger, but Kimya sat in silence and only nodded. "It's funny," she continued after a sip from her cup, "neither of us look like the witches you'd read about in children's books."

"Yet here we are, branded by society, simply because we're different." Kimya stared at the fire, watching the tendrils lick at the logs she recently fed it and tear them apart. "I was branded many years ago, probably long before you were born. And all I did was craft some elixirs."

Atra leaned forward in her seat. "You were cast out just for that?" She searched her mind for answers. "But that makes no sense! I did the same in my medical career, and no one ever thought
anything of it.” She imagined the scene in her head: a younger Kimya, on the run with her life’s work, dodging bullets and the public eye just for trying to help people.

"Society is cruel, Atra," Kimya continued. "There are many in this world who fear the unknown and are unwilling to learn. And for that, they create terrifying stories to try and get others on their side, to make it seem like they're not crazy. But there are also those who can see through the veil society has cast on the world, to see the truth. Those are the ones we must focus on. If a person is willing to go to such lengths to make your life miserable, they’re not worth your time."

"And if they don't give me a choice in their pursuit?"

Kimya grasped her chin and tilted her head. "Then you and I may not be so similar after all."

She really didn't know who she was talking to. Atra swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat and lifted her free hand. Closing her eyes, she searched inside of herself for the energy that created magic, the aura which flowed so easily when she was unable to control it. She remembered Ignis’ advice and searched for the warmest energy stored in her body. A circle spun in her hand, its temperature rising the faster it went, and when her eyes opened again, a flame sat in her palm. Kimya eyed Atra with awe, the left corner of her mouth turning upward at the tiniest angle noticeable. Atra closed her palm fast to snuff the flame out and let out a long sigh. "They call me Lamia. This is only the second time I've successfully created fire of my own accord. Most of the time, it's my subconscious that seems to do the casting; the last instance happened not long before you found me. The people after me want what I can't control."

"You have to fight for control over yourself." Kimya's sentence stung. "Your small flame was just the first step. If you retain the control, you can fight those who want it for themselves."

"But how-" Her question fell silent when the old woman rose from her chair and marched toward Atra, kneeling in front of her and resting a hand on her knee. Normally, she'd be the one do perform that action with her elderly and pediatric patients as a sign of reassurance, and it worked every time. She wasn't used to being on the receiving end of the action.

"I speak to you not as one witch to another, but as one human being to a fellow person on this earth. Don't let anyone ever control you. Having no control over your own actions is the worst feeling in the world, as you're all too aware of." Atra's head sank, and Kimya's hand tightened softly over her knee. "People once tried to control me, and though I'm now alone, I'm in control of my own destiny. Our situations are different, but the goal is the same." Her free hand caressed the younger woman's cheek. "Sacrifices may be necessary, but it's worth it in the end."

Atra took both of the woman's hands into hers and embraced her. "Thank you."

Kimya pat the back of her shoulder. "Rest now. You have a long road ahead of you."

For the first time in days, Atra slept comfortably. Kimya offered her the spare room she normally used for storing her special elixirs, and offered to pack a small bag for her to take on the road. She was grateful for the kindness Kimya showed her, having needed it after days of her life crumbling around her. A hot meal would be ready for her to take with her, as well as fresh clothes; the ones Velox had given her were bloody and ripped in places that couldn't be fixed overnight. She was never asked where she was from, nor did Atra know if the old woman realized she was from enemy territory. Either way the doctor doubted she'd care; for all she knew, the young woman was just another pariah left to fend for herself with society's classified norms on her tail. Atra liked her a lot and wished she had more time to get to know Kimya. She was sure that if the world were a little different, Kimya would've gladly passed her elixir-crafting knowledge onto the young woman to keep the secrets from dying out when she was gone. Atra wished she had someone to confide in, and
another lump settled in her throat when she thought about leaving the witch of the Malmalam Thicket behind.

A violent shaking woke her up, It was still dark outside, but with the flashes of light blinking out the window, it was easy to see there'd be no more sleep. "Imperial soldiers!" Kimya's voice roared over what Atra quickly caught onto as a spray of bullets. "Gods, damn them!" Feeling suddenly alert, Atra grabbed the clothes Kimya had prepared for her and threw them on, then reached for the emergency satchel. A hole was blasted into the wall and a robotic hand reached inside, clawing and grabbing at the air and whatever was immediately in front of it. "Run, child!"

"Kimya!" Atra headed for the back door. "They're-

"No time for explanations! Go!" The old woman's warning rang in her head as Atra bolted out through the back door and skid down the nearest gravel path. She ducked under the crossbow of a Magitek trooper and shook it free from its grasp as her foot collided with its lowering head. Atra slid further down the hill, finding the forest littered with drones, and she used the thick brush as a cover to take out as many of the soldiers as she had ammunition. Having stolen whatever was on the soldier she knocked over, she counted eleven steel arrows and an additional one already loaded in the crossbow. She had little time to find a proper hiding place before another Magitek trooper discovered her location and launched its arm at her. Atra leaned out of its way and fired an arrow, cracking its facial casing. The arm retracted, finding a loose grip on her hair, and yanked her forward. Atra was pulled through a bush, its branches and thorns scratching her skin, and landed on the asphalt of the paved road. An airship blocked any cars from proceeding in either direction and more MTs piled out of the vehicle. The doctor loaded another arrow into the crossbow and ran across the road, aiming at the nearest soldier to keep them at bay. Another drone grabbed her shoulder for a second, then was felled when she rammed the butt of the crossbow into its breastplate and severed the wires inside. She skipped backwards into the open, thinking for a moment how ironic it'd be if the hunters appeared to help take them out. Atra didn't noticed a larger drone stalking closer behind her until she its shadow loomed over her, and she barely leaned out of the way of its sabres. The blades missed, but another soldier than ran in her direction spun its axes backwards and rammed them into her spine, sending her flying into the guard railing on the road. Her body ached from the pain which surged throughout, her ears rang, and the spots in her vision returned. The MTS advanced on her like flies, all jumping in at once to finish her off. Though Kimya's words played over and over again in her head, Atra struggled to lift her arm, even as the choking feeling came over her again.

She knew she blacked out; she wasn't sure for how long, but when she was fully aware of her surroundings, most of the drones were ripped apart by electrical currents that danced over their dismantled bodies. There were five still functioning, and Atra felt a tingle in her hands. The same currents swirled around her fingers. It was a feeling similar to when she sent lightning into the airship over the Altum Magma sea. She went with it and beckoned the electricity to come forth a second time, aiming it at the drone which attempted to crawl to her and do Etro knew what to her. She counted to three in her head, and on the third number, a large bolt shot out from her hand and skewered the Magitek through its head. Atra poured more energy than necessary into the spell, however, and was thrown in the opposite direction, landing on top of a fallen soldier. It took her a bit to recover from the rebound, and when she did, she found the crossbow that had fallen out of her possession. She didn't wait to recharge her energy and blast the remaining robots to bits. Turning east, she sprinted into a run. Somewhere down the road Atra discovered an abandoned car, and to her relief it still worked. Despite its rusted exterior she claimed it and planted her foot on the gas pedal.

Atra didn't stop until the car ran out of whatever gas had been left in its tank. It slowed to a stop a short walk from the Malacchi Hills, her house not much farther away. She jumped over the guard
railing, agony still riddling her spine with each movement she made. One of the MTs got her in the leg, leaving her pants torn around the knee and a nasty scrape in its wake. She limped over the hill and took it slow when she hopped down the other side. Her house was in the distance, close enough to walk to even with her injury. Atra picked up the pace as much as her injury allowed her to, sanctuary a few steps away, and before she knew it, she was back home. She hadn't been back in Duscae in what felt like forever. All her crops were overgrown, the garulas were grazing in the meadow, and ivy had entwined itself in the siding. Not much had changed in her absence. She was glad to see the house still in once piece despite recent news, and she found the spare key hanging from a tree branch next to the front window.

The first thing Atra did when she walked into her house was go for a glass of water. She didn't realize how thirsty all the fighting made her, and when the water swam down her throat, she almost coughed from the pain. Her neck still hurt from being stepped on. Atra took her bag to the bathroom and turned on the light to examine herself in the mirror. The force the hunter had used to try and suffocate her was evident, the first thing she laid eyes on. Her neck was bruised, the discolored skin in the shape of a boot print. She hissed as she exposed more of her skin to survey the damage, and found more injuries littering her back, shoulders, and arms. Atra removed a potion from the satchel and pulled out its cork, drinking the contents quickly. Its taste was much different from her own concoctions, and she coughed when it was all down, but the effects were immediate. Most of her injuries began to heal herself, but she knew the neck bruising would take more time to dissipate.

She rushed to the closet and found some clean pants. She felt bad for borrowing clothes from such a kind woman only to have them ripped so soon, and set them aside to be fixed at a later date. Kimya stayed on her mind as she changed her outfit. A fellow outcast, a person she'd barely known in the hours they spent together, showed her more kindness than many people had since she was freed from her cell. The world was a strange place, she'd been made to see. It was a place where your best friend could become your enemy at the drop of a pin, nations allied with one another could turn at a moment's notice, war could be waged with just a nod. Not even Lucis was safe from these things, she learned. Atra took some canned food and set it in a pot to cook, and while the fire heated the pot, she wandered into the basement. All of her things were still there: the hot plate she used to heat and cook the elixirs, the bowl she used to crush the leaves of local herbs, the rows upon rows of homemade potions and elixirs spread across the four shelving units against the walls. Aside from some dust collecting on the bottles, it was as if she'd never left.

One footstep further in, something crunched under her shoe. Atra knelt and picked up a piece of paper, slightly crumpled with scored lines from folding. It was hard to ignore the seal of Lucis on the bottom right-hand corner of the paper, or the signatures that lay at the center of its lower edge. The Shadow Agreement's initial contract, she remembered. It'd been drawn up after her cross-examination, performed by the head of the Kingsglaive himself and Clarus Amicitia, two of the only four people from the royal complex who were aware of the agreement's details. Staring at the paper made her wonder how the Lucians were doing in the trek to Solheim. She hadn't heard any news regarding them since they all left Altissia, and her last sight of them came as she was falling from the airship. She didn't know how long it'd been between her fall and making it to the shores of Cleigne, nor was there a way for her to check. She hoped they were all okay: Noctis, Prompto, Luna, Gladiolus, Ignis, the King... So many lives she worried about. Atra wished she had a way to check up on them, but she quickly locked the idea away, telling herself they were better off without her bringing more danger.

Voices gathered in the land surrounding her home. Atra rushed up the stairs and peered through the window. People - many of them neighbors she'd known since she moved to the area - were headed her way, armed with any kind of farm tools or weapons they could find. "Shit!" Atra bolted into her bedroom and took whatever clothes and personal belongings she could fit alongside the elixirs in the satchel. Not a second later, someone banged on her door.
"Get out here, witch!" an older man's voice yelled. She didn't answer and hid under the window. "We know you're in there. Make it easier on yourself and surrender!"

She clasped her hands over her ears. "What do you want from me?" The question was redundant.

There was no answer, on the murmurs of the Duscaen people. Then, silence. One that bothered her a great deal. "Get back," someone finally said, and a smoky scent quickly followed. It seeped through the crack of space under her front door, and when she bent down to see what was going on, bright orange blinded her. Atra jerked backwards and shielded her face, another translucent barrier shooting out from her hand. More orange and yellow glowed through the window's glass, and it didn't take the doctor long to realize they were trying to burn her house. Burn the witch alive. That's exactly what President Speculo wanted to do, and the memory of his sentencing ached. The headache resurfaced as she scrambled to her feet and aimed her free hand at the front door.

"Come on," she pleaded. "Work..." Calling fire and lightning to her will had become much easier, but not once had she tried the same with ice. It was difficult to beckon something so cold and uninviting, even when she saw how it could trap people without bringing any harm to them. "Damn it, why isn't it working?" Atra gave up on summoning the blizzard and resorted to filling a pot from the sink with water. She splashed it under the doorway to try and put out the flames, and her jaw dropped open when she noticed the flames spreading inside.

There was no use fighting it. She wouldn't be able to keep up with the fire's speed, she realized. Atra grabbed the satchel and ran for her bedroom, locking the door and stuffing towels in the crack of space beneath it. Her headache intensified, knocking her off balance. It was the same as Altissia: the pain rattling her body from the top of her spine, the fogginess creeping over her vision, and the sudden weakness in her legs. She fought for control over herself, dragging her body closer and closer to the window. Atra found the strength to stand once more and pulled herself upright when she reached the window, coming face-to-face with more familiar people she'd helped in the past. "The witch is escaping!" he cried, dropping his torch and making a run for it. The flames from the torch licked at the house's exterior wall, and the base was soon consumed by fire. A tendril got in through the tiniest crack between two wooden boards and lapped at her skin. She flinched and pulled away from the wall, only able to watch the fire grow bigger by the second. This was it. She was meant to die by fire, as her sentence was originally issued. The pain in her skull pounded again and she screamed, the spots in her vision returning and widening.

"No..." she growled, unwilling to give in to whatever was happening. "I'm...tired of your shit..." Her eyes began to throb. She closed one and shielded the other, her hands suddenly feeling chilly. Ice crystals formed between her fingers and shot outward, hitting the glass of the window. When it was completely covered, Atra backed up a few steps, then charged forward and rammed her shoulder into the window. The glass shattered and she flew through the flames that had grown large, reaching the roof of the house. Atra rolled on the ground, and as she pushed herself to a seated position, found herself surrounded by her neighbors.

"How long have you been lying to us for?" the bombardment of questions began as the people came closer, all weapons pointed at her.

"Why did you lie to us?"

"How many people have you killed?"

"Are you even a real doctor?"

"What's wrong with her eyes?" The last question was a strange one to hear out of the mob. Atra had no idea what they meant; she'd never seen her own reflection during an episode. A gun barrel
distracted her mind, and she followed it up to yet another familiar face. Aurum, the adolescent she'd treated after his run-in with a pack of sabretusks, was on the other end. "Mydriated pupils, but only one of 'em's all wide..."

"Don't matter, kid. Haven't you seen the newspaper in the last two days?" Another intervened. "Our doctor's been lyin' to us the entire time. She's the witch from Niflheim." A pitchfork motioned to her heart. "Dave said he ran into her yesterday."

"So what do we do now?" The neighbors exchanged glances, having never been close to a situation such as the current one; and if they had, they were in Atra's position.

It wasn't a second later that a single gunshot rang through the field. "What the hell do ya think yer doin'?" an old man's voice shouted. "Go on, git!" A pathway split the circle opened, and Atra's eyes widened at the pair of figures coming her way. Cid and Cindy, each armed with a firearm, forced the Duscaen people away from her a few feet. A large space was left between them and her, and the old man motioned his gun from the people upward. "Get up."

Atra sat, motionless and confused. Sensing her abashment, Cindy rested her rifle against her thigh. "Paw Paw ain't gonna repeat himself. Now hurry up and move." The doctor didn't waste another moment and clambered to her feet, wrapping her arms around herself and following Cindy away from the crowd. Cid brought up the rear, his shotgun still aimed at his neighbors in a threatening manner.

One of the adults in the group took a step forward. "You're making a big mistake, Cid. She's dangerous." The aging mechanic ignored his warning and pursued his granddaughter and Atra.

The three were silent in their walk, which seemed longer without any conversation. It started to rain again, not to anyone's dismay. It seemed to rain a lot since the fall of Altissia. Atra stayed between them, not voicing any pain she felt. She didn't dare to look over her shoulder, either, and stare at the place she once called home be burned to ashes. Her life's work, almost every potion, antidote, elixir and Phoenix Down she'd ever created, were sure to create beautiful colors in the flames. At least she'd managed to save the recipes for them, she told herself mentally, though little could replace the hundreds of vials that were now vapor.

She recognized the road they stopped on as the one closest to the Hammerhead outpost. Her lips parted, prepared to ask them why they'd taken her to their home, but Cid held a hand up and silenced her. "We didn't come to save you," he began, "in case you were wonderin'. We intervened because we didn't know what would happen to them if they tried anythin' funny."

Her hopes fell apart. "Oh. I see..."

"Is it true, Nebula?" Cindy asked, the pseudonym sounding foreign to them all when she said it. "Is your name really Atra Interitio? And are you really this...'Lamia' thing the whole continent's freakin' out about?"

Once more, there was no point in lying. "...Yes. All of it's true." She backed away from them and hugged herself tighter. "But when it happens, when Lamia comes out...it's not me." Cindy raised an eyebrow. "I don't know how to explain it, but when that 'side' of me is triggered, it's like I have no control over it."

"Then it's not safe for you to be here."

"I know..." She twiddled her fingers. Atra always wondered what it'd be like to be on the run if she were ever found out. "But before I leave, there's something you need to know..."
"If it's about them Nifs you offed when they tried to drag you back to Niflheim," Cid cut in, "I already knew." Atra blinked, startled by how calmly he stated it. "I didn't know exactly how you managed it, but no one else was around that night. It had to have been your doing."

Atra nodded. "That's what that side of me can do." An awkward, almost scary silence lingered between the three before the doctor found the courage to speak again. "Thank you, Cid. I never properly expressed my gratitude for what you did for me that night. Even speculating what you did, you still chose to save my life." He had no explanation for that night, but he could tell she didn't need one. Out of instinct Atra outstretched her arms to embrace them, but she immediately retracted her limbs when she saw the fear written on Cindy's face. "...If you happen to see Noctis, tell him... I'm sorry."

Cindy nodded to her, and she and her grandfather watched the doctor start walking down the street. Dust kicked up in the wind as Atra pulled her hood over her head.

"Where will you go now?" The question was simple enough, and yet there wasn't a solid answer. The world knew her face and name. There was no avoiding fights; the struggle would only cause internal conflict and damage. She didn't stop to reply, only answering with a shrug of her shoulders, and didn't look back at them. She didn't want them to see how hard she was biting her lower lip.

When Hammerhead was long gone, Atra rested for a moment in a rocky field. Retying the laces on her boot, the wind became fierce for a second. She watched some tumbleweeds roll next to the road, in the direction of the checkpoint to Insomnia. The capital of Lucis. She was sure it was still war-ravaged, and based on what she'd overheard from some of the Kingsglaive, the crystal might still be in the palace basement. The rock that warded the Starscourge and daemons from the city, the power it gave to the Lucian royals... For some reason she smiled and chuckled to herself. "Ridiculous," she muttered, the hilarity of her idea quickly fading as she began to believe the crystal was the answer to her problems. Pushing herself off the rock, Atra adjusted her satchel and continued walking toward the bridge. She'd always wanted to visit the infamous city.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who were wondering: yes. Atra's still kicking. Here's your proof. Also bringing in some NPCs that you can interact with for quests in the game. I was legitimately surprised to learn about Kimya and the similarities between her and Atra. I needed to bring the two of them together, even if it was just for a short time.
Etro's Eyes

Chapter Summary

A deeper look into the ways of the gods and goddess of Eos, the Archeans, and the phenomenon behind the eyes of the Lucian royals.

Chapter Notes

I've been wanting to bring back some aspects of Versus XIII that were left behind for the final project of XV. While I loved the fact that they kept the eye-color change for Noctis when summoning the gods, I was pretty excited about the 'eyes that could see death' and wanted to investigate that concept a little further.

I still think of Lucis as a country which celebrates the concept of death as less of a saddening occurrence and more of an ascension to a higher plane of existence, much like the ancient Egyptians did thousands of years ago. It's very interesting to me, and I wish it'd been a significant thing in the game (especially since they seemed to have hinted at a Chaos realm, at least, in the Omen trailer and never really explained it). I'll be looking into more Versus XIII ideologies to bring in, because the idea of a dark Final Fantasy is quite intriguing.

I'll also be clarifying the choppy timeline of what character's events happen at what time since I keep switching to different POVs (possibly in the next chapter's notes).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"I'm sorry." Two words which weighed heavily on both the Prince's and the shield's shoulders when the young monarch said them. They were choked out, regretful and hurt, sensing there was something he might have been able to do to prevent the explosion. A chunk of debris had taken out the back half of their borrowed vehicle, so until they had the convenience of finding another, the men were forced to carry on by foot. It was demeaning, if Noctis had to pick a word to describe it, and that was to say the least. He was lucky to have been passing by the hospital's pharmacy when the first explosion occurred, and he grabbed as many vials of potions and elixirs that he could fit into his arms before sprinting off to Ignis' room to warn him and Prompto. The gunner had assisted the tactician in drinking one, hoping it would help his eyes heal, and acted as the guide. Seeing his once bespectacled friend with bandages bound over his eyes, unable to find his way without someone there to tell him of a step he'd miss, formed a ball of guilt in the Prince's gut. And Gladiolus, usually so hard-headed and unafraid to be the voice of reason when he and the others couldn't think, was completely silent. Not a grunt of discomfort or a word of pain left the man, even as they located a vehicle to use for the rest of the way to the train. Noctis wanted to say something to him - maybe lay a hand on the guardian's back or even pull him into an embrace, despite his shorter stature - but he kept his eyes hidden beneath his bangs and refused to meet anyone's gazes. He didn't want to run the risk of speaking to his comrades, facing them, and watching their expressions transform into writhing horror when his eyes turned red.
He wasn't sure if they'd started turning color yet. He'd never been good at telling when it was going to happen, much like his often impulsive emotional state. And it was quick to take place. Noctis recalled being eleven years old and working on a project with some classmates in school. Next thing he knew, he was being carried to the infirmary by one of his bodyguards, the woman reassuring him that everything was alright as he remained kicking and screaming bloody murder. The other kids had chased after his protector against the teacher's orders, from what he'd overheard the school nurse saying to his father over the phone, and was reported to have eyes the color of blood. He wasn't allowed any visitors, not even by adults, unless they were his family or the Crownsguard staff. But some of the kids must've caught a peek before he was carted away, because the day he was allowed to return, children who once fought to sit next to him in class cowered when he greeted them or asked for a pencil. He'd been brought to a counselor many times when this happened throughout his childhood and much into his adolescence, each time forcing himself to describe the death scene that played before his eyes. The one in the classroom had been an older woman, looking to be around his father's age, coming face-to-face with a man wielding a gun. He couldn't tell where it was happening, why it was happening; all he could see was the woman's soul leaving her body and hugging herself as her mortal body choked on its own blood. Regis encouraged him to tell the counselors, and did the same with those who told their King they couldn't listen to his son's horror stories viewed from afar, lest they lose the lunch from their stomach and be haunted themselves by the dead spirits.

"Why, dad?" the Prince asked his father countless times. "Why do I have to see these things happening? I don't even know these people!" Regis promptly opened his mouth to answer, only to be interrupted by Noctis. "It's not a blessing, no matter how many times you say it. It's someone dying!" Of course the King could only comfort his son as much as he was allowed. They rarely saw the same deaths, though the elder saw less as the crystal aged him farther than intended. It never got any easier to deal with, though the Prince found ways to keep it all in and do his best to ignore the people he saw that were nowhere near. Some went peacefully in their sleep, while others mirrored terrifying murder scenes, but all the souls ended up in the same place, from what he'd learned. They were sent to Etro's planes for judgement: if they were deemed worthy they were allowed into her paradise for eternity, but if their crimes weighed down their souls, she was said to rip the clouds from under them and they'd be banished to spend eternity living in Chaos. It was a mantra repeated through his life, as his grandfather had done for the King and so on. The royalty of Lucis were agents of Etro, forged in a contract that entwined with their ownership of one of the crystals of the world. In accepting the power of the crystal offered by the gods, the royals were given the goddess' all-seeing eyes, enabling them to see the deaths of those around them. The reasoning? So they and the Oracle could guide their souls to judgement, and, should they pass, into the paradise awaiting them. A load of garbage, Noctis told himself on more than one occasion, to let people spin stories of the curse through rose-colored glasses. It only got worse as the war with Niflheim deepened and the world's crystals were destroyed. And with the war, as Noctis has to learn the hard way, would come witnessing the passing of those close to him and his family. He saw their deaths twice.

Clarus Amicitia had died in the explosion, he was sure. And if he hadn't, then Noctis pitied his father's servant for having to suffer for so long before death's sweet embrace carried him onward to his journey into the afterlife. He didn't want to say it out loud, despite his comrades knowing, despite Gladiolus' head hanging lower than usual as the train station was noticed over the approaching hill. An apology was all he could utter, the only other sounds coming from Cor giving the group instructions or Prompto warning Ignis of anything that may be in his path after they parked. "I'm sorry," the Prince repeated, his voice louder than the first. The Prince's shield finally acknowledged his friend, turning his head to face him while they walked. Noctis still wouldn't meet his gaze. He bit hard on his lower lip as a squeezing sensation sat over his chest and eyes, his steps slowing to a near halt.
"...Thank you," Gladiolus responded, then he noticed the Prince stopping. Turning around, the shield was quick to notice fisted, trembling hands. Noctis drew in a breath and turned his head upward. A wet streak rolled down his cheek, and as the others realized they were two people short of their party, they ceased their trek up the gradual slope of the hill. An invisible hand gripped Gladiolus' heart when he saw crimson irises looking back at him beneath black bangs. There was no malice between the two as there had been before, but a mutual mix of sadness and guilt.

The Prince forced a small grin on, his breath catching in his throat. "He...went on with a smile..."

Replying with a nod that took everything he had to deliver, the shield turned back toward their destination and marched forward, moving ahead of the others. Noctis took an extra few seconds before he continued onward, understanding the need for space which Gladiolus had at that moment. "...Looks like it's gonna rain."

Prompto held his hand palm-up and searched the sky for clouds. Though it had been a dreary morning, the sun was still looming overhead, and would for a few more hours if luck was on their side. "I don't see any clouds." Ignis' hand tightened gently around the gunner's forearm in an attempt of silent explanation. Amicitias weren't ones for open displays of depression.

There was no incident boarding the second train. The ticket counter had a sign and no teller, letting any potential passengers know the line would be free until 'further notice'. "Code for until the war comes to an end," Cor concluded before the train pulled into the station. A single bell sounded for any passengers to get off, and a second for new ones to get on. He was the best at masking his emotions. Clarus was a dear friend to the Marshal, who, along with Weskham, Regis and Cid, were a formidable force back in the day. They had road trips much like Noctis' entourage had before everything fell apart, and when the wall separating Insomnia from the rest of Lucis went up, the friendships forged and held together for many years disintegrated as well. Cid was the first to branch off from the group, and Weskham followed suit after a family incident left him unable to continue serving the Lucian King. Cor and Clarus were the only ones left by his side, and now they were down to just two. The war had torn them apart.

None of the civilians on the train seemed to recognize Noctis, much to their relief. They left the men alone, albeit occasional glances were thrown their way by children and adults alike. Most of them were on Ignis; Prompto was sure they were curious about his bandages. Ignis could feel the stares on him and was tempted to turn their way out of instinct, but fought the urge and rested his head against the window molding, listening to the train's movement over the tracks. He silently prayed to the gods to keep the cars safe from Nifeli attack, not wanting to hear more gut-wrenching shrieks of terror from innocent bystanders. The quiet bothered him, though, an unusual thing for the tactician. He wished he could at least peel his eyes open to get a glimpse of his comrades, possibly give Gladiolus that glance he knew would offer his friend all the reassurance he'd need to get through the difficult time. His hand left Prompto's forearm and searched the space around him for the bodyguard, finally finding his knee and ghosting a single pat on the man's limb. He didn't need to say, "we're here for you if you need a shoulder to lean on"; the gesture said everything for him.

Noctis' eyes were still red, though the color was beginning to fade to purple. Prompto had caught a peek at them when they were at their most vibrant, and it'd taken him more than a moment to understand what it meant. He'd only seen Noctis' eyes change color three times before, and none of the instances had to do with someone's death. The phenomenon intrigued and scared him, and though he felt it may be overstepping his boundaries to ask about it, his inner curiosity put his worries on the back burner. "Hey, Noct," he began, "I never really understood the whole thing with your eyes turning red. Is it something exclusive to Lucian royalty like the crystal?"

Cor's mind formed the answer before his Prince could. "They're referred to as Etro's Eyes. It's the
result of a contract between the goddess Etro and the Lucian royals; for wielding the crystal, the kings and their heirs must guide the souls of the departed to be judged by her." No one was surprised by how much the Marshal knew. "The people of Lucis see death differently from the other nations. We understand it to be the final release from pain and the next step on our journey to ascension." He stared into Noctis' gaze, watching the color fade from magenta to violet, and knew Clarus' spirit had found its way to be judged. "It's the burden Morus Caelum bore before his son Regis, as Noctis has bore since he was a child."

"But why?" the Prince interjected. "Why are we forced to watch something so horrific? Most of the time I don't know the person, and the rest it's due to the war." He didn't know why he was asking the same questions again, only knowing there was no true answer. "I'm not even sure how to guide the souls in the first place."

"It's a subconscious thing, Noctis. Without even realizing it you're guiding the departed souls, only shown by the change of color in your eyes. It happens when you experience the pain they felt in their last moments of life, when you breathe in the breath which was their last. So long as you stay strong, those who have left this world will be able to start their journey into Paradise."

The ideology intrigued the gunner. It was beautiful in a heartbreaking way, almost comforting. As his imagination played out how he thought the journey went, however, a question invaded his mind. "Hold on a second. If Lucis worships Etro and she gave these eyes to the royals, then why is-" he had to force himself to say it- "Lamia saying she's an agent of Etro?"

"It is intriguing," Ignis joined in to the surprise of his brothers. "Niflheim spoke poorly of Etro and the other gods until the sorceress' infamy surfaced. Only when her title put fear into the populace did they begin to praise her and use her as a threat."

Gladiolus crossed his arms and focused on the ceiling. "Whatever they're trying to do, it's a good plan to draw attention away from themselves... I saw a wanted poster of her before we boarded the train." No shock was shared alongside the news. It was something they had to expect after she'd killed an entire shift of secret guards. "But I am curious to know the details behind their tactics."

"As am I." Cor spun his katana between his legs. "This little distraction of theirs blew up, probably beyond what they had control of. Them trying to hunt her down is just a ruse to regain full management over her." His head hung as he contemplated their next course of action.

Looking at Cor's face, Noctis recalled a night he awoke screaming in pain. He'd seen the Marshal collapsing to the ground, a hole in his chest and blood spurting out. It formed a lump behind his Adam's apple and made breath hard to come by. "Cor, there's...something I've been meaning to ask you. A while ago, I saw something in the middle of the night. It was...gruesome." Cor sucked in oxygen, knowing what was coming next. "What happened to you? I saw you die."

All eyes fell on the Marshal. He dreaded the day he'd have to reveal what Atra did to him that night. "Noctis..." It was more difficult than he imagined, but silence told them exactly what the Prince suspected.

A fierce wind suddenly roared outside, interrupting the thoughts of all. Children pressed their faces to the windows and watched in awe as it started to snow. While the youngest generation marveled the surprised snowfall, the adults on board knew the precipitation wasn't normal. Lucis was close to the equator of Eos, with a mostly tropical climate and rainfall occurring often. Temperatures near freezing were a meteorological oddity. Whispers spread between the families, wondering who'd pissed off the glacian goddess this time, and hoping her temper would calm instead of flare to keep the snow and cold to a minimum. As the others watched the snow pick up in accumulation, Ignis was the first to notice the sharp drop in temperature with his forehead still firmly rested on the
window. "It's getting worse," he told the others. The wind howled and ice scraped the outside of the
train cars, scratching lines into the glass and metal. For a moment Noctis thought he heard an angered
yell melded in with the wind, but with everything happening to him in the past few days, he'd
question his sanity first.

Then, as swiftly as the storm arrived and kicked up, the winds died down. The children booed as the
few snowflakes stuck to the windows melted and dripped down the side. "Bye, Lady Shiva," one of
the kids whined as she returned to her family.

"That was fast," Prompto commented, raising an eyebrow. "Quickest outburst I've ever seen from an
Archean."

"Too fast."

"Maybe it was just a bug or something?"

Gladiolus and Ignis shook their heads. "The Archean wouldn't react to flies moving about. It must be
the Empire's doing."

"Must've been a weak lot," the bodyguard replied. "Still, doesn't change the potential for danger. If
the winds were headed north like we are, we'll have to be on our toes."

Nyx didn't know what to make of the elder Oracle. When they'd hear the yells of warning outside
their quarters the night before, it was almost like Nebula knew what was coming. Then again, there
were really only two things that held the potential for any danger to humans: daemons and the
Empire. And since the compound was surrounded by bright floodlights, only one answer remained.
Luna had a sense of what was going on, he was sure, after a single glance at Nebula told them both
to stay put. She remained still for more time than what felt comfortable, stone-faced and stiff with her
eyes closed. After an eternity she blinked and turned her attention to Nyx and Luna once more, her
expressionless gaze now accompanied with a smile. "Our problem should be taken care of shortly."

"The Empire?" Nyx asked before Luna could get a word in.

"Very persistent, young Glaive." Nebula was already starting to look much better than she had after
curing Gentiana of the Star's scourge in her system. The blotches on her skin were clearing and her
sclera were white again, though it was taking longer for the orange hue in her irises to dissipate. "I
just asked for a little help from one of the gods." Her gaze shifted to Luna. "I understand you've been
having some trouble speaking to them since your guardian was injured, yes?"

Luna nodded. "That's right. Ever since Leviathan and Gentiana were injured by-" she almost said the
name of the person she once called friend- "Lamia, I haven't been able to communicate with any of
the others."

"Understandably so. The Archeans are hesitant to lend you their assistance with one of their own in
such a state." The young Oracle pressed her lips into a hard line. "Though once your Astral
awakens, she should be able to calm their worries. Fret not, Lunafreya." She pat the blonde woman's
shoulder. "And in case they need an extra push, I put in a good word when I asked for assistance in
dealing with the Imperial pests." As she carried on with her explanation, Luna could sense the
slightest hesitation in the healer following the mention of the sorceress, almost like an awkwardness
in her had been triggered. It was only noticeable in the eyes: her lower lids would pull up and form a
crease under them deeper than the wrinkles that were slowly becoming prominent. She did well to
hide it from Nyx, with most of his focus on the outside situation. "For the time being, I'll be your link
to the gods. Shiva is always willing to listen."
"You serve her?"

"I have for my entire time as an Oracle, since my training began. Shiva has always been much more open about her love for humanity than many of the other gods, Leviathan included." Nebula was right, Luna knew. When she'd chosen to become a follower of the Hydrean goddess, her mother had been unsure of her daughter's decision. Leviathan was a protector of the planet, but had a chip or two when it came to people. She saw most of them as soul-sucking leeches who wanted nothing more than to deprive Eos of all it had to offer and took Niflheim as a prime example of the evils humanity was capable of with the right tools; Sylva even dared to compare Leviathan's disgust with Ifrit's defiance during a conversation years before. How the serpentine goddess was able to see Luna's light through her horse blinders and come to appreciate at least a small few humans on the planet was nothing short of a miracle, so it made sense that one of the last remaining Oracles in existence chose to serve under a more lenient Archean. "Unlike you, unfortunately, I lack the aid of an Astral to provide a link between myself and the Archeans. I can only do so through prayer, which you and your bodyguard watched earlier."

Nyx hummed at her statement. "So that's what that was. And the noise I heard outside after that?"

"A cover, provided by Shiva. It'll drive the Imperial caravans away from here to buy you some time." And it had bought them time, plenty of it. Venus lent the Tenebraen Princess and her group a car to use for their travels, as well as map that had a roadway circled for them to follow. She wished them well on their travels and handed Luna a bag of supplies for the journey to Solheim. It'd be a while before they reached the edge of the continent to get to Solheim, they were aware, so it was best to prepared for any skirmishes they might get pulled into. Minutes before the Princess' departure, Luna came up to her and asked the elder Oracle to join them on the road.

"At least until Gentiana awakens," she explained. "You've taught me so much in so little time, and I'd like to learn more from you while I still can. I don't know what awaits once we reach the Lucian borders and cross the ocean to Solheim."

"Not to mention having an extra pair of hands will be good in battle," Nyx added. "As much as I'd like to boast, I can't protect Luna while fighting and holding Gentiana. Could use your help in keeping her safe."

She couldn't deny such a request. "Very well. I'll make sure you reunite with your Prince." Looking over her shoulder, Nebula gave the people in the compound a single wave. "I'll be back as soon as I can." The residents wished them well and their car pulled away from the outpost, moving into the open land.

It wasn't long after leaving the outpost that Gentiana, laying in the backseat of the truck with her head in Luna's lap, began to stir. The Astral moaned and peeled her eyes open, her charge being the first thing she laid her eyes on. "Lunafreya..." she mouthed, reaching a shaky hand up to caress the young woman's face. Her body no longer hurt, all pain replaced by exhaustion. Her gaze wandered about Luna's face, seeing the relief wash over the young Oracle, then it drifted to the details of the car they sat inside. Adjusting her position, she couldn't help noticing the woman in the front passenger seat. Focusing on the back of her head, she sensed a light similar to Luna's with a hint of chill from Shiva, and bowed her head. "A servant of the Glacian. If it's thanks to you that I've returned to normal, you have my gratitude."

"It's good to hear you voice again," Luna said to her. "You had us so worried."

"My humblest apologies." She took Luna's face in her hands and laid a kiss on her forehead. Her focus returned to the woman in the front seat. "I take it you're the one who banished the venom from my body. Luna would not have been able to survive it."
Nebula nodded, her eyes still forward. "My experience allowed me to handle it with less trouble. Besides, we can't have our future queen laying about in agony." Gentiana blinked in understanding. "I've learned your injury was the doing of Lamia. That's quite a shock to hear. I didn't know she harbored daemons..." There it was again: the twinge of pain in her voice when the doctor was mentioned. Luna kept her thoughts to herself.

"I don't think it came from her, though. The sorceress had no demonic presence about her." Gentiana's stare moved down to her hands. "Which raises many questions as to how I was infested..." He thoughts raced and swam in search of answers, and in the midst of the search, she remembered seeing Noctis' uncanny eye color before she'd passed out. Gentiana took her charge's hands into her and looked into the pair of startled eyes glancing back. "Noctis-

Luna remembered her words before they were separated. "What was it you saw when you looked at him?"

The Astral shook her head as she sat up. "Luna, he's...falling into Chaos."

"What?" Nebula nearly screamed from the front passenger seat, startling the Glaive driving next to her. "But he is to be the Chosen King. King of Light, the banisher of daemons and darkness."

"It's the crystal, I'm sure," replied the younger Oracle. She wasn't aware of how much Nebula knew of the Lucian crystal; there were times where Oracles would dedicate themselves to specific regions of the world, though everything about Nebula was speculation until she asked. "I'm sure you're aware that Lucis hold the last crystal in existence. It was given to the first King by the Archeans Bahamut and Etro. It's not public knowledge, but it is a crystal born of Chaos. If Noctis is falling into Chaos, it means he's losing his connection with Bahamut." Nebula listened with her eyes closed - communing with Shiva, Luna assumed.

The elder woman nodded. "I understand now. It's imperative that we get you to his side before Chaos consumes him."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on," Nyx cut in. "What do you mean, 'Chaos'? That would make the crystal the equivalent of a hell portal."

Nyx sucked his teeth. "All that power from the crystal that was sucking the life of His Majesty...where's it going? To some sort of daemon inside the damn rock?"

"It is normally used to suppress the evil within the crystal itself," Luna explained, "which Bahamut is there to assist with. But his inability to contact Bahamut is troubling. The longer it goes on, the more likely it is that Noctis will be consumed."

"And the King?"

Gentiana huffed. "He is too advanced in his age. The crystal automatically seeks out the youngest of the Caelum bloodline who is of age, while their minds are still vulnerable. It explains the reactions he and King Regis experienced before their reunion, and the hue I saw in the Prince's eyes. Noctis does not yet understand the full implications of his responsibilities to the crystal as the next King, and with the crystal under such stress, I'm not sure how much longer it can last."

Nyx caught a passing glance of the guardian as his vision shifted from one section of the road to another. Her eyes still spooked him. "How do you know all this? To have gathered such massive quantities of info, you'd have to be-

"At least eighty-five years," she interrupted, silencing the Glaive immediately. "The passing years have blurred together in recent times, so I cannot recall the exact year of my birth."
sleeve aside and revealed a small bracelet in her hand, surprising even her charge. "I was found with this beside an Astral shard. It has a remnant of the shard embedded in itself."

He knew he had a reason to be creeped out by her. "There, uhh, any more of you 'immortal' humans lurking about?"

Gentiana stayed quiet, only smiling at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. "I'm not at liberty to reveal a fellow Astral's identity."

"Fair enough."

The area became more mountainous as they neared the edge of the continent. Conversation after the reveal of Gentiana's secret mostly involved how she was feeling and her life growing up as an immortal being. Nyx asked most of the questions, curiosity taking over; they ranged from her connection to the gods to relationships between said gods. He was amazed to hear that not all were on the side of humanity. Ifrit the Infernian, she recalled, had more than a chip on his shoulder, more so than Leviathan, and preferred to do things his own way. "Sounds like me," Nyx snickered, to which Luna couldn't help grinning.

Nebula turned around and faced Luna. "Have you tried speaking with Leviathan, my lady?" The sudden reminder caused the blonde to fidget her fingers. "Don't worry. If you're unable to receive an answer, I'll be here to help."

"Thank you." It was scary, Luna told herself. She felt like she was staring at Atra; with the exception of the gray eyes of the doctor versus Nebula's azure, they were one in the same. It couldn't have been a coincidence that Atra took on the pseudonym Nebula. Her eyes closed, she searched the many souls of Eos for the one that flowed over the earth like water. She searched Altissia first, it being the last place she saw Leviathan before their boat vanished behind a secret waterway. Her spirit cried out in silence to the Hydrean, pleading with her to answer the calls. She heard Shiva beckon to her fellow god and was elated to have the help in re-establishing her connection. As she fell deep into concentration, with her hand entwined with Gentiana's, Luna's subconscious wandered about on its own. She didn't realize what she was saying out loud. "Please heed my call, Leviathan. Your mortal vessel still lives, without pain or fear. The sorceress is long gone. Atra can't hurt you anymore-"

Flinging her eyes wide open Luna felt another pair on her, and met Nebula's stare. The creases in her features deepened as a lump settled in the elder Oracle's throat, and she slowly turned away.

Gentiana spoke up first. "Nebula, surely you're aware of the question floating in our minds. Your resemblance to Lamia is uncanny. Is it more than a coincidence?"

Nebula's lips parted, her mouth suddenly dry. And then her attention was ripped away, yanked in front of her as her eyes widened further. "No...they've found us!"

Not a second later, as Nyx was to question her statement, did a rocket fly into the roadway in front of them. The Glaive swerved out of its path, sliding just under the legs of a MT mobile unit before picking up speed again. "Shit...we've got a walker on our tail!" He floored the gas pedal, not wanting to see the giant robot follow after them. Scores of soldiers were in their path and met the grill of their vehicle, one of them flailing like a fish as it tried to reach inside for the nearest human body. Steering with one hand, he reached for one of his knives and cut off the drone's hand. There were many more ahead, most of which he avoided to the best of his ability, but when Nyx spotted a wall of the robotic husks blocking the road ahead he hit the brakes, and everyone's bodies flew as forward as their seat belts would allow. Luna hissed in the backseat as her head lunched forward and strained her neck. The Glaive unbuckled himself and threw the door open, knocking an approaching Magitek soldier away from them, and he drew his second knife.
"It appears you've run out of road." Nyx searched the area for the source of the voice, his mind momentarily distracted by a second drone coming at him with an axe. "And just when you were near the border...pity." The Glaive and Luna - now out of the car with Gentiana by her side - followed the voice to a cliff and discovered a figure perched at the top. Ardyn Izunia stood with open arms as he stared down at the surrounded people. "Lady Lunafreya, it is a pleasure to be in your company again.." His gaze shifted to her guardian. "And what a surprise to have an immortal in my presence. Gentiana Surgens... I'm overjoyed to see you in one piece." Ardyn tipped his hat and gave them a bow. Neither of the women were the least bit surprised that he knew of Gentiana's Astral presence.

"What is it you want?" Nyx yelled to him, able to focus more on the Chancellor when the husks around them resorted to standing in a menacing fashion. "You have our crystal."

Ardyn gestured a hand to them, his peripheral vision on the car when he heard the front passenger door open. "On the contrary, my boy. The crystal still resides within Insomnia's Citadel. It's been quite the problem for the Imperial Forces to deal with. Why, even my dear General Glauca has grown annoyed over the stubborn stone. I'm forced to ask for your assistance in freeing it from its chamber." The shock on their faces told him all he needed to know of their knowledge. As he began to pace the cliff's edge, auburn hair captured his attention. The elder Oracle stood beside Nyx and stared up at him with an expressionless glare. A twisted smirk crept onto the Chancellor's face. "My, my... Nebula Flumine."

"Ardyn." Her tone remained flat when she addressed him. "You've been causing trouble again, I see."

"Just a bit of fun, my dear. I've been meaning to ask you about the child prattling about and using your identity. She's soiled your good name."

"As have you with your title." Neither person backed down. Nebula closed her eyes and drew in a breath. "Tempus est, Leviathan." Gentiana sucked in air as an invisible force hit her and water particles were torn from the air to encircle her form. A blue light shot out from the middle of the spiral and the serpent burst from the Astral's body once more. It was Nebula who caught her staggering body the second time, and she laid a hand on Gentiana's forehead. Her eyes flickered open as light emitted from the Oracle and she retained control over her mortal form, able to stand on her own with the Archean looming over her. She caught the slightest sneer on the Chancellor's face when the Astral was conscious again.

"Video vos didicistis dolum vel in regeneratione." A faint gasp echoed from Luna's mouth when she heard Ardyn speak the tongue of the Archeans. She'd had some suspicions for a while that the Chancellor let on more than the public eye was granted access to, but to hear the words leave his lips still sent chills through her. And for a moment, she thought she saw his sclera take on the same murky black and purple hue as Nebula's had when she absorbed the daemon from Gentiana. "I'll be sure to let General Interitio know you're still floating about." He tapped a finger to his chin. "But perhaps I should save that for his reunion with the sorceress-" He wasn't the least bit surprised to find a flame flying from her palm, aimed at his face.

"You'd be wise to keep that monster away from my daughter, lest the world learn what you really are."

A laugh bellowed from the Chancellor, continuing even when the Hydrean tried to whip at him with her whiskers. "You were never good with fulfilling your threats, Nebula. It's the very reason she became who she is now." The once calm elder Oracle bared her teeth at Ardy, who brushed off the water Leviathan had splashed him with when her whiskers missed. "But you look serious this time. Let's see how things have changed after all these years." With another bow Ardyn bid the Lucians
adieu and turned on heel, heading to a waiting airship to watch the show unfold.

"Hey!" Nyx threw one of his knives toward the cliffside and vanished in a spurt of flaming blue. The blade stuck into the top edge of the rock, allowing him to climb up when he reappeared, but the Glaive was nearly knocked off when a fiery hand swiped at him. He fell to a knee and pulled up a barrier right before the attack could land. Nyx hadn't been one to believe in the Archeans growing up, but he questioned his decisions when he met the blinding glare of the Infernian who towered over him. Flames licked at the ground around his skidding feet and he sucked his teeth as he pushed against the force threatening to crush him.

"Hominum..." it started. "Omnia eadem. Et ipsi pleni."

While she guarded Luna with Gentiana and Leviathan's assistance, Nebula's gaze landed on the cliff and spotted the horned Archean applying more pressure to the Glaive's shield. "He won't be able to hold it forever..." Her eyes darted to the Archean. "Protect Lunafreya! I'll be back shortly!" She didn't wait for a response from the Hydrean as she ran toward the large line of Magitek troopers, armed with only her magic.

Ignis and Gladiolus had gone off to the dining car to get some food. Noctis wasn't all too hungry; he'd lost most of his appetite since seeing Clarus pass on. Prompto sat beside him, playing with his phone, and Cor was still as a statue with his eyes closed. It wasn't much longer to their destination, he knew, and then onto the third train. The best thing they could do was rest while they had the time.

"Noct!" They were startled by Gladiolus' voice booming through the train car, waking sleeping children and disturbing private conversations. "The radio! Come quick!" He gave no time for the Prince to question what he was babbling about when he vanished into the dining car again. Cor went ahead of him in a hurry, knowing the shield's tension meant something was really wrong. Prompto and Noctis followed close behind and found their friends mixed into a growing crowd of listeners as the radio station was changed.

"People of Lucis," the voice began, "lend me your ears." They were quick to recognize it as the voice of the Nifeli Chancellor. "In this time of war and turmoil, tough decisions have to be made. The stalemate has gone on for far too long and has gotten both sides nowhere. It is with a heavy heart that I announce your dear Oracle, Lady Lunafreya Nox Fleuret of Tenebrae, is now in the custody of the Imperial Forces." Gasps sounded all through the room, and for the first time since his accident, Noctis met the invisible glance which Ignis gave him. "Fret not, for I have a proposal to offer all of Eos. If it is the life and well-being of Lady Fleuret which you seek, then deliver the sorceress to the Imperial Army. Lunafreya Nox Fleuret for Atra Ardere Interitio. Your trade would take a dangerous criminal off the streets. A generous offer, no?"

Chapter End Notes

Some more notes on my canon AU versus the game's canon:

-There are more gods than the six depicted in the game. Etro is a major goddess, especially in Lucis. The countries may worship the same or differing gods. They include Etro, Odin, Phoenix, and other summons commonly found in other Final Fantasy titles.

-The gods usually aren't summonable. Only Oracles and royalty are able to call upon them, though the Oracles have more influence than royalty, as they were once agents of
the gods who carried out work in their name. An Oracle can dedicate their life to a single god or multiples, should they choose so.

-The canon AU universe has multiple crystals owned by different countries, though the Lucian crystal is thought to be the last in existence.

-The concepts of heaven and hell are referred to as Paradise and Chaos.

-Gentiana is connected to the Archean Leviathan, while Nebula (not Atra) is connected to Shiva.
"A generous offer, no?"

The Chancellor's voice cut from the radio, swiftly replaced by the reporter who broke the story. "As you've just heard, Niflheim Chancellor Ardyn Izunia has confirmed that Lady Lunafreya Fleuret, thought to have died alongside King Regis and Prince Noctis in the invasion of Insomnia, has been captured. From what we can analyze from the announcement, we can assume that she's alive and unharmed, but that is all speculation until there is video proof. There's no response yet from the Republic of Solheim's King and Queen, who've remained quiet since the sudden attack on Accordo that left one of their ambassadors injured. The nation of Tenebrae's Parliament have also been silent on the matter, and we've received word that Major Ravus Nox Fleuret is set to give a report on the matter before the day is done." A tone played following his report, and after a minute, another reporter took over the newscast.

"Following the murders of the First Family of Accordo, the nation's government gathered all that survived to begin the process of rebuilding. Senators and the remaining military officials have secluded themselves in an unknown location. It's currently unknown when the government will make any formal announcement regarding their plans to rebuild Altissia, or discuss any future they may have in trade with Niflheim..." Luche tuned out the report and laid his focus on the map he and Drautos were using to plan their next course of action. It was a miracle none of the remaining members of their group suffered serious injury or died after they were separated from the Prince and the Oracle. The Empire stayed on their tail for the majority of their escape, and had more time to chase the King of Lucis when the Kingsglaive discovered their train was nowhere in sight. A passerby explained that there was a derailing around an hour before their arrival. A sigh from Axis expressed the worries of the entire group, until the Commander brought everyone's focus back to finding their way to Solheim. Libertus was the first one to spot a motel complex after the Empire lost track of them and took Sonitus and Tredd with him to investigate. It was abandoned, to their relief, and to their luck the electricity still worked.

Once settled, they got Regis inside and tended to any wounds he had. Drautos unfurled the partially torn map from his pocket and spread it across the large table in the center of the common area. "Our original route is out of the question since the train's a no-go," he began, "so we won't be able to get through the mountains. We're left with only two options. A: we can try and cut straight through Lucis due east." He swiped his finger straight across the map, stopping just past the Hammerhead outpost. "We're guaranteed to run into more Imperial factions on the way, but if we cut past the bridge to the cliffs, there's a way to Solheim through Galahd." Tension immediately filled the room. Libertus bit his tongue, holding in every bit of resentment he had regarding the territory. He and a lot of the other Glaives hailed from there, and were given more than their fair share of problems when they joined the King's guard and were paired with native Lucians for missions. Many were upset when they learned outsiders to the country were in direct service to the King and voice their disdain for the foreigners openly, and there were more than a single instance where the Galhadi were exposed to the physical side of those angered. Even as war loomed in the wake of the failed treaty signing, many Lucians wouldn't accept Galahd's assistance. Libertus hadn't been home in a long time. He wondered if his family and friends there were safe - if they were even still alive. He'd have to go to Crowe's relatives and tell them she died, that her body had been left behind in the once bustling floating city of Altissia, and that there was little hope of recovering her. He couldn't do that. "Option B would take up north again, on a road through the mountains far from the path the train takes. We'd drive to Virent and utilize its archipelago to reach Solheim. The journey will take longer, but the threat of the Imperial Forces following us up there is reduced greatly."
"Moving through Virent will take way too long!" Tredd voiced, and turned to Regis. "That's at least a two-week journey, Your Majesty, and time is of the essence. Who knows how far ahead Prince Noctis and his caravan are by now? We need to get you to Gurgues by the time they make it."

"I assume you'll be doing all the fighting for us, then," Luche cut in, "when we go straight through the battlefield. We should just paint the target on your face now."

Tredd spread his arms wide in a welcoming gesture. "Fine by me. I'll be waiting for your little chicken ass right by the gates."

Before Luche could bolt out of his chair and so much as grunt, the Commander silenced his subordinates with a clearing of the throat. "Both options will leave us vulnerable: the straight cut to the Nifs, and the trek through Virent to the elements, as there will be little lodgings for us to stay in. The ultimate decision does rest with His Majesty, but if I may voice my stance on the matter, I believe we're better off cutting right through Lucis." Luche's head whipped from Tredd to Drautos.

"Sir, you can't be serious."

"You know we have little time at hand, Luche. We all heard the Chancellor's announcement on the radio. The sooner everyone is in Solheim's borders, the sooner a rescue plan can be worked out."

Sonitus joined the group, pushing himself off the wall he laid on, and rested his hands on the back of Libertus' chair. "Forgive me, Commander, but that's suicide. We'd be walking right into Niflheim's hands. The protection of the King is our top priority, and if that means using a route that'll take longer, then I'll brace whatever the elements have in store."

"I'm with Sonitus," Libertus agreed, wanting to avoid Galahd at all costs. "They'll be expecting us to rush. We'll find a way to survive the mountains." Sonitus moved behind his chair, resting a hand on the back of it, and Luche quickly joined them on one side of the table. Axis shrugged his shoulders and stood beside Commander Drautos with crossed arms, letting his movement speak for his decision. Tredd brushed a hand through his hair and sauntered over to his commanding officer. "Looks like we're split even on this one. The final say is yours, Your Majesty."

Regis straightened his back and released a long sigh, carrying within it a twinge of exasperation. "I don't know how much longer I can keep up the fight," he began. "I'm not the youthful King I was when I ascended to the throne after my father passed on. Tensions have grown stronger, and as it stand right now, Niflheim will do anything in their power to end the royal blood of Lucis. The arrival of myself, my son and the Oracle in Solheim is imperative, as Commander Drautos has stated." His hands tightened over the top of the cane. "I understand your concern for my safety, officer Lazarus, but there simply isn't time for an extensive strategy. It's come down to a race against the clock."

"We leave whenever you're ready to depart, Commander."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Drautos bowed to him and drifted back to the map, gesturing for Luche and the other Glaives to come closer. The best way for us to go involves multiple stops to hunter outposts, including Hammerhead and the Coernix Station near the Disc of Cauthess." Pulling a pen from a pocket in his uniform, he circled each outpost and connected them with lines. "It totals six outposts before we go around Insomnia and cut through Galahd. It's likely the territory hasn't suffered significant damage since Niflheim was so adamant on getting it back." In his peripheral vision, the Commander noticed Libertus' eyebrows scrunched and his jaw clenched. He paid no additional attention to the Glaive's tension and added another line, long and curved, through the Lucian territory. "We'll take tonight to rest and depart before dawn breaks. While the cover of night is the best way to travel."
"There are actual daemons lurking about," Sonitus finished the thought. "Best to avoid them at all costs."

Libertus huffed. "Really wish we had Crowe now. She would've voted for the alternate route."

"And you really think Nyx would've passed up the opportunity to show off again?" Tredd inquired. "The guy's a firecracker. Can't help himself on the battlefield."

Sonitus rolled his eyes. "And Pelna would've had some sense to him. 'Better safe than sorry.' His voice is ringing even through death."

"Which makes the vote in our favor," Luche concluded.

"You forget His Grace counts for more than one vote," Drautos voiced, "so we'd still have reached the same decision." Axis laughed to himself while Luche and Sonitus sucked their teeth, one of them waving a hand at the comment. Regis couldn't help flashing a small grin at the discourse among his Glaives. Even in difficult times, he knew a little relaxation didn't hurt. Deep down, though, he knew the situation was much worse than his guard knew. Only he was aware of the true extent of the danger the world was falling into with the Infernian as Niflheim's ally.

As they detailed their route to the first safe haven, the Kingsglaive were none the wiser to a figure draped in black standing outside the window, arms crossed and gold eyes focused on the ground.

Ignis had a job to do. The second Ardyn's voice sounded over the airwaves, he sensed the muscles in Noctis' shoulders contract. Gladiolus was on the other side of the Prince and Prompto somewhere behind him; it wasn't too hard to miss the grunts of the shield and nervous foot tapping of the gunner. Prompto began pacing at some point, his resolve waning, and it quickly dawned on the tactician that he had to be the one to keep everyone's cool as he had many times in the past. "We have to remain calm," he said to them, his hand clawing at the air to reach for a seat. Noctis took his hand and led him to the nearest bench, biting down on his tongue to hold in his rage.

"Or else we won't be able to get Luna back," Noctis filled in. "I know that already."

Cor rejoined the younger men, cup of coffee in hand. "Then you should give it a try." Before the Prince could protest, the Marshal held up a hand, taking Noctis' chin between his fingers, and tilted his head up. "Your eyes are still blue. That's a good sign. Means nobody's died. We still have time to work out a strategy." He released Noctis and sat down beside the tactician.

"But we have no idea of anyone else's whereabouts," Prompto added, taking a photo of a herd of passing anaks. "And who knows what route Luna ended up taking before she was kidnapped-"

"I have...an idea on that." Prompto's words caught in his throat, his and the others' eyes falling onto the leader of their group. "When the blizzard hit us earlier, we all knew it was no ordinary storm. I couldn't help noticing the remains of airships and MTs after it calmed. Shiva protected us from Niflheim, but someone had to have known our location and that they were coming for us."

Gladiolus leaned on the side of the bench beside Noctis. "You think there's an Astral floating about somewhere."

"I'm certain."

Ignis shifted in his seat, folding his hands together atop the table directly in front of him. "I'm aware of Lady Surgen's true being," he informed the Marshal, to which Prompto eyed his companions for an answer. "While I'm not surprised that it's an Astral who walks beside the Oracle, I doubt the
blizzard was her handiwork. If I'm correct, she's the Astral for Leviathan, hence why the Hydrean is so tolerant of us."

The gunner shot out of his seat. "Wait, you're saying that Gentiana... Leviathan-"

Noctis yanked Prompto down by his arm and covered his mouth. "Keep it down. This isn't the kind of information we want the world to know. Just look what the Empire's trying to do with the crystal; if they had a god on their side, we'd be royally fucked."

"That's the other part of the problem. "Arms halfway crossed, Noctis raised his head and gawked at Cor, whose gaze remained on the table. He didn't need to add on to his single sentence for Ignis and Noctis to understand exactly what he meant, Gladiolus catching on a few seconds later.

"Which one?"

"Ifrit." Noctis slammed a hand on the table, quickly gaining the attention of another family dining on the other side of the car. They turned away from the men's conversation after a moment, and Cor continued with his explanation. "He's been defiant for ages. We were fortunate to get Leviathan's compliance, but Ifrit is a different story. The Infernian despises humanity. He wouldn't hesitate to wipe everyone off the earth if he were given the opportunity."

"And therein lies the question of why he'd fight alongside the Empire," Ignis inquired as he drummed his fingers on the table top. "But the easier thing to figure out is why you know all this, Marshal. You know many things as head of the royal family guards, but knowledge of this nature is a secret to all except the royals and Oracle."

A heavy sigh escaped Cor. "There are many things I know that any other head of a royal guard shouldn't," he started. "I understand the crystal's workings well, better than even King Regis might at times. There are matters I know of which King Morus didn't have a clue on as he battled against Niflheim, long before the wall went up around Insomnia. Not even King Miles knew what would come about before the treaty he attempted to enforce with Emperor Tempus fell apart."

"And the blond knew he was talking about the past rulers of Lucis. "The further back you go, the less the former Kings of Lucis knew about the Archeans, even with the help of the Oracles. Only the chosen messengers of Eos, the Astrals, could fully communicate these matters with the Oracles and royalty of the world. So it'd make sense for one to know exactly where we were and ask the Archeans for help in defense from the Empire." He rested his head backwards, laying on the cushioning of the bench, eyes closed. "The Astrals before my time sent a warning to those in present times of Ifrit's mindset. He was always the only one without an Astral, believing it to be the other gods trying to control him.

"I remember seeing him for the first time. I was in my teens, Gentiana nearly two. King Miles was trying to keep the peace treaty between Lucis and Niflheim active. It was around the time Galahad had declared itself an independent nation, despite their financial and militaristic woes. Tenebrae was fighting for their own independence, claiming Niflheim only wanted them for the Oracle. They and Solheim were sure it was thank to the Empire that the abundance of Oracles in the world had dwindled to a few family bloodlines, and another was close to its end. Many suspected Ifrit had been sent to eliminate them, though it's more plausible that he was awaiting orders from Emperor Tempus to strike." Cor found himself reliving the memories of his younger days, almost forgetting about the awestruck faces of the young royals listening to him ramble. "Vivamus was the queen of Tenebrae at the time, and if Miles weren't already wed to Mella, I swear he'd've married her on the spot. Lunafreya looks so much like her. Her voice would soothe away all the headaches I'd get, and she helped me realize they weren't regular pains. She was there for Gentiana, too, and all the other Astrals, and all of us were there for her funeral when Sylva was no more than a toddler."
memory of the child, blonde and gripping her mother's hand tight, was as clear as the image of Noctis and Regis at Queen Aulea's funeral, and just as disheartening. "I was an adult when she passed on, and after her death, I visited the Disc of Cauthess for the first time. I'd been hesitant to make the trip and delayed it many times, but I couldn't put it off with Vivamus gone. That was the first time I laid eyes on Titan. He was exactly the same as he is now: on one knee, keeping the Astral Shard suspended above the ground, focusing all his strength on preventing it from falling. The headaches stopped after that, and then I pledged my service to King Morus."

Prompto, mouth agape, stared at Cor. "B-but then that'd make you..." He began counting on his fingers and stopped within a second, knowing he wouldn't get anywhere near the number he had in mind. "Holy shit, Cor!"

"Astrals are the closest humans can get to immortality. But as you all saw in Altissia, we're not bulletproof. We're just as susceptible to injury and death as a normal human...as you saw all those months ago, Noctis." The Prince swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. He'd been right about Cor dying. But to see the Marshal sitting before him, in the flesh and speaking, made him doubt whether he was talking to the real Cor Leonis or just a ghost. "Ifrit was there when Lunafreya was kidnapped. I'm certain of it. As for the blizzard, someone knew it was coming and asked for Shiva's help."

"And it wasn't Gentiana," Ignis concluded. "Which means it was either her Astral, or Lady Lunafreya."

Cor shook his head. "Shiva's Astral died twenty years ago, and she hasn't found another yet, as far as I know. And though I don't doubt Luna's skills, she hasn't been in tune with her abilities for long enough to directly call upon an Archean for assistance."

"Are you hinting there may be another Oracle bloodline?" the shield asked, finding himself more interested in the conversation than he thought. He'd read up on Lucian and Nifeli history many times since his youth, and never once was there a mention of Niflheim utilizing an Archean to turn the tides in the seemingly endless war.

"The possibility is near zero, but it's still there. I wouldn't be surprised if Luna found this Oracle and got her help."

"And do you think that 'help' might still be out there, Cor?" The Prince crossed his arms. Gladiolus leaned forward and glanced into Noctis' eyes the same way Cor had earlier. "I'm still not seein' any red, so I'd say they're fine for now."

"And then there's the matter of communication." Ignis tapped a finger to his lips, feeling over the scar on the right side. "Marshal, is it possible for you to speak directly to Gentiana or the other Archeans?"

Cor nodded. "I've been doing what I can since we boarded the train, and I do have some news that's on our side. The crystal is still in Insomnia." Closing his eyes again, Cor beckoned for the other Astrals and Archeans to confide in him. After a minute, the Marshal met their gazes again, his eyebrows scrunched tight. "Luna was kidnapped north of here, near the edge of the continent close to the Aeris Ocean. She and Gentiana have been separated, and are being brought to Niflheim." He waited for another line of communication to open up. "Shiva...she says she's sorry she couldn't do more to help. Her guide became distracted trying to save another and was beaten... Nyx is still alive, but badly hurt... They're going to try and meet with us near Insomnia."

"And Dad? What about him?" Cor shook his head, bringing Noctis to slam his fist down again. His
eyes took on a violet hue, and he didn't need to look at Prompto to know the gunner would attempt to calm him with words. "Don't bother trying anything, Prom. I'm not in the mood."

"Rage will get us nowhere," Ignis told the Prince, raising his voice a few decibels to get the younger man's attention. Turning to Ignis, Noctis knew the strategist was staring directly at him through closed lids and the bandages restraining his sight. Silence loomed over the men. Lifting his hands, Ignis rested them on the back of his head and jerked at the bandages until they tore down the middle. He was slow to remove it from his skin, fearing the gauze would stick to his wounds, and piled the bandaging on the table. Thicker gauze sat over his eyes and he removed the left patch first, separating the medical tape from his skin one piece at a time, then the right. The tactician opened his right eye, feeling scab crusted over the lid separation for his left, and looked in the direction of his comrades. His left eye had been completely encrusted under the dark scarring that marred the entire area of the socket and eyebrow, angled upward toward the middle of his forehead and ending on his cheekbone. The scarring on the right was much less: a few long lines that went across his eyebrow and eyelid, the longest ending at the bottom of the socket. Once bearing a fern hue, the iris was now a foggy, milked version of the color, and the pupil matched. The eye flicked left and right, trying with all its might to identify the objects within the vicinity, but all it could see was a blank space cast in shadows. "...If we're to save Lady Lunafreya and reunite with His Majesty, then we must all stick together. No bouts of anger, no doubt in ourselves or each other." He laid his hand on top of Noctis, pushing his hair away from his eyes with the other. "We're all we have as it stands."

Even with the extreme scarring the Prince was sure Ignis knew the extent of, Noctis wondered how he was able to hold himself together without cracking. Prompto was barely able to keep himself from shrieking when Ignis undid the bandages, and only let out a gasp when Gladiolus offered his hand to squeeze tight in response to the sight. It was painful for even Cor to witness. The men nodded in mutual agreement to his statement, silently promising to keep their heads about them and not let their emotions get the better of them. As the quiet continued following his words, Ignis grunted. "I can't see you nodding, if that's what you're all doing."

"Sorry." Prompto sniffled and rubbed at his nose. "Gotta say, Iggy, you look kinda badass with those scars." He leaned in and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Not like someone else I know..."

Gladiolus tapped the back of Prompto's neck, his calloused fingertips catching the edge of his own scar, and the blond yelped from the cold contact. "Well how 'bout we add one to your collection, Blondie? Might put some hair on that chicken chest of yours."

Prompto gasped in a dramatic fashion. "I do not have a chicken chest!"

"Just like you don't have a chocobo's butt for hair," Noctis casually added, catching his friend's attention. While the younger men bickered among themselves, Cor drifted into his own thoughts again, remembering the many people he'd encountered in his life since learning of what he was. The memory of Vivamus' funeral played in his mind again, as clear as the day it took place. Gentiana stood right next to him, cradling Ramuh's Astral against her thigh as he cried. They didn't say much to each other before or after the service, having recently ended a romantic relationship with each other. He hadn't been involved with many romantic partners after her, knowing he'd have to watch them die while he lived on, and serving the royal family of Lucis helped distract him from the hole of loneliness which formed in his heart. Meeting Atra had triggered something in him difficult to ignore, the same something he'd felt in Gentiana in the short time they were together. Yet the more he told himself that they could never be together, that staying as far away from the sorceress as possible was the best thing for him, the greed for having someone care for him festered like an open wound. It didn't help that it centered itself under the scar Lamia gave him. Resting his head against the window, Cor closed his eyes and set his focus on getting more information from the Archeans.
Ardyn watched the video feed of Gentiana from his seat in the airship's cockpit. Her cell was enormous - usually reserved for units like the Imperial Max-Angelus 0 - but he knew the Hydrean within would fall into a fit of rage once she was captured. Chained like a wild animal, the Astral had cuffs around her wrists and ankles, and a single ring linked around her neck. Leviathan had taken over her mind, causing the woman to thrash about and spew water jets from her hands and mouth. There was no sound on the tape, but the Chancellor was positive if he could hear her, she'd be cursing his name in the ancient tongue. It would've been music to his ears to hear one of the Archeans in such distress, but what struck him more was the video feed of Luna, who sat still on the bench in her tiny cell, hands folded atop her lap and head tilted down. "Persistent child," he mumbled to himself. The soldiers flying the airship paid no mind to the Chancellor when he got up from his chair and strode down the main hall. He took the lift to the top level and stepped out, turning left and ignoring the human soldiers and drones that stopped in their tracks to salute him. His steps halted in front of a cell door, flanked by guards on either side of it, and one of them pressed their thumb to the keypad to open it.

Luna, hearing the door slide open, watched Chancellor Izunia stride in. The man tipped his hat when he bowed to her and offered her a sincere smile. "To what do I owe this visit?" she asked, her tone distant and her eyes glued to the tiled floor.

"Can't a host make sure his guest is comfortable?" he retorted as he sank to a knee in front of her. Luna turned away from him and faced the wall. Ardyn smirked at her sudden headstrong nature. "\textit{Quia pertinax non novi te cum esses iunior Caligo solvi visitationis.}\" The woman's head whipped back in her direction and she jumped off the bench.

"How is it you know the Archeans' tongue?" she demanded. When Ardyn stayed quiet, her hands balled into fists and she took a daring step closer to him. "\textit{Noli ludere mecum stultus, Cancellarius. Nosti quam ego scit nisi Oraculo lingua deos.}\" Luna's comment had Ardyn laughing, swinging an arm down to slap his knee. "My, my. The Oracle has a feisty side to her, I see." He clapped his hands together. "I like this better. It's much more entertaining to handle a rose bush than a delicate bud." Turning his back to Luna, Ardyn started to pace the short length of floor before her, wagging a finger in the air and tilting his head. "Let me cut to chase, Luna. You have something that I want, and you can do one of two things; though I hope we can be civil about this, because I'd hate to dirty my hands with the matter." Ardyn stopped mid-step and extended his hand to Luna, who tread backwards until her legs hit the edge of the bench. "Come now, Lunafreya. Do you really want your precious Astral to remain chained up forever?"

Her lips pressed into a hard line. The staring match lasted too long for what was comfortable for Luna, until Ardyn broke the contact and sucked his teeth. "Oh well. We shall see how you're feeling in a few hours." Halfway turned, Ardyn looked over his shoulder. "But do keep this in mind, young Oracle: you may delay the inevitable, but you've already seen your last dawn. And your precious husband will follow suit in due time." He faced the doorway and waved a hand to her. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

His guard was down. This was her only opportunity. Without a moment's hesitation, Luna pulled the knife Nyx had given her from the outer pocket on her thigh and thrust the blade into the Chancellor's back, pushing him forward some steps and drawing a pained gasp from his lungs. The soldiers flanking the doorway skipped backwards, watching Ardyn drop to the floor as Luna jumped over his fallen body, her shoulder knocking over the soldier to her left. The one left standing scrambled to get his gun and aim at the escaped prisoner, but a hand motioned for him to stop before he could catch the fleeing Princess in his cross hair.

Luna didn't know where she was going. She wanted to find Gentiana; that much she was sure of. The inside of the Nifeli airship was a maze, and every turn seemed to bring her to another dead end.
Another turn brought her down a long hallway lined with Magitek drones, all which honed in to her presence. They sauntered toward the Princess as she summoned her trident and swung it wildly to keep them away from her. Luna sensed one coming at her from around the corner and created a barrier behind her. The MT clawed at the invisible wall as she knocked another into a heating element, the wires of its arm frying while it reached for the running woman with the other. She ducked out of the way of the next robot and swiped its head off, the eyes and mouth moving even with one of the trident's blades through its face. Luna reached the end of the hallway just as the barrier cracked and fell apart, and the MT behind it rushed after her. She held her trident sideways and threw it forward like a javelin, impaling the body of the robot. When she walked back to it, the drone's limbs were flailing like an overturned turtle. Luna took hold of the trident and twisted it to destroy the operation unit inside. Panting, the Princess spun on heel to continued her search for Gentiana, only to feel an iron grip wrap itself around her throat and lift her off the floor.

"It seems I had too much confidence in you, Luna." Ardyn scratched the back of his head and let out an exasperated huff. "Here I thought we could resolve the matter in a dignified fashion, and you stab me in the back. Quite literally." He contorted his free arm and reached for the knife still embedded in his back, grunting when he missed it the first time. He snatched the handle and ripped it out, hissing between his teeth, then observed the unusually curved blade. "Hmm. Nice design." Luna scraped at his hand with her fingernails, doing what she could to make him let go, and swayed one of her hands behind her to summon the trident again. "Ah, ah, ah. Let's not do this again." Ardyn seized her wrist before releasing her neck and slammed Luna into the wall, her arm pinned above her head. "I tried to be nice about this, my lady, but you've become a thorn in my side." Her eyes were locked on his face, watching black blotches form in the veins around his mouth and eyes and spread across his skin. The sclera in his eyes turned the same hue, mirroring the Starscourge Nebula had absorbed from her guardian. "I think your defiance was more than enough for one night, hmm?"

Luna's breathing picked up again as he pointed the knife at her neck. "What are you?"

Ardyn laid the tip of the blood-covered blade on the bottom of her jaw and slowly pulled it down, leaving a red line that followed its trail. He stopped at the valley between her breasts and changed his grip on the hilt, holding it backwards against her. Luna's eyes shut tight and he leaned near her ear. "Calling myself your worst nightmare would be so cliche, but I can't think of a better term, so..." The Chancellor retracted the blade and stabbed it into the wall next to her head. "So where were we before you so rudely interrupted me? Ah, that's right." Ardyn's hand lunged forward and took Luna by her face, and in less than a second she was flung into the remains of the Magitek drone she'd sent into the wall's heating element. Her head crashed into an armor plate on its side and she fell to the floor, blood dripping down the side of her mouth and smearing when she slid down. Dazed, she could do nothing but watch as the Chancellor knelt next to her and say something she could barely recall, before her world went black with a hard smack.
The City of Nightmares

Chapter Summary

Insomnia isn't all glitter and gold. But in the midst of darkness, there's a small glimmer of hope when control comes forth.

Atra had always wanted to visit the infamous walled city, and while unfortunate circumstances kept her from doing so, she never let go of that desire. She never expected to actually walk right in, even with the checkpoints taken over by the Imperial Forces. With Lamia threatening to fully take over the doctor didn't fight the urges and let murderous intentions take over her mind, knowing she'd come to once the danger was swept away. She was remembering more bits of each incident that took place, finding herself able to control more of the magic within her body, and when she was face-to-face with the line of Magitek soldiers and mobile units at the bridge checkpoint, Atra could recall almost the entire fight. There were thirty troops stationed at the gates and two of the large robotic quadruped units, and by the end of the fight only a few of the soldiers were left half-operational on the ground, flailing about like unattended infants. Atra had no sword of her own to defend herself so she stole one from a larger soldier, grunting when its weight struggled against her grip. "Son of a..." In the end she couldn't walk straight without the weapon faltering her step, so she scrapped it and settled on a pair of daggers and another crossbow, scraping the malfunctioned drone clean of all its ammo. She moved cautiously, knowing the husks had a reputation for waking up at the last second to self-destruct, and kicked its head out of her way for good measure. Atra gathered more arrows from the other fallen drones until the quiver strapped to her back was full, and as she stepped over another metallic body, her eye caught on to the glimmer of another weapon in its grasp. It'd been ages since she touched a gun, and longer since she shot one. The firearm was a small-scale semiautomatic handgun and fit in her hand rather well when she picked it up to study it. She wielded one well back in her days in Niflheim's academy for elite and privileged youth and neared the top of her class, despite the reluctance of the instructors to teach her when they heard the rumors of her being a 'mutant'. Some of her classmates threatened to try the pistols out on her more than once, but her father was quick to silence the lot, until the night she finally left. "What am I doing?" she chuckled to herself in a sardonic fashion. She despised guns; then again, a crossbow wasn't much different, she told herself. Atra shook her head with a huff and tucked the gun's barrel into an open slot on the holster and stepped onto the bridge.

The walk across the bridge was ominous, to say the least. Cars were forgotten like trash, some bearing a portion of the damage she knew the city had to show. There were more Magiteks patrolling the bridge, though they were far and few, some of them half-destroyed shells of their former selves. Their skeletons showed beneath the damaged armor that made up their bodies, and had it been dark, the scene would mirror the horror films she'd catch glimpses of. A breeze was the only thing slicing the silence in half, and even then the chill of death was heavy with its presence. The quiet spoke for the lives lost during the invasion, and when she reached the other side of the bridge, reticence was replaced with yells and firefight. The second checkpoint - if she could call the barely standing remains of the toll booths and gates that - did nothing to prevent her from stepping over the debris with carefully placed steps to avoid the jagged metal sticking out between destroyed pieces of road and what was left of the city entrance's stone archway. One of only two entrances into the Crown City, the towering structure was in shambles. She somehow found a way through the debris and snaked her way into the outskirts of the city, and was quickly met with a walking Magitek corpse reaching for her face. Atra shoved the crossbow into its chest plate and fired an arrow into it, sending
the robot flying into an abandoned tow truck. The hook hanging from the back bore through its head when it flopped backwards, immediately ceasing all movement from the robot. Atra drew in a heavy breath, not believing it was truly dead until she kicked at the truck’s tire to tempt it, and when it remained still she continued forward.

The sun quickly withdrew from the sky, leaving the vast battlefield shrouded in darkness. Atra skirted around the outside of the large empty areas, watching the citizens who stayed behind to fight tackle the army of drones the empire sent in to clear the city, and as it got darker, the daemons that crawled out of murky portals on the ground. Their appearances resembled many of the hunters she'd seen and befriended throughout her years in Duscae, and merely watching the combat from the sidelines brought the aches back to her head. She clutched the back of her neck, feeling the muscles and device embedded in her pulse in time with every surge of pain, and ducked behind a broken piece of building as she attempted to regain control over herself. Spots were in her field of vision on the left, and on the right, twinkles of light which had no source. The sounds of the battle behind her combined with the pain and blindness, crippling her in silent agony she struggled desperately to fight. In her moment of suffering she caught a glimpse of her reflection in a large piece of mirror broken off a nearby car. She stared at herself, ignoring the crack down the middle of the glass. Her right eye - the one she'd seen the sparkles of light pouring into - had a mydriated pupil that covered almost the entire iris, leaving very little gray visible. The left remained unchanged to the environment. She knew this is what Aurum had seen when he commented on her eyes and why it'd scared him. Her vision began to clear some as the fighting died down, and when she felt it was safe, Atra poke her head out from behind the debris. The humans fighting there moments before were gone, moved on to their next battle, she assumed. With the coast clear she stood up and continued deeper into the city.

She was awestruck at the amount of people still residing in the remains of Insomnia, especially by the few children she spotted in hiding with their families. Many of them were armed with firearms and bladed weapons, and upon closer inspection, some of the residents had torn uniforms on. Atra thought the entire Kingsglaive and Crownsguard had gone with the Caelum royals during the invasion, and she wondered for a split second why some of them would've stayed behind. "The crystal," she said to herself when the realization hit. It was still in the palace, and was the reason she came to Insomnia in the first place. She climbed on top of a car and got on her toes, turning in every direction in search of the largest building. It was easy to find, towering over all in the middle of the city, and was in the worst shape compared to the rest of the city. Climbing down from the car, Atra heard the yell of a man's voice. Her head whipped in the direction of an Imperial soldier who was calling for backup on an intercom system hidden in his helmet. She loaded an arrow into the crossbow and aimed at the soldier, chasing after him as he ran away, and fired. The arrow hit a daemon emerging from its puddle, three of its multiple eyes destroyed when pierced. The laser it had prepared to fire hit a portion of the nearest building, sending debris flying down on top of it. Atra ducked out of the way while reloading the crossbow again and she continued after the soldier, her military training from her youth becoming clear again when she was forced to search for the vanished trooper. A figure jumped in front of her and her finger flew to the trigger, but she stopped herself when she saw the fear-filled eyes of a teenage girl staring back at her.

"P-please spare me!" she screeched, holding both hands up in surrender. Tears welled in her eyes as Atra held the crossbow aimed at her forehead, the horror only calming when the doctor lowered her weapon. It was like watching herself back in the thicket, the only difference being the mercy she showed the person before her. "I l-lost my family!" the young girl explained, still keeping her hands in the air. "I don't know where they are! I'm scared!"

Atra wrapped an arm around the teen and pulled her in. "Stay close to me," she ordered the girl, not caring if she knew of her identity or not. The doctor handed her one of the knives she'd stolen and showed her how to strike if necessary. She pushed forward without another word, cursing under her breath for allowing herself to lose track of the soldier and be distracted. They hid behind a half-
standing utility pole and caught sight of a train station. Not knowing where it would lead, Atra deemed it safer than treading through Insomnia's streets with so many daemons appearing, and led the girl underground. They stayed back-to-back and encountered more daemons, the creatures recognized as lesser creatures than the ones appearing above ground. Atra plowed through the goblins arrow after arrow, and as she neared the end of the passageway, a scream caught her off guard. She whipped her head around and saw one last goblin dragging the girl away by her ankle and larger, bulkier versions of the daemon slamming their enlarged fists together. "Shit!" There wasn't enough time to reload and aim. Atra grit her teeth and willed wind to gather around her. She fired a gust from her palm, blowing the larger daemons backwards and into a broken electrical unit that instantly fried them. The goblin, still holding onto the girl's ankle, couldn't react in time to an electrical burst soaring from the opposite direction of its fellow daemons, and the creature exploded into black bits of goop and ash. Atra sank to a knee, gasping for breath from the lost energy. The teen girl hesitated to approach her, having a clue on the woman's identity, and sauntered her way after a few tense moments.

"...Thank you," she finally told Atra. "...I know you're that witch people have been talking about." She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Atra sighed. First was the identity reveal, then would come the death threats, and finally, an attempt on her life. She closed her eyes, waiting for the girl to get it over with. "I'm not scared of you, if that's what you're thinking." Her eyes shot open and she stared at the girl. In passing her gaze caught a glimpse of red marks around the girl's ankle, and she slowly reached her free hand to the limb.

"It cut you. Let me take a look." The teenager didn't flinch as Atra placed her weapon on the floor and examined the lacerations. "They're not that deep, but it could still be serious." She reached into her satchel to find a potion, only to be met with jagged glass, and immediately retracted her hand. "Dammit!" Atra unstrapped the bag and tossed it aside, assuming the elixirs had been destroyed from some sort of impact by falling debris. She grabbed the papers inside and stuffed them into her pockets, wiping the glass shards from her hands. She stared at the cuts on the girl's ankle and swallowed hard. "I'll need you to trust me for a second." Laying her palm over the gash, Atra closed her eyes again and willed her energy to gather in her hand. Healing didn't come as easily as spells she could use to attack people, and she squeezed her eyes tight, whispering, "Please," to herself where the girl couldn't hear her. The energy seeped into the wound and soothed the pain away as it stitched the skin together, and when Atra finally took a peek at the wound, only a faint scar lay in its wake. She wiped sweat from her forehead and rested her hands on the floor. After taking time to regain her strength, she stood up and helped the girl to her feet. "We should keep moving."

Leading the girl through the rest of the passageway, they emerged closer to the citadel when they came above ground again. Atra watched the teen run up the stairs and into the arms of several people they spotted a few feet away. The older man and woman thanked her for bringing their daughter back and quickly departed, not wanting to attract any daemons or Imperial soldiers. They ducked into a store down the block, and when Atra started walking again, she heard a gun cock behind her head. "Hands up," the male voice ordered her, and she obliged when she heard a footstep come closer behind her. The assailant removed the crossbow from her grasp and threw it to the ground along with the remaining arrows sitting in her quiver. When his hand began to pat her down it stopped on the back of her neck. A gasp escaped him as he turned her around and looked Atra in the face. "You're the-" His sentence was cut off when an electrical surge surfed across the asphalt and crawled up his legs, frying all his internal organs. An inhuman shriek followed as Atra jumped out of the way of the shock wave and she saw an Arachne crawl toward them. One of its claws grabbed the fallen soldier's body and pulled it inward toward its mouth. She spun on heel and ran into a nearby gated area before it could reach her, the only sounds coming from the daemon crunching on the soldier. She quickly found herself surrounded by more Imperial Magiteks and didn't hold back, summoning a wave of ice that froze all the machines where they stood. She shivered her way past
them all, paying them no further attention, and it wasn't until she stopped in her tracks that she realized she'd reached the royal palace.

The palace was huge, much bigger than even she imagined. But in its towering prowess a chilling sensation came about when she absorbed the extent of the destruction that befell it. A large hole had been blown into an area fifteen floors up, where she assumed either the throne room or some conference room sat. Windows were blasted out, electrical lines felled, and lines of Magitek drones could be seen marching inside. "It's definitely in there," she concluded, and located a hole near the garage to sneak in through. She stepped over the twisted metal gate and wove her way between wires and debris, her shirt getting caught near the hem and tearing. Atra grunted and found an elevator, then stepped inside and pressed a button to take her to the main level. She laid her hand on the gun still sitting in her holster and readied herself for an attack.

The first wave of soldiers was small, and she settled on using magic to immobilize them rather than the gun. A second blizzard spell froze them in place and allowed her to navigate through the halls without an issue. Light glistened off their frozen forms when moonlight poured in from outside. She followed the carpeted pathways through the castle, moving slow and checking each room that didn't have closed doors; if she felt the presence of any Imperial forces lingering close by, she'd release another blizzard to keep them from following.

Unknown to her, word of Atra's arrival in the palace had already reached General Glauca. A soldier caught video of the sorceress prowling almost aimlessly through the halls through the castle's surveillance feed and sent the news to the highest command. "Send word to Commander Highwind at once," he demanded from his subordinates, "and don't let her out of the palace."

"Sir?" An admiral got the attention of the general, saluting him as he approached the armored man. "Please pardon the intrusion, but shouldn't we be doing more to capture Lamia?" A sudden tightening of the general's fist caused a yelp to escape the young admiral. "Forgive me, sir. I'm only looking out for the safety of our men."

"You know nothing, Admiral Carter. This is exactly what we've been waiting for." He got up from his chair and walked over to the wall of surveillance videos, watching Atra's form move from one to the other as she advance through the castle halls. "We need only wait for the prey to find its way into the trap."

Atra fought drone after drone as she advanced further into the castle. She was lost - something she refused to admit as Lamia battled to control her body and mind. The dark spots and blinding bits returned to her vision, taking longer to vanish, and her body became more fatigued with every battle. She settled on using the dagger to continue her fights, and the further in she pushed, the greater the number of opponents grew. At one point she lost consciousness, and when she awoke, every single soldier in the room had melted. Flames whipped off the tattered remains of the rug before dying down. There were no flesh soldiers among the bodies, she realized, and was grateful for a moment for not reverting back to the murderous mindset of the sorceress. Hearing a voice approach from another hall Atra hid behind a curtain and stood on her toes, trying to conceal herself as much as possible.

"...been here for only a short while," a male voice began, "but you've seen what she's capable of, Captain. I don't know what General Glauca is thinking!"

"All the general wants right now is to be rid of Insomnia," another replied. "He's been sitting here for weeks wanting to slice something in half. Be glad you haven't become one of his next victims."

"That can't be!" Atra turned her head sideways as the footsteps stopped next to her. "There's no way for him to control the sorceress! How does he expect her to handle the barrier with no way to ensure
her cooperation?" She could feel one of the men backing closer to her position and shut her eyes tight.

Someone, presumably the lower-ranking officer, groaned, and she detected a shift in the man's weight through his boots clunking. "It's our only option at this point, Admiral Carter. You don't seem to grasp the number of mutants we've expended on this mission. None of them have the energy storage to accomplish something so big." Silence lingered when he finished his explanation, and Atra took the opportunity to get a glimpse of the people speaking through a hole in the curtain. Two men, with varying shades of blond hair, were gripped in the middle of the conversation, the elder of the two pressing his fingers to his temples. "Why do you think we've sought to capture Lamia for so many years, Admiral?" Before the elder soldier could think of an answer, the younger started to pace in front of him. "Why do you think we've made her out to be such a danger to the public? Lamia is the most powerful mage in all of Niflheim's history. She's the only one now that could possibly destroy the barrier downstairs."

Atra wondered what could possibly have a barrier that the Empire wanted so badly, and it didn't take more than a second for her to figure out it was the crystal. One of them had to have knowledge of where it was hidden. She was tempted to take one of them hostage and force him to lead her to the crystal chamber, but once she was inside, the soldier would flee and inform his dear general of her presence - if he was still unaware that she was in the palace. There was another way, she concluded, something she'd read about in her magic codex called Libra. The spell allowed a person to tap into the thoughts of another for a limited time to gather information. It was a common practice for some forms of therapy - and used heavily in the Kingsglaive for interrogation, she presumed - and one of her patients told her it worked well for her husband's nightmares following his time in the Lucian royal army. She didn't want to know why the technique hadn't been used on her when she was imprisoned in Altissia. It was a long shot, a spell in a long list of others she'd never attempted before. It'd be a big risk: if she couldn't get the information out of the Imperial soldier before he woke up - or at all - her entire fight would be for nothing. She may as well hand herself over to the Empire now, she told herself for a moment, then shook the thought from her mind when the admiral saluted his commanding officer and departed into a nearby room.

With the captain alone and turning his attention to his left, Atra waited for him to take a few steps before uncovering herself. She followed him step for step, keeping hers quiet so he wouldn't hear her, and before he reached the end of the hall, she drew her gun and rammed the butt of it into the back of his neck. The captain hit the floor hard, his head and armor creating an echo when he fell. Stunned, the man crawled to his feet again and staggered when he stood tall. "You..." He was faster than her with drawing his gun and pointed it right at her head. "Drop it!" Finding herself stuck, Atra cursed under her breath and moved slow to not raise the soldier's aggression. The captain kicked it away and pushed her down onto her knees. "You don't know how long we've been waiting to get an audience with you, sorceress. General Glauca will be so pleased to know I found you." He contorted her body so she was forced to meet his face and she hissed from the strain in her muscles. "Your effort to bring me down was cute, though you're nowhere near your father's skill level. Perhaps you should ask him for a lesson when you see him again."

"And perhaps you shouldn't get ahead of yourself, Captain," Atra retorted, "otherwise all that self-recognition coming out of your ass will go to your head."

She was reduced to hisses with a tug to her hair. "It goes without saying you definitely have General Interitio's attitude. Consider yourself lucky I was ordered to not harm a hair on your head." The captain shoved her onto the floor and rolled her over with his foot, aiming his gun at her again. It was exactly like the scene back in the thicket, and her blood pumped faster as he knelt to her level. The spots were in her vision once more, blocking out portions of the man's face, and when one of his eyebrows arched upward, she guessed one of her eyes was mydriated again. "You're not as scary as
a lot of people make you out to be, you know." The gun's barrel moved dangerously close to her temple. "Then again, I haven't seen the real you yet. I wonder if you're more frightening than that Astral we captured." The blank, pain-twisted expression on Atra's face told him of her lack of knowledge. "Oh, come on. Don't tell me you didn't know the Oracle's pet was one of the immortals." Her consciousness was waning but he continued on anyway, giving her shoulder a violent shake when he noticed. "Maybe we'll lock you up the same way the Altesians had you and find out..."

Everything came to a quiet halt after his sentence ended. Atra had no idea when she'd raised her hands over her face for protection, or when the soldier decided to give one of them a violent twist; the only thing she could comprehend after his words ceased were the unwavering silence and how stiff he appeared, still kneeling above her. The doctor uncurled her fingers from around his forearm and shook herself free of his grip. Crawling to her knees, she studied the frozen man and tapped his shoulder to see if he'd respond. Nothing happened when she pushed his arm, and upon closer inspection, Atra noticed that not even his eyes or chest were moving. He as completely immobilized. She stared down at her hand and saw a purplish fog swimming between her fingers, its trail leading to the soldier's body. She realized the opportunity at hand and laid her palms over each ear, searching his mind for the information she sought. It was surprisingly simple to map out the path to the crystal with him frozen like that, and when she acquired all she needed, Atra didn't linger for a moment more. "...I really did it," she hummed to herself, and followed the first hallway she'd mapped in the captain's mind.

Each hall led to more soldiers frozen like statues. Magitek drones patrolling, human Imperial forces exchanging conversation, and out of the corner of her eye, a red and black airship approaching the palace. "Guess it only effected everyone inside the castle." Atra hurried down the hall and found the lift she'd seen in the captain's mind, pressing the button to summon it. The same eerie quiet from the bridge to Insomina enveloped the elevator, and as the doors closed, the activity in the halls came back to life. The drop stole her breath for a second and came to a stop just as fast at the seventh level below ground. The next set of hallways were much more narrow, and she had to keep herself from shrieking as she stepped over a dead body, its blood caked and hardened over the concrete floor. Her steps slowed the further in she got, and when the hall opened into a room, she came to a complete pause. Atra rested her hand on the wall and stared in awe at the crystal floating in its chamber, lips parted and stance tall. The majority of the rock had a violet hue similar to her Stop spell, and flecks of blue and orange sparkled in the protrusions that jutted out of the rock. She couldn't remember seeing something so beautiful. She stuck a hand out in hesitation, not wanting to move too fast, and pushed her arm gradually into the room. A strange warmth gloved over her hand and forearm. Crystal particles danced around her skin, tickling and scratching at it as they flew by. "Please help me," she pleaded, ignoring the warmth that turned into small shocks of energy. Sparks erupted from her fingertips and she retracted her arm, flexing her fingers and watching the burning skin pulse. "...You're hurting," she began. "Your King and Prince are gone, and the Oracle's been captured by the Empire. I can't imagine the pain you're going through." Atra laid her palm on the magic barrier and bit her lower lip, absorbing the shock from its power. "I...can't do much to soothe your pain, but I can listen until you've no more to say." Another pulse shocked through her arm. "Please! I'm begging you!" She heard movement approach from down the hall and her breath quickened.

"Et falsum locutus es de hominibus de Etro." Atra gawked at the crystal and searched the room for a source for the voice. It was heavy and two-toned, and venom dripped off its tongue. "Cur ego non timebit te. Illa oculos meos super te quia custodivimus chaos. Examinatio eius magnus adversus."

Something in her head translated every word the crystal spoke. "...How can I understand you?" she asked, holding her face in her hands. Footsteps from down the hallway broke her trance.
"...Tu venis sanguis thar Oraculum vetans. Ne forte in deorum magis quam vobis." The barrier dissipated for a split second and Atra fell into the crystal chamber, not noticing it reform just as the captain she'd frozen skid to a halt at the hallway opening.

"Lamia!" He threatened to bang against the magic barrier and only stopped himself when electrical currents danced off the invisible wall. "How'd you get in here?" The captain pulled his gun from his holster and aimed it at the barrier, and fired until the clip was empty. Atra ducked down and shielded herself with her hands, a barrier of her own forming over her palms. None of the bullets penetrated the barrier and only piled on the floor, enraging the captain further. He blew air from his nose and stormed off in a fit of anger, rushing up the stairs to report the incident to General Glauca.

Pryna was barking at him again, commanding him to follow. Waking up in the desert again had been a nightmare on its own, the Prince finding sand in his nostrils and dirt on his tongue when he coughed and forced his eyes open. Noctis struggled to his feet in the loose sand and pressed forward, following the dog into the shell of an old gondola. He couldn't get used to the dry air for long as he walked into a subway car packed with passengers clad in Imperial armor. None of them seemed fazed by his appearance on the train and stayed within their own business. He rushed between the passengers to the front of the car, brushing past someone's newspaper, and halted beside one of the doors. As the train pulled into the station he glanced out the window, catching sight of something yellow for a split second. The doors opened and he dashed out, finding the landing crowded with more Imperial troops who finally noticed his presence. Noctis shoved soldiers out of the way to find his way down the stairs. The Prince summoned his greatsword and swung it at the soldiers, sending some flying over the railing and others into each other. He spotted an elevator in the distance and threw his weapon in its direction. His body vanished in a veil of blue light and reappeared next to the opening elevator door. He crawled inside and pulled the dog in by its collar before the door closed. Bullets flew in and he ducked out of the way, meeting Pryna's eyes. His once gray eyes took on an orange hue, and before Noctis could understand what was happening, the floor beneath them falling away one plank at a time.

Outside of the Prince's vision, Prompto and Gladiolus were desperately trying to wake him from his trance. Ignis could only listen and offer advice on how to bring Noctis back to them, and Cor's eyebrows knitted themselves into a knot as he caught word of a disturbance in the order of the gods.
Divinity

Chapter Summary

Three gods. Three conversations. One conclusion.

Chapter Notes

A huge shout out to Final Fantasy Peasant and Perona77 for their fan theories. They've given me so many new ideas for this story, so don't be surprised if you see a few of them appearing in future chapters.

Also, updates may be a bit slow for a little while. I'm in the middle of convention prep for the end of May. If you happen to see something to do for Memorial Day weekend, why not come see me at BoroughCon? (I'm also sick and have more hours at work.)

Regis never once questioned the will of the gods. He and the former Kings of Lucis took their words to heart, even as war waged on and unrest held an iron grip over the lands, but halfway across the country he was beginning to have his doubts about their desires. He didn't voice his concerns to his Glaives or even Senator Virtus; doing so was pointless when he alone in the group was connected to the crystal. But not even the Oracle could always communicate with the god who lay inside the confines of the Lucian crystal; if she ever possessed the ability, Etro help her, Regis suspected she wouldn't have the same youthful appearance her mother was able to keep until her final days. Chaos was a bitter Archean, one only calmed by the sweet tune of Etro's voice when his ways got the best of him. However, as his caravan escorted him across the continent with eyes facing all angles, the will to trust in what the Archeans did out of the control of humans began to wear heavily on the monarch's mind. The orange he'd seen in his son's irises before their separation was one of many worrying factors. Chaos was like no other Archean. He thrived on the imbalance in the world, and it was because of this that the Lucians - seen by many as able to withstand the god's influence to keep it in check, and further testified by Bahamut and Etro - were gifted with the crystal. Chaos once caused destruction to run amok across all of Eos, and he took responsibility for the release of the Starscourge without hesitation when asked. It was even assumed by many that Chaos was the cause of the Great War of Old - the very war which ended with Ifrit defecting from the others and disappearing into a clouded, murky void he'd never be found in again. For his crimes against the sustained order Chaos was imprisoned inside the Lucian crystal and handed off to the Caelums. They saw no better punishment for the bringer of his namesake than to be watched over by the very humans he sought to wipe out. He was compressed and fossilized deep inside of the crystal, which was then chained in the lowest basement level inside the royal palace in the center of Insomnia, and Chaos' power was channeled through the Lucian royals to be used to protect their people.

Following the hand signals of Commander Drautos, Regis and the Kingsglaive advanced to the next safe haven just past the Disc of Cauthess. They found themselves fortunate to not have run into large groups of Magitek troops or live Imperials, but they didn't take it as a sign to relax. As they guided him farther through the terrain of Duscae, the King drew in a deep breath, and closed his eyes when
the squadron came to a halt. He searched his soul for the connection to the crystal, hoping it was still strong enough to communicate with the being inside. The kings before him would look down upon him for what he was about to do, Regis assumed, but his conscience told him to push on with the inquiry as if his life depended on it. His hand drifted to his blazer pocket and dug around until the index finger and thumb rubbed against a smooth surface. Wrapping his fingers around it, Regis took the crystal fragment out of the pocket and observed the glimmering orange light dance inside, fighting the violet hue trying to mask its presence. His connection to the large mineral sparked back to life, and before the voice on the other side could say anything, a silent huff left the King's lips.

"How many must die before you're satisfied?"

"...I have no idea what you speak of, dear Regis."

It was the first time he'd heard the Archean's voice since Noctis' childhood accident. "Do not take me for a fool," Regis retorted. "I am not like my forefathers. I can see through your words." The King's eyes darted left and right to his soldiers, thinking for a moment they could hear the conversation. His nerves calmed when he remembered the silence lingering around them, save the sound of boots and cane scraping the road and dirt beneath them. The lights of the next safe haven became visible in the distance, and as he exhaled in relief, Regis overheard the beast within the crystal grumble in its native tongue. "I haven't the time to repeat myself, so answer while you still have my complete focus."

A growl rumbled under Chaos' breath. "I have seen many deaths throughout my time, and thousands more since I was trapped in you precious stone. I have also bore witness to unspeakable crimes, some of which a mere mortal could never understand." The growl warped into a low chuckle, and for the first time in years, the hairs on the back of Regis' neck stood on end. "But now I'm only looking forward to one. And then, I can rest."

"He will take responsibility, you know," the monarch told him as he reached his hand out to one of his Glaives for support while stepping over some boulders.

"You sound sure that the boy will comply." Another chuckle followed the rattling tone, and before the monarch could question the reasoning behind his laughter, the Anarchian continued to speak.

"Have you considered how he will feel about his fate once he learns the truth? The Prince's youthful rebellion often gets the better of him, as it once did you. Your response was becoming of a prince turning king, but your son is not you, Regis." Regis' hand clenched around Luche's, alarming the Glaive for a short second, and let go when they set foot in the next safe haven's borders. Libertus and Tredd were the last of the group to cross over the haven's magic-created barrier, the latter looking over his shoulder to see the daemons that had been following them dissipate back into the ground. He sneered at the vanishing creatures, then returned his attention to his squad.

As his men took a moment to rest, Regis' hand drifted back to the crystal fragment in his pocket. More orange danced under the surface, scratching at its underside in an attempt to break free. "How many fragments have you clipped from the structure, Your Majesty?" Regis watched his soldiers dust themselves off and roll out their shoulders as the silent conversation carried on. "A crystal carved in the form of the Fantasian, placed next to the pillow to soothe the Prince's nightmares away. Two more crafted from the same fragment, split apart and forever entwined in their powers. You bestowed one half to that shadow of yours; where did the other go?"

The King's hand halted when it moved to let go of the crystal fragment. "You are in no position to speak of altering matters in one's favor."

"As are you, dear Regis. You said it yourself: your son will take responsibility...as must we all."
There comes a day where everyone must atone for their crimes; when will yours come, my liege?"

A hand on the King's shoulder broke his connection to the Anarchian. "We're ready to move, Your Majesty," Drautos said to him. Regis collected himself with a nod and took his position in between the commander and Luche. Daemons had already begun to respawn outside the safety of the barrier, but as fast as the murky mud circles bubbled to the surface of the ground, they were vanishing. The younger Glaives had no clue as to what was destroying the daemons before they could pull themselves out of the ground, but said nothing when the elders made no commentary toward them. Regis gave silent thanks to the subtle shadow he spotted moving about far ahead of them, knowing they were well protected.

The Oracle remained unconscious for much of the trip via airship, and in the middle of the day, it landed in the mountain base on the western fringe of the Lucian continent. Soldiers guided the airship to the hangar entrance and stood at attention when the large metal door fell open. Ardyn waltzed out, arms outstretched when he laid eyes on the approaching High Commander. "Ah, Ravus," he began, "just the man I wanted to see."

"And what brings you to my grounds, Chancellor?" the elder Fleuret questioned. "You didn't come to drop off my sister."

"Even if I did, I'm afraid she's in a particularly deep slumber at the moment. I didn't expect her to put up a physical altercation." Turning slowly in place as he spoke, he barely paid any mind to the High Commander's raising eyebrows, assuming the reaction came from him seeing the still-bleeding stab wound through his coat. "But don't you worry. I didn't do anything that would leave a permanent mark."

The raised eyebrows on Ravus' face lowered into a scowl. "You promised you wouldn't harm her."

"And you promised you wouldn't put on the Ring of the Lucii, but look where that promise got you-" His words ended just as Ravus drew his blade and aimed the edge at Ardyn's throat. Ardyn didn't flinch and only offered Ravus a grin. He gestured his hands in a surrendering manner and tapped the sword until the blond man lowered it. "Come now, Commander. I thought you'd worked on your restraint issues. Besides, you wouldn't want to threaten me when I've a gift to offer you." The Chancellor motioned his right hand to signal the soldiers from his ship. Immediately both human and Magitek troops poured out of the parked airship, all tugging on taut chains which they seemed to struggle against with every pull. A violent, reptilian scream erupted through the garrison. Gentiana's appearance was far from her regal, beautiful composure. Her entire body was soaked, hair sticking to her cheeks and parched lips, and doing whatever she could to wriggle out of her chains. She yanked against the cuffs around her limbs and neck, dragging one Magitek drone off its feet and using the chain against it to whip the robot over the garrison wall. Three more drones swiftly took hold of the chain and forced her to the concrete ground, others jumping in to hold her in place. No words left her lips, and as Ravus took cautious steps closer to the Astral, he noticed the green in her eyes had been replaced by yellow, and her pupils carried a serpentine shape. "Don't worry about your dear sister's guardian," Ardyn continued. "Her human spirit seems long gone. Only the rage of the Hydrean remains in that shell."

Ravus knelt in front of Gentiana and observed her in silence. Water sprayed from her mouth in his direction when she laid eyes on him. A lone soldier noticed and jumped between his commanding officer and the Astral, taking the brunt of the impact and flying into the side of a mobile MT walker. "A small part of her still lies within," Ravus determined, and he stood up straight again. "Nevertheless, why bring her here to me? Why not Gralea?"
Ardyn peeled his eyes away from the recovering soldier. "I'm afraid that arrangement wouldn't work. It would involve a conflict of interest." Ravus didn't understand what he meant, and the Chancellor saw it in his eyes. "Explaining it would be such a bore, Ravus. It'd be easier to trust my judgement." Ardyn turned on heel to face his airship. "While this chat has been heart-warming, I must make a delivery to the emperor. You know how impatient he is. And I wouldn't want to keep you from tracking the Prince and his entourage." Glancing over his shoulder, Ardyn tipped his fedora and smiled at Ravus.

"Commander!" A human soldier sprinted across the base to her commanding officer and skid to a halt mid-salute. "Sir, we've just received an urgent message from General Glauca. The sorceress is in Insomnia!" Ardyn stopped in his tracks, his back still facing Ravus and the subordinate. "But that's not the worst of it, sir. The message states that she's sitting in the crystal chamber! Inside of the magic barrier!"

The grin Ardyn wore as he'd started to walk away fell apart. He spun around and gawked at the subordinate, who sensed his lingering stare and shuddered in place. Ardyn and Ravus exchanged glances. "It seems there's been a change of plans," the Chancellor said to him. "Is Loqi floating about?"

"He should be returning to the base soon, Your Excellency," the soldier replied.

"Good." Facing Ravus again, Ardyn brought a hand to his chin. "Send word to Captain Tulmett that he's been reassigned to guard the Hydrean's Astral."

Ravus marched toward Ardyn, who was already taking out his cellphone and dialing a number. "And what of the Lucians, Ardyn? Loqi has them tracked-"

"Captain Ulldor's already on their tail. He discovered something in Frons' garage and went from there." Bringing the phone to his ear, Ardyn grunted impatiently as he waited for the Nifeli Prince to pick up. "I have a delivery I need you to make for me."

"...What kind of delivery?"

Within a half hour, Captain Loqi was back in the garrison walls. He was silent for the majority of Ardyn's orders, having never seen the Chancellor so disgruntled before. Ardyn even appeared to display a headache at one point during the shift change, rubbing his temples as a new airship landed inside the base. Everyone bowed when Prince Velox and his raven-haired assistant walked off the airship, and the situation was made evident to the young monarch. He cursed out loud when he learned of Lamia's survival, and though he insisted on retrieving her himself, Ardyn hushed his advances. Many of the soldiers bat more than one eye at the silent mage that stayed within Velox's shadow, who sauntered into Ardyn's airship and walked out with Luna hoisted over her shoulder. Ravus bared his teeth at her.

"Ah, ah." Velox wagged a finger in the High Commander's face. "Any insubordinance, and there goes your other arm. Wouldn't want that happening, would we?" The disgraced former Tenebraen Prince growled under his breath as he could only watch his sister be carried away. "I'm sure Father will be pleased when he sees all the gifts we're bringing him."

"But of all the gifts, there's only two he truly desires. Let's see how generous Eos is to us tonight." Ardyn's gaze shifted from Velox to Ravus, who'd pushed his rage down enough to regain some form of composure. "Come, Ravus. We have a witch to fetch." He beckoned for the High Commander to follow him back into his ship, and Magitek soldiers poured into both airships. Velox's took off first, the escort ships waiting for him high above the base, and only when they were far off did Ardyn's caravan lift from the ground.
Inside the airship, Ravus was seated next to Ardyn in the cockpit. "You could easily go after her yourself," he started, grasping his metal fist in the flesh hand. "Why have me tag along?"

"You know as well as I do that even with your title of High Commander, you're still a liability." Ravus' breath caught in his throat. "No matter your title, you're still the Oracle's brother. I'll not have the instincts of siblings get in the way of Niflheim's rise to the top." Ardyn didn't once look at Ravus as he addressed the younger man. "Besides, you're carrying a lot of anger in you. What a coincidence it would be if we were to run into some Lucians along the way..." The Chancellor got out of his seat and walked behind Ravus', laying a firm hand on his metal shoulder. "Do not make us regret saving you, Ravus Nox Fleuret." He pat the commander's back lightly and left his to his thoughts, walking into the hallway with his hands folded behind his back.

Silence followed him through the airship. Soldiers would salute him as he passed, but he paid them no mind. Ardyn stopped at a window every few minutes to watch the gathering clouds above, and the daemons ripping themselves out of the earth below. Glowing orange and yellow bursts fired from small, moving dots across the lands, some falling victim to the murky creatures that attacked in the night. "What a pitiful world," he muttered to himself with a hand pressed against the glass.

"*Et servire te habitant in hoc saeculo miseria.*" The voice hissed in his ear and singed the hairs inside.

The grin returned to Ardyn's face. "And here I thought you were asleep." The Chancellor continued his walk through the airship and descended to the bottom level, leaning his back against one of the mobile walkers in storage. A flame ignited in the center of the room and swirled downward to the floor, expanding and forming a humanoid form. Two horns protruded from the figure's head, matching the shape of the nails on its hands and bare feet. "Sending messages to me would be so much easier if you'd adopted an Astral, you know."

"*Ne temptare, Ardyn. Iam semel offensus sum hodie; Non iterum patientia.*" The wispy figure's arm swung backwards, releasing a flaming tendril that whipped the air behind it. "*Mollia invenit tuam liquido cubiculum mirari non minimum.*"

"You worry too much, Ifrit. It's no surprise that she's a skilled mage. The girl's had five years to perfect her spells." His eyes stayed on the mobile MT walker across from him. "What's wrong? I've never seen you so frightened of a mere mortal before."

The flames grew in intensity, warning the Chancellor to not overstep his boundaries. "*Timor non est peccatum mortale. An oblitus es quod Lucianus cadaver milite reliquisse?*

"Then why have the daemons grown in their numbers wherever she's stepped?" Ardyn countered. "She's not an Oracle like her mother. The world is against her."

"*Et osculatus est eum Chaos.*" The mention of the Anarchain finally got the Chancellor's attention. "*Erat plicat, non modo, quae liquido deposuit custodiam carceris. Unus homo non potest in sua transferre sine dira consequatur. Sed non est electus.*"

Watching the flames calm momentarily, Ardyn shrugged his shoulders. "And? Chaos picking a toy to keep him company hasn't altered our plans. If you haven't noticed yet, he's holding her there for us." The head of the Infernian's figment tilted to the side. "Had she been a normal human, he probably would've killed her by now. But she's not. And though he's been trapped within the Lucian crystal for millennia, his goal is within ours. So let him play for a little bit."

"*Ab his quae facit et distraherentur.*"
"Only until he's reunited with his Prince," Ardyn concluded. "And if Shiva tries to intervene, you can take care of her, no?" Ifrit scowled at him, and Ardyn couldn't contain the chuckle that wormed its way from his throat. "You're giving me the same look I'm sure she gave you all those years ago." The flaming figment bared its teeth before the fire dispersed and faded into the atmosphere, leaving the Chancellor to his own thoughts.

Nyx's vision went in and out. He had no clue how he was still moving, and only knew the pain that was surging through his body. "...there..." a voice going in and out said, probably to him. His skin burned, but at the same time, the burn had an icy edge to it. The more he focused on the cold singe, the more aware he became of everywhere he felt it. A jerking motion threw his head upward, waking the Glaive to a full, agonizing awareness of his surroundings. "Just a little longer," the woman's voice continued. "There's a haven not too far from here."

"Wha...what happened?" he asked Nebula, cursing under his breath when he attempted to reach a hand to his head. Nyx spotted a crude bandage tied tight around his forearm and hand, and the memory of the fight flooded back into his mind. He'd come face to face with Ifrit, the Infernian, who nearly threw him off a cliff. He fought a god. Glancing over the rest of his body, he found his other arm pulled around Nebula's neck, and the woman's face was covered in soot and frost. "Nebula-" His eyes shut tight when a painful wave shot through his leg, and upon closer inspection through the bit of makeshift bandaging, he could see the horrific extent of his burns. Biting the insides of his cheeks, the Glaive did his best to suppress a whimper.

"Nyx, I'm so sorry," the healer started. "This is all my fault."

He raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. "I should've known better. I always ask for too much-"

"Whoa, whoa, hold on there." Hobbling to a stop on his good leg, Nyx forced the Oracle to halt her step and face him. "Look, I was knocked out. It happens. As for the Princess, we'll get her back. Don't go beating yourself up over this." The older woman wasn't crying, but a clear suffering was written all over her face. "This isn't your fault."

She wouldn't meet his eyes, knowing his stare would only make her agree. "We'll talk more at the haven," Nebula retorted, and pulled the Glaive's arm over her neck again. She helped him walk until the owners of the nearby outpost spotted them and ran out to help. Two men lifted Nyx into one of their trailers and a third offered his hand to the healer for assistance, but she politely refused his offer. Her mood switched from regret to responsible as she shook off her cardigan - which Nyx immediately noticed was missing most of a sleeve and a good portion of the bottom - and rolled up her sleeves. "This is going to hurt," she explained, "a lot more than the glass did. Your skin won't be exactly as it was, but you'll be able to move and won't have the risk of infection."

"Just...do what you have to," The pain was beginning to get to him.

Nebula nodded. "Alright. Gentlemen, if you'd please..." The two men pressed their hands on the Glaive's torso to hold him down. "One, two-" Even with the countdown and the single breath he pulled in, Nyx couldn't prepare himself for the massive wave of pain that hit. He swore for a moment between him screaming bloody murder and Nebula holding down and healing his leg, he passed out and gave the outpost owners a heart attack. He faintly remembered the green glow dancing off the healer's fingers and seeping into his distorted skin, moisturizing it and pulling each layer back into place. He didn't recall someone placing what felt like leather in between his teeth, though, but he knew why it was necessary. After an eternity in his mind, a cool air surrounded his forehead and leg, and Nyx knew it was Nebula's magic at work again. He barely flinched when she worked on his arm.
- which to his relief, was in much better shape than his leg.

"Must've caught me mid-warp," he commented as the cooling magic worked it way around his forearm. "Meh, I've experienced worse in training. If you'd been there when I almost blew myself up in a Firaga/Thundaga mix..." A whistle left his lips. He hoped the conversation would soothe the Oracle's mind, but one look at her told him otherwise. "You know we're going after them."

"I know."

"And we're getting her back - to Solheim, and to Noctis."

Nebula scoffed. "It won't be an easy task, Nyx. Ardyn is a dangerous man."

Nyx gestured his hand. "The Chancellor of the Empire, with countless soldiers and robotic drones at his disposal. Not to mention the fear he brings about in millions of people -"

"It's more than that." The Glaive's sentence quited and he watched Nebula stand from her chair. The healer sauntered to the trailer window and laid a hand over the plexiglass. Snow started to fall outside - a sign the locals knew as the Glacian's shield over their property. "You haven't seen the side of him I have. There's more than soldiers at his disposal. He's a daemon."

"A lot of those Nifs are," Nyx shrugged. "And Iedolas is their supreme king, which is why we have to take him out. Cut off the head, and the body falls limp."

Nebula sighed. "I wish it were that simple." She paused and rested her head against the window, seeming to leave the present for whatever memory was playing in her mind. Nyx sat in silence, tugging at the cloth sling his arm hung in, and moved slow to throw his leg over the side of the bed. Nebula returned to the situation when she heard a thud and rushed over to the Glaive. "I'm sorry."

She helped him adjust the leg of his pants and loosened the laces in his boot to keep it from rubbing on the still-healing wound.

"I see where Nebula - err, Atra - gets a lot of her quirks." Nyx flexed his calf to check for movement. "Guess she wanted to be a doctor just like her mom, huh?"

"I suppose." The smile on the healer's face was similar to her earlier expression. "I...wasn't around for long enough to have that sort of influence." A huff escaped her lips as she sat next to the Glaive. "I'm sure you know who her father is. Her family story is...complicated, to say the least. I haven't seen her for twenty years. Guess it's my fault she turned out this way."

"Well..." Nyx exhaled sharply. "...I mean, she DID try to kill the President of Accordo."

"That's not her. Atra is a sweet woman who only wants to help people. She was thrown into an unfortunate situation she has no control over." His fingers curled inward. "My heart breaks every time I hear someone call her a witch on a broadcast. She's no mutant. The blood of Lucis runs through her veins." Before Nyx could ask for more information, Nebula shot up and rushed out of the trailer. The Glaive adjusted his position and gazed out the window to see why she'd run out. Ice crystals gathered in a swirling wind and created a large humanoid form. Everything about its appearance mirrored the cold, from the while braided hair to the blue skin and eyes. Nebula bowed before the figure and Nyx leaned closer to listen.

"Habes redderet debitum."

He'd never seen Shiva so close before. The quickly growing frost on the window obstructed some of his view. "I know, but there's still an evil on this world that must be purged. Repayment will come once the world is safe."
The figure floated closer to Nebula and caressed her cheek with one of her large fingers. "Quid est quod sic, uti homines? Aut cupere bellum et pacem medium." Snowflake spun around Shiva and Nebula, and Nyx wondered for a second why the Oracle didn't shiver in the obvious sub-zero conditions. "Quoties tamen facies vestras intueor, possum quin exclaimen, quando primo creatus Eos gaudia vobis. Et fascinant me."

"Then surely you will understand why I must continue to fight. The Oracle of Light has been captured by the Cursed One, and it is my duty to set her free so she may aid the true King of Light." Bowing her head again, rested a hand on Shiva's finger. "Please, allow me to put an end to the darkness."

"Ego dicam tibi durior et durius quam reperire, Nebula. Tu mihi sicut filia." Shiva retracted her hand, earning the Oracle's undivided stare. "modo, quia foedera et deos tempora oraculum de auro mundissimo tu et aliquando tenebrae perpurgata vinculo finem. Eos non potest esse alterum. Et scire effectus."

Nebula nodded. "I understand." Shiva bowed her head and began to dissipate into the snow. When her body was half-destroyed and only her head and one am remained, the healer called out to her. "Wait!" The Glacian halted her departure to hear one last inquiry from her pupil. "...What will become of him?"

The Glacian remained quiet for longer than normal, and didn't extend her hand to the healer. A portion of the snow around them cleared, allowing a sliver of moonlight to break through and reflect off the ice crystals making up the Archean's face. "Cumque conpleti fuerint dies judicii Etro relinquiqu animae suae. Sola peccata generis tono viderit." At the end of her sentence, the Glacian's figment fell apart and fluttered to the ground as snow, and the wind died down.

A whistle broke her concentration. "What was all that?" Nebula spun around and saw Nyx hobbling out of the trailer, nearly losing his balance on the last step out.

"You shouldn't be walking yet," Nebula urged as she rushed to the Glaive's side. "Luna was right. You are stubborn."

"What was she saying?" he asked. "For a second I thought she was going to eat you alive! And then all this stuff about repayment..."

"Another long story." Her gaze shifted to the crested moon hovering above. Nighttime was the best chance for them to move and catch up to the Imperial airships. She looked at Nyx again, observing how he shifted in place and how much weight he laid on his bad leg. "Are you able to move alright?"

Nyx half-shrugged. "Enough to where I can get around. As long as there's no running involved for a day or two, I'll survive." A growl from his stomach interrupted him. "...And maybe a quick meal."

Nebula couldn't help laughing at him. "We can spare time for food." She gestured to the dining hall on the other side of the haven and walked beside him, keeping her movements slow to allow him to keep up.

Halfway to the dining hall, a question suddenly came to his mind. "...So if she gets her magical powers from you, does she also have your quick temper?"

The Oracle halted for a moment the Glaive didn't seem to notice. "...No... She gets that from her father."
Chapter End Notes

Some new terms to bring in for the gods introduced in this chapter: Chaos the Anarchian, and Carbuncle the Fantasian. Haven't decided on titles for other gods (Odin, Siren, Etro, etc).
Off the second train and onward to the third, Noctis was still caught in his trance. Gladiolus was forced to throw the Prince onto his back and carry him like a napping toddler to their next destination. Prompto guided Ignis with the sound of his voice and their footsteps, and Cor took up the rear to keep watch for any trouble. The Prince barely reacted when the others spotted search lights approaching from the distance and heard the familiar whirring of an Imperial airship's engine, and his comatose state was highly concerning. "This isn't good," Cor commented for what felt like the fourth time since their departure from the train station. "I've never seen it this bad."

"Has Noctis been like this before?" Ignis asked, turning his head in Cor's direction.

"Not Noctis. Regis." The air grew thick as silence settled over the younger men. "When he was around Noctis' age, Regis would go through similar episodes. He'd fall quiet for hours and wouldn't react to anything around him. Sylva became a frequent visitor when this happened, and at times, she'd stay for weeks until she was certain his trance was done." Cor laid a hand on a tree trunk as he pushed past it down the path."They only stopped when he fully entwined with the crystal and gained control over the Archean inside."

Gladiolus' steps halted momentarily. "You're saying it's a deity that's turning him into a zombie?" He peered over his shoulder and strained his eyes to get a glimpse of the Prince's face. Crystal pieces were forming over his bangs like icicles, poking his skin and causing the young monarch to moan. The bodyguard wasn't sure if he was even aware of being carried, one of the many forms of physical contact he normally fought off if attempted. As guardian of Lucis' future king he was aware of the dangers that came with being connected to the crystal, and the fact that he could do nothing to save Noctis from what was ailing him bothered the shield greatly. He remembered a conversation he overheard his father and King Regis sharing in the King's study when he'd just began his Crownsguard training. Peering through the cracked doorway, he heard Clarus express concern for the child Prince's safety when he was to first make contact with the Lucian crystal. He didn't understand what the men meant when they mentioned 'chaos' all those years ago, but after Cor's words, Gladiolus grasped a sense of what the marshal was talking about.

"How do we control it?"

Cor shook his head. "We don't. Noctis has to learn how to do that on his own. The only thing we can do is try to give him signs that'll help break his trance."

Prompto had remained quiet the entire time, scanning the area for any strange movement that could
be deemed Imperial activity. Ignis found his lengthy silence unnerving, and tightened his hand around the blond's bicep. "Something the matter, Prompto?"

"Hmm?" The gunner's focused mind rejoined the party. "No...no, I'm fine. Just a little on edge." He switched his gun to his left hand and flexed his fingers. "But I have this creepy feeling that we're being watched. It's been so quiet since we left the train."

"I'm glad it's not just one of us," Ignis commented as he turned his head in the direction of some trees. "I've been sensing another presence not too far behind us for a while. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I'm sure it's not a Magitek drone. It must be a human soldier."

As the men came closer together and searched the immediate area, Noctis stirred in Gladiolus' arms. "Noct!" the shield exclaimed, relieved to see his charge moving after over an hour of inactivity. The Prince pushed himself away from Gladio and leaned on a boulder when he stumbled over his own foot. Cor and the others stopped in their tracks to watch him. "It's good to finally see you alert. You were starting to get heavy-"

"Get back!" Cor jumped between Gladio and Noctis, intercepting a swing from the Sword of the Tall with his still-sheathed katana. The marshal caught a glimpse of the Prince's eyes and sneered. "He's still in the trance." Struggling against the greatsword's weight, Cor dropped to a knee and hissed at the force Noctis was surprisingly able to swing about. Noctis let go of the weapon with one hand, prompting it to vanish, and a red light swirled in the free appendage. "Ignis! Shield!" No one questioned Cor's command from the tactician when they saw the flames licking between Noctis' fingers. The men gathered beside Ignis and Prompto pointed the strategist's arm in the right direction. The magic barrier went up just as the Prince tossed the fiery ball in their direction and evaded the target zone with a backflip, the flames exploding over the arced shield and blasting past their heads.

"What do we do?" Prompto yelled as the flames dispersed. His battle instincts told him to find an opening and take out the rampaging royal, but he fought to remind himself that said individual was his best friend and the hope for the world's future. "We have to stop him somehow!" It was in his bout of distress that the blond noticed Ignis put a hand up to silence him. Jaw clenched, the tactician listened to the sounds he heard coming from Noctis, each pained grunt transforming into poorly constructed sentences.

"...here are they?" Ignis was finally able to make out. Noctis' attacks grew weaker and misplaced with each swing of the greatsword, and moments later, the Conqueror's Axe. "Ignis... Gladio...Prompto... Luna... Dad..." His words went in and out as the axe's blade landed halfway through a tree's trunk and he couldn't pull it free. The weapon vanished in a crystalline dust and the Prince's head fell into his hands. He stared straight at his comrades from between his fingers, but to him, the four figures standing before him were members of the Niflheim empire's leadership. The pair of orange irises watched them approach him with slow steps, Ardyn and Iedolas in the middle, Generals Glauca and Interitio flanking them on either side, and behind them, countless daemons. To him, the forest-covered mountain path they were treading was some war plain devoid of natural life, save the enemy and otherworldly creatures that walked the earth. "What have you done with them?"

He sank to his knees and curled his fingers, drawing dirt and gravel into his palms. "Why, Pryna? Why can't we find them?"

Ignis released his grip on Prompto and followed the sound of Noctis' voice, staggering over the uneven ground until his hands found the Prince's shoulders. "Noct," he pleaded, "you have to find your way out of this trance. Please. We need you in Solheim. Gladio and Prompto need you. His Majesty needs you. Luna needs you..." A white glow surrounded his hands as he rested them on the sides of his head and explored Noctis' mind, looking for him in the mess of fear and anguish flowing
inside. Crystal dust settled on his forearms and scratched his exposed wrists. Behind him, he heard the familiar whirl of an Imperial airship approaching.

"Hurry, Iggy!" Gladiolus begged. "We've only got a minute before we see some drones!"

He didn't know how he did it, but Ignis noticed a sudden calming in the Prince's breathing. A gloved hand glided over his right and gripped it tight. "...Ignis?" Noctis looked up at the tactician, whose eyes were closed as he breathed a sigh of relief. "What-

"There's no time to explain right now. We have to move." Ignis stood up, nearly falling over, and Noctis caught him before he could tip over. "Let's go," he urged the Prince, and the group hurried into the trees to keep hidden from the coming soldiers.

Within one hour, the entire Insomnian palace was scrambling. The sorceress' arrival and subsequent entry into the crystal chamber sent the Imperial forces into a panic. Their original plan had involved luring her to the compound and using the Lucian royals as a bargaining chip to force Atra to lift the barrier protecting the crystal. But with the key player already inside the barrier's limits and with no way for anyone to pull her out, the soldiers had to regroup and come up with a plan to draw her out. The Emperor and Chancellor were informed of her sudden presence within the palace in the hopes of finally securing and capturing her, and while both parties' responses were minimal, the Imperial forces knew a trap was in the works.

Aranea's airship landed moments before Arta entered the basement, and when she laid eyes on the growing chaos, she immediately caught a sense of distress among the men. Biggs and Wedge, her two assistants, were quick to pull some soldiers aside to get some answers. "The sorceress is in the crystal chamber!" one exclaimed to Biggs, his face red and breath short. "General Glauca has sent word to the Chancellor and Emperor, but we're stuck! There's no one else here who can perform magic!"

"And what dumbass let her slip through their fingers?" the commander groused with a hand on her hip. She never figured General Glauca a man to be so easily fooled. He made her glad she was under the command of General Interitio instead, even if the other's ways were somewhat harsher. "His Imperial Majesty must be in a sour mood now that he knows what happened."

"No one has heard from him yet," the soldier continued, "though the Chancellor is on his way here to try and sort out the matter. Even he seemed off when he received the news." Someone shouted for him to get back in formation. "Excuse me, Commander." The soldier saluted Aranea and dragged his feet as he made his way back to his squadron.

Aranea huffed. "Well there goes that plan." She marched toward the palace entrance, paying no mind to the subordinates on her tail. "And we were on our way to a good bounty, too..."

"Shall I reschedule our meeting, Commander?" Biggs inquired, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead.

"Hold off on that until I hear what Glauc'a got to say." She glanced at them over her shoulder and gestured a hand to them. "Wait here. I'll radio you if anything changes." Wedge and Biggs saluted her, turning back to the airship while she waltzed into the compound. The soldiers inside were even more of a mess than those running around outside, and the confining walls made wedging between them and the robots much more annoying. "Glauc'a," she yelled down a hallway, gaining the full attention of the scrambling soldiers who did their best to show her respect while preparing for the Chancellor's arrival. She found the makeshift conference room on her own and sidestepped out of the way when she saw a husk of metal and wires fly out. The Magitek drone smashed into several pieces
and three troops stopped what they were doing to clean the mess before Glauca grew more enraged.

Walking inside with crossed arms, Aranea leaned against the door frame and shifted her weight. "I think you called me a little too early for the pickup."

"Don't patronize me!" the general spat when he turned her way. The table at the center of the conference room - once King Regis' study - had been swept clear in a fit of anger. "The key to freeing the crystal is inside the chamber with no way for us to reach her. If you hadn't lolly-gagged and brought me what I needed in the first place-"

"Don't you try to pin this on me!" The tail on Aranea's helmet whipped around her when she stormed up to General Glauca. "If your memory wasn't as shitty as your command, you'd remember I was off keeping watch over the Astral shard keeping Titan busy! You could've persuaded the emperor to make his son give up that precious doll of his!" She grit her teeth and backed away from the armored man, not wanting to escalate the situation any further. "If dear ol' Ardyn's coming to fix this, there's no point in me staying."

Before she could say another word, Glauca's fist careened into the edge of the tabletop, splintering the polished wood. "You're still the one who will deliver the crystal to Emperor Aldercapt."

"For what? If anyone really needs to hand over the crystal, it's you. Maybe it'll fix your broken ego a bit." The general growled beneath his helmet. "In all seriousness, there's no point in keeping me here. General Interitio already signed my resignation papers, so why not speed up the process a little? I'm better off as a daemon hunter anyway."

"So you're handing in your resignation. What appropriate timing, Commander Highwind. And to think my men thought so highly of you." General Glauca reached a hand to his helmet, unfastening switches on the bottom. "You should consider yourself lucky the emperor ever allowed you into his army."

Aranea scoffed. "Spare me the guilt trip, Glauc. We both know I only joined for the money - which, I should add, isn't as good as it used to be. Bounties bring in more of a load." She spun on her heel and gave the armored man a weak wave. "Just let me know when the Chancellor gets here so I can warm up my ship. I've got a job waiting to be done."

In the basement chamber, Atra sat cross-legged in front of the crystal with her eyes glued to the glowing rock. The heavy voice booming from it had shifted languages and spoke in a manner easier for her to comprehend. Human soldiers came every twenty minutes to watch her every movement, noting each time she did so much as breathe. And when the few times where she stood up and paced the floor near the barrier did come, they used whatever weapon they had in their hands to attempt destroying the shield. The doctor flinched the first two times when bullets and tempered steel clashed with the magic barrier, but her paranoia died down when her subconscious understood there was no way for anyone to penetrate the field. She ignored most of the troops who came by, some of them going as far as threatening to end her the second she set foot outside the barrier. Her current aggressor stayed relatively quiet, to her relief, allowing her to focus on her conversation with whatever lay inside the crystal.

"A god, trapped in the Lucian crystal," she repeated. "And you're saying there's nothing you can do to help me?"

"Your matter is not one within my jurisdiction," the Archean responded. "Every god has their limitations; as for mine, they're furthered by my imprisonment in this crystal."

"And what if I freed you?" Atra jumped to her feet and clasped her hands together. "If I could figure
out a way to set you free, you could convince the others to help you rid me of this curse. Please, I'm begging you. I don't want to be Lamia anymore. I'm tired of hurting the people I'm meant to care for. Crowe, Pelna, Senator Venenum...they're all dead because of me."

Her head dropping, she nearly missed the sudden chuckle erupting from the crystal. Orange flecks of light danced between the layers of violet and indigo. "Who ever told you your powers were a curse, child?" Before her lips parted particles from the rock spun around her, caressing her form. "Don't listen to those fools. They only fear you because they lack the understanding to see the true nature of your gift."

"But the empire-" A crystal fragment flew up and pressed against her lips, silencing her. Atra's eyes drifted down to her hands, studying the backs and palms. She had to remind herself every time she performed a spell that she only did so intentionally for the purposes of protection and healing others. "...They only see me as a danger." A headache began to form, the pain crawling from the back of her neck. "I can't do anything without your help. Please! The people will listen to a Lucian god!" The Archean's words fell silent under her pleading, and Atra's jaw dropped when she didn't get a response. "PLEASE!" Offering her no further guidance, the Archean only opened a hole in the barrier. The soldier watching over Atra looked frantically down the hall to find someone to report to, but when he saw no one, he took matters into his own hands. Atra ducked under the soldier's cross hair and cast a Stop spell on him. The soldier frozen, she ripped the firearm from his grasp and ran to the elevator, jumping over the dead body in her path, and hit the button to go up.

The elevator door opened on the ground level and Atra rolled behind a pillar, searching the hall for any soldiers. The air was uncomfortably quiet compared to before, and with no men in sight, she began to wonder if they'd gathered in a more open area to corner her. She tiptoed around the pillar and into the open, her attention darting from left to right and left again. Atra spun around once to check behind her for an ambush and found empty space. Lowering her gun, she huffed and turned around again, only to be met by a pair of amber eyes staring back at her. "I must say," Ardyn began, remaining casual even as she pointed the gun at him, "you're becoming very creative with your evasion methods. I heard you've even learned to control a few new spells." The Chancellor took a step toward her and raised his hand to chest level.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" she shouted at him, intensifying her stance. "Not another move." Ardyn remained unfazed by her threat but moved slower all the same to not alarm her any further, grabbing his fedora and tipping it.

"Relax, Atra. If I were here to bring harm onto you, you'd already be dead." The smile he gave her sent chills down her spine. "Let's just talk for a moment." He noticed her gaze shifting past his form and focused down the hall, and with a sigh, Ardyn leaned on the column next to him. "Oh, please. Give me some credit. If I say it's only you and I standing here, I mean it."

Atra scoffed. "You're such a liar. Why should I trust you after the attacks you led on Accordo and Insomnia? After you planted a spy to follow me? Answer me that."

Another sigh left the Chancellor's lips. He approached Atra, whose finger trembled on the trigger, and he laid his hand atop the gun barrel. "I'll admit, I've used shady tactics now and again in the name of the Empire. But you must understand that I only do these things for the greater good of the world." He glanced at the carpet for a mere second then met her eyes again as he spoke, and when he had her entranced by his stare, Ardyn turned away. His hold on her firearm loosened and he sauntered away from the doctor. "But you don't seem interested in what I have to say, do you? So we should just get on to the part where you fill me with lead, hmm?" The Chancellor faced her once more, arms opened in an inviting manner. Atra aimed the barrel at his head again, but as her finger traced the curve of the trigger, she found a small part of her curious and unwilling to leave his
monologue unfinished. The doctor's crooked neck straightened and she pulled her eyes away from the cross hair.

"...What are you talking about? What does you wanting the crystal have to do with the world's safety?"

"Ah, so we might just be civilized after all. I'll tell you what you want to hear, but first I ask you ease your stance." He pointed at her arms and the gun. "Speaking with a gun to one's face will divide my attention too much." Atra raised an eyebrow at his request, not wanting to take her eyes or the gun off of him. Against her better judgement, she eventually relaxed her stance and laced the gun's strap over her shoulder. She crossed her arms and leaned her weight on her left side, tilting her head to the same side. "What were you taught growing up?" Atra's brow furrowed and her lips parted to question the man, but he raised a finger to put her thought on hold. "All Nifeli citizens are taught from birth that our ultimate goal in life is to keep the world safe from harm. The Starscourge, daemons, the crystals that both exist now and once were. Those are a few examples of things nations can exploit in order to gain power. And in fighting for and against these factors are the very nations of Eos, with Lucis and Niflheim being the leaders in this fight." Ardyn gestured his hand for the doctor to join him at the window, and she followed him with reluctance. "Have you ever seen the territory of Galahd?"

She shook her head. "No. I've only heard of the place by word of mouth. Luna told me-"

"That Galahd was saved by Lucis when King Miles brought the tiny nation under his protective wing?" Ardyn chuckled. "I'm sorry to be the one to inform you that even Lady Lunafreya has been lying to you. Everything every Lucian man and woman has told you opposes the truth. Why, they were even the ones to declare you a sorceress!" Atra stepped back, her eyes widening and mouth agape. "Oh, I wish you weren't so naive, Atra. Your father would be very disappointed to learn of this."

"Get back to your point!" the doctor yelled, reaching a hand to her gun. Ardyn scratched the back of his head and turned his attention away from Atra again, reaching in his pocket for something. The firearm spun around her body and into her grasp. Atra aimed the barrel at the Chancellor's calf and fired a single shot, bringing the man down to a kneel. She stormed up to him and pressed the gun directly on his forehead, and he raised both hands in a surrendering manner, the right clasped shut.

"Open your hand." Ardyn unfurled his fingers one at a time, revealing a flat egg-shaped object. It had a shiny black luster like plastic, and on the top half of it lay three circular buttons. A small light bulb was screwed in at the top where the plastic casing met. "A remote."

"Precisely, and a minute thing to shoot a man over." Ardyn pushed the woman far enough to allow him room to stand. He shook off his wounded leg, agitating the gunshot until the bullet fell out of his ankle. "And if I were to press this button..." His thumb hit the button on the left, and an immediate pain rang in Atra's neck. The doctor sank to her knees, clutching the aching area and forgetting all about her gun. She cracked one eye open, glaring at the man she suspected for bringing about the agony. "A familiar suffering, isn't it?" he started. His steps circled around her, keeping away from the woman now rolling on the floor. "Ironic how much the truth hurts. We strive to build a facade of strength and triumph, but no matter what armor we may wear, eventually the shield will fall to reveal the weak constitution inside." He stopped and stood over her, one leg on each side of her body, and brushed her bangs away from her sweat-covered forehead. "You only understand the pain, don't you?"

Gritting her teeth, Atra smacked his hand away. "You...how-" Another wave of pain rushed into her head. "Make it stop!"
Ardyn grabbed her wrist and held her down on the floor with one hand, using the other to force her to look at him. "Is that what you want the most? For all this suffering to end?" He waited until Atra nodded in his grip to release her, and he stepped backwards. "Then there's one small thing you must do." Ardyn offered his hand to Atra, and the answer was quick to sink in. "The key to your peace is just outside, Atra. Everyone is waiting for you at home. Your true home."

He watched her continue to writhe on the floor, broken glass cutting into her skin. "You...want me to go to Niflheim."

"I want you to be where you belong: with your people." She stared at his waiting hand, then her gaze drifted to the grinning man's face. It was the first time she looked at him for more than a minute, and for once he seemed sincere in his intent. Even with his past lies she couldn't help the sense of trust growing over her. With hesitation, Atra reached her own hand up and placed it in his. He helped her to her feet and rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. "I'm glad you're seeing the truth, Lady Interitio."

"Me too." The purple glow of a Stop spell spread out from her fingertips and across Ardyn’s arm, enveloping his entire body in the magic. He froze where he stood, his hand still extended, and Atra pulled herself free. Hopping away from the Chancellor, she spun around and jogged down the hall, finding the space littered with Magitek drones. Atra hid herself behind the wall as they started shooting, and when she heard the heavy footsteps of a rushing husk, she sucked in a deep breath and released a Firaga spell onto the waiting soldiers. Their armor melted off partway, sticking them to the floor, and Atra rushed past them while firing shots into those that still functioned. With the drones taken care of, she scanned the next room for any soldiers and took out any that were standing with more time-altering magic. The soldiers turned into statues, none the wiser to her presence, and she pushed open a door to her right.

"Naive child." Atra spun on her heel in the direction of the Chancellor's voice, watching the once frozen man walk toward her, an annoyed gleam in his eye. "And here I thought you were actually changing. What a shame." He pulled the remote from his pocket again, and Atra cursed herself for forgetting to steal it from him. "I see you need a reminder of exactly who you're dealing with." He hit the same switch as before and an electric jolt shocked through her body. Atra screamed bloody murder, feeling her muscles tighten and twist against her will, lighting her nerves on fire. "In case you've yet to realize, you're no longer in control of your own actions. Lamia is sure to come out anytime now." The doctor forced herself onto her stomach and outstretched her hand to the gun she'd dropped. Ardyn turned a dial on the side of the remote, upgrading the level of the electrical output. Her limbs convulsed and she fought for breath and control over herself. He released the button and the electrical assault stopped, allowing her to find enough backbone to grasp the firearm and pull the trigger. Ardyn's head whipped backwards when the bullets collided with his skull. Panting, the doctor watched his body fall backwards, then saw an arm wrap around a curtain. He hoisted himself to a standing position and met her eyes, licking the trails of blood that poured down the center and right side of his face. "You're almost as annoying as that fiesty Oracle, though much easier to subdue..." His thumb moved to the top button on the remote and pressed it. A new pain, stinging deeper than the electric shock, coursed through her veins and rendered her screams silent. Mouth wide open, Atra convulsed until she passed out, her face buried under her hair. Ardyn waited for her to stand again and when she did, the blown-out pupils told him Lamia had returned. "That's better. Now that we've resolved our little disagreement, destroy the barrier holding the crystal out of our reach."

Atra's body turned without hesitation, her head bowing slightly at Ardyn's command. She laid a hand on the wall and sent an electrical surge out from her hand into the hall's wiring, using the current to sense out the location of the crystal chamber. Atra found the chamber within a minute and blasted a hole into the floor, creating an opening directly above the glowing stone. Energy poured out from the
barrier in wisps, shocking and burning the air it touched. The doctor grabbed one of the wisps, ignoring how it seared the skin on her fingers and palm, and sent her aura drilling through its center. The magic struggled against the barrier's energy, fighting its way through the purple and blue flecks within to forge a path inward. The wisp she held coiled up her arm and around her neck, seeping into her veins. Atra growled and pushed harder against the magic. The Archean inside the crystal stayed silent, observing the fight from his prison and waiting to see who would come out victorious.

The palace floor and walls trembled. The remaining windows shattered and fell around the slowly waking soldiers, who stopped what they were tasked to do to watch the sorceress at work. Ardyn summoned one of them with a snap of his fingers and ordered the subordinate to bring General Glauca over. As the young troop ran off, he continued to observe Lamia at work. Even she, the most powerful mage to come out of Niflheim in hundreds of years, was having a difficult time destroying the barrier. Blood started to drip from her nose but she did nothing about it, laying all her focus on fulfilling her order. After twenty minutes of recoils and throaty groans from the sorceress, the Chancellor heard a crackling sound. Looking into the hole in the floor, he spotted a line not visible on the barrier earlier. He kept his enthusiasm quiet, knowing Atra would finish what he commanded her too without a need for a second briefing. A transparent arm of magic emerged from the barrier and shot through Atra's stomach, knocking the wind out of her. With a shrill yell the sorceress sent the remainder of her aura into the shield, overloading and cracking the barrier. It fell to pieces and shattered like glass. The thousands of pieces glittered when the moonlight hit them, and when Atra turned to look at Ardyn again, she collapsed. Her pupils drew in to their normal size. Her head rolled to the side as she felt the sudden loss of her energy, and she peered through the hole. The crystal's orange glow grew stronger, overpowering the other colors in it, and left the stone with a black hue inside the spires.

"...No..."

Two pairs of footsteps stomped to their location, one halting farther away than the other. "It's in your hands, Commander," Ardyn said to the woman passing by him. Atra forced herself to turn to her side and saw the armored woman approaching. She winced and lifted her hand, doing all she could to send a barrier out, but the soldier walked by as if she weren't there and jumped into the hole. Chains followed behind her waist cape, and within a minute she was back on ground level.

"Ready to go." She knelt down and picked Atra up by her waist, shuffling closer to Ardyn and dropping her beside the Chancellor's feet. Without another word she was out the window and shouting commands to her men. The palace rumbled a second time, intensifying with each passing second, and they all watched more of the floor crumble when a heavy object scraped its underside and forced it apart. The crystal, changing from orange to blue and back again, tore on whatever it was pulled against on its teip out the window, and the whirring of the airship engines replaced the rock's abrading on the concrete outside.

Atra pushed herself upright, stumbling and falling into the cracked wall. "Wait!" she yelled, gawking at the crystal being lifted off the ground by Aranea's airship. "Come back! COME BACK!" When she broke into a sprint an armored hand wrapped around her wrist and threw her into the remains of the last window left standing. The doctor coughed up glass and blood, rolling onto her hands and knees, and she looked up at the men in front of her.

Ardyn leaned down, laying his elbow against his knee. "What a shame. You did so well setting the crystal free, and now it's gone." Her eyes darted from him to General Glauca and back, seeing the smug grin fade into a flat line. The Chancellor pulled away. "Don't kill her, Glauca. Remember that she's still needed."

"I make no promises." The armored man grasped the hilt of his sword and ripped it from the holster,
pointing the tip at Atra. Ardyn left the general to handle his business, and when he made it to the other end of the hall, he tipped his fedora to her. He vanished behind Glaucal's armor and sword, the latter swung sideways at her stomach. She jumped backwards and ducked under a second swipe. The rest of the soldiers rushed to their airships as per Ardyn's orders, leaving only the Magitek drones behind to handle the rest of the civilians. Atra found herself cornered between two pillars and Glaucal, who was preparing his blade to split her in half. A barrier shot out from her palms, bouncing his sword back and into the opposite wall. The doctor created distance between herself and the enemy, and summoned a wall of ice. Glaucal banged his sword against it once he freed it from the wall, and in four hits the ice was in piles. She made it to the palace's main entrance with Glaucal not far behind her, and sent out a Thundaga spell. The electric pulse collided with the general's breastplate and separated into five strands, all moving away from his heart, and rejoining when they sailed over his armor.

"Shit!" Atra tripped and tumbled down the stairs into the Citadel, stopping herself in front of a line of Magitek troops. Three portals opened up on the ground behind them and Red Giants crawled out, the middle one knocking half of the soldier line away. The doctor evaded a collision with the flying husks and dashed to the palace gates, avoiding battle as much as possible.

Her memory faltered the farther she ran, and she could only recall pieces of the battles she fought the closer she got to the wall. She ran for the nearest opening, conveniently created by a mobile MT unit on the eastern side of the city. There was no way for her to tell what time of night it was, nor was there a shelter she could stay at for more than a few minutes before a Magitek unit discovered her presence. When she was fully aware of herself at the end of each battle, she found the bodies of countless drones thrown about like trash. Her ears rang uncontrollably, throwing her off balance when she crawled through the hole in the wall. Atra landed in the middle of a fight between another Magitek infantry and civilians, both of which threw blows her way. Evading only got her so far, and she started to accumulate more injuries than she could handle. She blacked out, and when she came to, the body count consisted of both flesh and machinery. Atra held in her sobs and pushed on, navigating through Galahd by following the horizon to the shoreline. She neared the edge of the territory and found a truck abandoned on the side of the road. "Dear Six," she repeated to herself, choking back tears as she tried her best to forget about the Galhadian lives lost by her hand. She sped down the road and turned on the windshield wipers when it started raining.

She didn't know where she was driving to; her only goal was to get away from Insomnia. Atra's foot stayed pressed on the gas pedal, her body hunched over in the driver's seat. A glimmer caught her eye, and when she peered closer, the shine revealed a face, followed soon by many others. She hit the breaks and steered sideways. The car skid to a stop in front of the group, who quickly surrounded the oldest member and readied their weapons. The dust from her sudden stop settled and Atra met the gaze of King Regis and his men, who went on high alert the second they realized who she was. "Your Majesty-"

"It's Lamia!" Luche exclaimed as he drew his blade and jumped into battle.

Atra leaped out of the caravan and dodged Luche's swipe. "Please, wait! It's not-" Her words ceased when Tredd and Axis joined the fight, keeping her unable to relay her message to the King. She spun around and did what she could to avoid their attacks without harming any of them. Tredd tagged out and Sonitus came in with a cartwheel and a kick to her back, and traded blows with Axis when she leaned out of range for another kick. Commander Drautos stayed beside Regis and Astrum, keeping watch over the fight. Libertus knocked her into the side of the car and marched toward her. "...coming...they're coming..."

There was no time to ask who she was referring to when the answer flew above them. An Imperial airship circled around their location and opened its hatch, dropping a flock of the drones close to
them. "We've got husks!"

The doctor climbed over the truck and stood on its roof, facing the crowd of approaching soldiers. She lifted both hands and searched her body for any remaining magic energy. Casting lightning magic in the rain was dangerous, but with it being the quickest way to eliminate the robots, Atra knew there was no other choice. "Shield yourselves!" she told the Kingsglaive. Atra gave them six seconds to put up a magic barrier, then fired all her focused energy out at the coming troops. Currents shot through the mud and grass and entered the legs of the Magiteks. Their wiring fried instantly, popping circuits and setting their memory boards on fire. The husks fell like dominoes one by one, and when the last one was destroyed, she slid through the window into the driver's seat. "Get in!" she yelled to the Lucians, who released the barrier that protected them from Atra's onslaught. "We can't stay here. They have the crystal! We have to hide!"

The men exchanged glances, unsure of what to do next. Commander Drautos huffed and marched to the truck. "No time to waste. Let's move!" Still uneasy the Kingsglaive piled into the truck and helped their King inside, seating him behind Drautos. Luche and Libertus sat beside him and the rest piled into the truck bed. Atra started driving away from the city once more, her sight darting frantically in search of shelter.

"There." Sonitus tapped the hood of the truck and pointed Atra in the direction of an abandoned factory. "Take us inside." The doctor nodded and turned into the large opening on the side of the building. Astrum and Regis were helped out first, escorted to metal crates to sit on and rest. Drautos and Luche counted heads to make sure the entire party was still together, and both breathed relieved sighs when all were tallied for. The Glaives kept Atra in their peripheral vision, noting the distance she put between herself and them. The storm outside grew heavier with thunder whipping through the clouds, breaking the awkward silence between her and the men. "You said the Imperials have the crystal," Sonitus brought up when no one else would. "How did they break through the magic barrier?"

"...That's my fault." Atra sat against the wall and hugged her knees. "Chancellor Izunia found some way to force me against my will. I don't know how, but he pressed a button on some device, and I blacked out."

"Did you do all you could to fight him off?" Everyone's attention was drawn to Senator Virtus when he spoke.

It was an unexpected inquiry. "I mean, I shot him in the face twice." Atra shrugged. "That didn't seem to stop him."

Astrum nodded to Regis, whose hands were knitted together and hung over his knees. "You resist him as if you were a true Lucian. You have been at war with Niflheim your entire life, have you not?"

"More or less." Regis stood up and hobbled over to Atra against the pleading of his men. Halfway over to her Atra caught on and shot up, backing away from the monarch. "Your Grace, that's not a good idea. You know what I'm capable of."

"Yet you saved us from that squadron. Why?" He took a step closer to her and Atra pulled up a barrier, keeping the distance between herself and the King. "When I first met you in Altissia," he began, "you displayed a similar nervous quirk. Always shielding yourself without retaliation unless absolutely necessary." Regis laid his hand on the glassy surface. "You're not the monster you've been portrayed to be."

Drautos rushed over to his ruler. "Your Grace, she's the enemy. She-" He fell quiet when Regis held
his hand up.

"Atra, was it?" With reluctance she finally laid eyes on the King, still watching her from the other side of the barrier. "You remind me of my dear friend Clarus. He was especially cautious when we were younger, sworn to protect me the individuals he cared about from harm. He'd often be the one in need of treatment after we returned from battle, yet his focus always remained on others." Atra remembered the face of Gladiolus' father. Even when he interrogated her back in Altissia, his demeanor was gentle and inviting. She wondered how a man with such a soft personality came to be one of the most revered Crownsguard members of all time and father to another one of the best, and as his face continued to drift in her thoughts, she wondered if he and the rest of the Lucians were safe. Her moment of distraction dropped her barrier and Regis came ever closer to her. "Like him, you must not allow yourself to give into fear. You have too much life to look forward to."

"Your Grace..." The corners of her mouth turned up. "You're the fourth person to tell me that."

"Then perhaps it's time you took the advice to heart." Regis returned to his men and took his seat beside Astrum. "Noctis may be ahead of us. We shall wait out the storm to see if he finds us. If not, we continue once the storm has passed."

They took time to rest. Sonitus declared first watch and walked to the factory entryway to keep an eye on outside activity. The other Glaives formed a circle around the resting King and Senator, keeping themselves busy with small talk. Atra stayed far from them, not trusting herself to lose control with the Imperial forces still hunting them down. She dug around her immediate area and found a few potion vials still intact. "Commander Drautos," she called to the red-cloaked man and shuffled to him. She handed him the potions and bowed her head before returning to her wall, resting her head on the steel lining. The rain beat against the glass and concrete walls, and the sound brought her back to the night she first met Noctis. It was much more memorable than most meetings she had, Atra noted. The day had been slow and she passed the time tending to her herb garden before the storm rolled in. And with the storm came four men clad in black, individuals she never expected to change her life. She missed hearing Prompto's jokes, sharing recipes with Ignis, and the sarcastic banter from Gladiolus and Noctis. It was the first time in years she bonded with anyone, and with them came more bonds she treasured. She missed living in the countryside and preparing ingredients to be brewed into elixirs that healed people. For a split second, Atra hoped there was a way for her to go back in time and change the way things went down when Cor was killed, or when she exploded into a rampage at the gala. Even if it was just for a moment, she wanted to see what life could've been.

"Grenade!" Sonitus' voice brought her back to reality. Atra shot up and sprinted to the factory entrance, seeing a dark elliptical object roll inside. Turning on her heel, she summoned a barrier mere seconds before the device exploded. The shield stretched to the top of the entryway, and when the smoke cleared, a rain of arrows came next. An Imperial airship sat in the middle of the road and Magitek troops poured out, led by General Glauca marching toward them. The Glaives were up in an instant, readying their blades and urging the King to stay back. Lining themselves up between Regis and the entrance, their mouths fell open when the wall behind them was blasted open. Metal shards flew in their direction. Axis warped behind the monarch and pushed him to the ground, taking the full brunt of the shard spray. A MT mobile walker's gun barrels started to turn and everyone hit the floor to avoid its bullet barrage. The young Glaive forced himself to stand and rushed to the others, who stood around Regis and Astrum in a circular formation. Atra hopped backwards, still keeping her barrier intact, and extended it around them. Libertus helped sustain it from the opposite side, and he was the first to spot Chancellor Izunia walking into the factory.

"Really, we must stop meeting like this," he started. "First you, Atra, and now dear King Regis. It must be my lucky day." His gaze landed on the medic. "I thought we talked about this, love. You're
better off without these brutes."

"To hell with you!" Atra spat. "You used me!"

Ardyn motioned his arms in a half-shrug. "Still a sore subject, I see. Oh well. There'll be more time to talk about your issues back in Gralea." His left hand dropped and the soldiers moved in. Half started firing their guns, and the other half lunged at the barrier, blades galore. Cracks started forming after a few minutes.

Atra hissed as she poured more magic in the barrier to repair it. "I can't hold it forever!" she yelled. "We've got to find a way out!"

As if answering her prayers, a shadow danced across the factory, destroying drone after drone. One was impaled by a kunai, three others the victims of shuriken, and a large number quickly fell when the shadow itself drilled through their bodies. It halted in front of the barrier and faced the walker. "Umbra!" Drautos shouted, and the figure gave him a single nod. He vanished in the blink of an eye, and when he was found again, the walker's leg was sliced off. The pressure worn down, Atra and Libertus split their barrier in half and guided the Kingsglaive into battle. Axis and Tredd joined hands and the former threw the latter in General Glauca's direction. He vanished with a warp strike and reappeared behind the general, striking the back of his armor before dodging the armored man's sword. Umbra took down another enemy and faded into smoke, reforming into solid mass next to Regis. The King reached in his blazer pocket and handed the ninja the crystal fragment he'd held onto since escaping Insomnia. "Noctis must receive it!" he urged, and sent the shadowy figure moving before summoning his own sword and intercepting a Magitek blade.

Amidst all the fighting, Ardyn walked forward, evading the surprise attack Sonitus and Luche attempted on him. The two crashed into one another, landing in a pile of metal crates. The Chancellor waltzed up to Atra and yanked her arm, shoving her into the nearest column. "Maybe I can convince you one more time," he whispered into her ear. "And I wouldn't try magic again if I were you." Ardyn shoved his hand into his pocket, and before he could take out the remote, he was knocked aside by Luche's flying knives. The Chancellor was embedded in the wall and pinned by the knives through his shoulders. Getting a grip on herself, Atra held her head and thanked Luche with a nod. The doctor spotted a wound on the Glaive's leg and knelt down to heal it. Her hand hovered over the bleeding area and was coated in a green aura. Halfway healed, Atra felt the agonizing surges return to her body and dropped to the floor, not seeing a murky smoke fly into Luche's face and knock him over. She forced herself over to the Glaive, whose oxygen supply was being cut off by whatever moved down his throat. "What did I say about using magic?" the Chancellor commented from across the room, pushing his body off the wall. The knives ripped through his shoulder and remained stuck in the concrete, and he paid no mind to his bleeding shoulders as he waltzed past the others. Tredd warped behind him and swiped his blades at vital blood vessels only to find his target gone, and Ardyn reappeared behind him with a hand around the man's neck. He pulled a knife from his back pocket and stabbed it into Tredd's back, pulling it down at an angle. Tredd choked up blood as he was thrown to the ground, the knife still sticking out of his back. "Oh, look. Your friends are falling and they can't get up. Whatever can you do to help them?"

The darkness that invaded Luche's lungs spread out in spires and protruded through his torso, and his breath ceased with a wide-eyed stare to the ceiling.

The doctor could only watch the others fall as she struggled against the pain coursing through her. Sonitus, Libertus, and Axis were all struck down by either blades or bullets. Senator Virtus was held from behind by General Glauca and his throat was slit spraying blood all over when he was dropped. Atra clawed at the ground, crawling with all her might to where Regis and Drautos stood. Her breath hitched in her throat the more she fought against Ardyn's invisible hold on her. "Why do you resist?" Ardyn asked her, kneeling beside the woman who watched Drautos and Glaucu exchange blows.
Regis did his best to protect himself with a magic barrier and swing his royal arms at the pursuing Magitek drones to keep them at bay. "I know you're your father's daughter, Atra, but you must be able to see how futile your efforts are."

"F-fuck you!"

Ardyn sucked his teeth. "And you have his vocabulary. He'll be pleased to hear that." The Chancellor clicked the large button on the remote and sent Atra spiraling out of control. Her scream alongside the thunder shattered a nearby window. One pupil dilated and covered her entire iris, the other contracted and expanded wildly. Her hand shot up and her palm aimed at King Regis, who caught a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye. "End him," Ardyn ordered her. Currents flowed between her fingers. Drautos saw the growing electricity and turned to his monarch. His hand grasped the underside of Glaouca's helmet and ripped it off his head. He shouted to Atra to redirect her strike at the general moments before dozens of bullets poured through his body. Atra sucked in a sharp breath and found the power within to send her Thundaga spell into Glaouca's face. The general flew into the wall and yelled as he got up. The left half of his face was burnt beyond recognition. Electric currents danced across the rest of his armor and he aimed his sword at the King's barrier, With a swing the remainder of her spell collided into his barrier and shattered it to pieces. Through the smoke, Regis couldn't see Glaouca approaching from behind. He turned around with only seconds to react, seconds he couldn't match when the large sword plowed through his body.

Atra screamed. Regis's mouth fell open. Ardyn watched the doctor get to her feet and try to run to heal him. His arms coiled around her torso and pulled her backwards. She knocked the back of her head against his to make him release his grip, but the Chancellor only slammed her face-first into a crate. Her vision spun and warped as she rolled over, pained moans leaving her throat. Her strength was gone. Someone picked her up and threw her over their shoulder. "We fly to Gralea," Ardyn's voice commanded from somewhere in the space she couldn't pinpoint. Agony swam through her head, and the last view she had of Lucis before passing out was Glaouca's foot pushing the King's body off his sword to join his men on the ground.
No one could help Noctis. Not when his footsteps suddenly froze as they ran from the Imperials tracking them, not when they found themselves surrounded, not when his comrades noticed the red hue of his irises. His screams rang loud as the rain fell, matching the octave of the thunder crackling above. The revelation hit Cor first, and he did his best to remain focused on the fight ahead of them while the younger members of the group shifted between protecting their Prince and doing what they could to calm his screams. Nothing they said reached him when he warped out of sight and reappeared on top of a Magitek body, his sword through the middle of its face plate. The Prince was gone again before anyone could utter a word or command, and back again in a blast of ice. Hordes of the robotic husks lay encased in the very ice still blowing from Noctis’ palms, his bloodied irises the only way his protectors could spot him through his blizzard. He ignored the bullets that grazed his face and body while continuing to charge forward, and the longer they stayed in the fight, the more Cor could feel a tugging in his chest directed at his charge. His strikes on the massive walker dropped down from another passing airship were bathed in a golden glow which matched the pressure growing behind his eyes. The others could only do their best to support Cor and Noctis while their assault on the enemy continued. Noctis summoned the Bow of the Clever, fighting against the sudden drain in energy he felt, and fired at all in his line of sight. Prompto and Gladiolus pushed Ignis to the ground, each laying a hand over his form to keep him from getting injured any further, hearing only the cries of their Prince and the exploding husks several yards away from them. The blond shut one eye and aimed his pistol at the soldiers who managed to make it past Noctis’ blizzard and arrow assault, the bullets piercing their masks and knocking them backwards. Gladiolus urged Prompto to keep Ignis safe as he rolled to a safe opening and charged forward with his greatsword. Magitek troops leaped into the battlefield through the trees and swiped their modified katsbalgers at the shield, who did his best to make it to Cor's side while deflecting the oncoming attacks. It was as he bifurcated three lunging drones that he saw just how Cor was eliminating multiple targets at once. The usual calm swipes of his katana were long gone, replaced by a dance tangled in flying boulders; at one point, he threw his blade into the semi-functioning giant walker and plowed his bare fist into one of the larger MT’s bodies, clearing a hole through its power system. He lifted the husk with his hand still in its chest plate and swung it around him, using its attached blades to destroy whatever soldiers approached. Near the end Gladiolus swore he saw Cor rip the borrowed Magitek in half with his hands alone and scatter the two halves on opposite sides of the battlefield. The golden glow present around his form earlier was gone, and he hurried over to one of the soldiers to retrieve his katana. Extending his hand to the hilt, he retracted it moments before lightning struck the ground next to the broken husk. Far down the path, the Marshal spotted Noctis on his hands and knees, his form soaked by the rain and pained, scratchy gasps struggling to leave his throat. Cor ripped his katana free and sheathed it, then gave Gladiolus and Prompto a brief warning glance to stay back until the skies calmed.

The Prince couldn’t hear the guardian’s footsteps. Anything he tried to articulate translated to nothing more than muffled breaths that blended into the rain storm pouring on him. There was no one else around except the bodies that lay around his shaking form. He was sure their count was in the hundreds, possibly nearing a thousand, but he didn't care how many of the drones Niflheim sent after him. He wanted to rip them to shreds, tear Iedolas' still-beating heart from his chest while his spoiled...
brat of a son watched. He wanted Ardyn barely clinging to life and coherent so he could put the Chancellor through the endless torture he was sure Luna was subjected to at the moment of her capture. But most of all, he wanted his father's soul to turn around and return to his body instead of slowly backing away from him with open arms and the usual sincere smile. His brows scrunched together, his lips separated to expose his teeth, and Noctis knelt with his head tilted upward. Ignoring the others who walked beside the fallen King into the next world, he couldn't tell where the rain stopped and his own tears began. Perhaps Eos was distraught over Regis' death, too, and the downpour was her way of expressing the unbearable sorrow that coursed through Noctis at that moment. All his rage was gone. There was no one else around, no one that could bring his father back. And for a split second, he contemplated doing the one thing that would reunite them forever.

He barely registered Cor's hands on his shoulders or the older man trying to make eye contact with him. His lips were moving but no words came out. He could only hear his father's voice playing in his head, only see his father's limped gait as he walked in front of him, only feel the monarch's hand caressing his cheek while he lay in bed as a child following his unfortunate meeting with a Naga. Even the scent of the rain was taken over by the strong aroma of his father's cologne, the one he specifically wore when they had guests visiting the palace. Noctis always hated how heavy it was, but at that moment, with no strength in him to pick up the sword and run it through himself so they could be together again, it was all he wanted to smell around him. He'd had it on right before the invasion, and the very thought of it made his breath catch in his throat. He felt his own heart stopping, overrun by a sudden pain that swelled in the middle of his chest, starting from the front and working its way through the middle until it spread across his back. The curse of Etro showed its most vibrant colors that stormy night when he saw, tasted, smelled, heard, and felt exactly what King Regis Lucis Caelum, the fallen King of Lucis, experienced with his dying breath.

Three more bodies circled around him. With his mind elsewhere, Noctis didn't have it in him to see if they were friend or foe, and was ready to be struck down should that be the case. They wrapped themselves around him: blond hair tickled at his nose when Prompto nuzzled his face into the Prince's neck, Ignis ushered Noctis' head to the side and against his own chest, and Gladiolus held his brothers together for fear of losing them. Cor stepped away and knelt beside the younger men, resting his forehead on the hilt of his katana. They sat in silence while the rain continued to pour on them, and despite the quiet gestures of comfort to him, Noctis could only see the last image he had of his father from his memory. He was inside a magic shield put up by one of the Kingsglaive, likely one who died trying to protect him, and the monarch's hand was against the glassy barrier. Noctis had laid his hand on the other side, mirroring his father's actions.

"I'm not leaving without you!"

"This isn't a choice we can afford. You must take Luna with you to Solheim."

"...Just get there by the time I make it."

"May the gods grant you protection on your journey, my son..."

His gaze shifted to the far-off distance, farther down the path they'd trekked, still hoping to see the twinkling light bouncing off the barrier. He saw nothing. A tear rolled from his eye and over the bridge of his nose, dripping onto Ignis' sleeve. More followed, the others noticing when Noctis began to tremble in their grasp. None of them, not even the Astral, could ever understand the sight of his father's soul departing from the physical world and marching toward the path lit up ahead. A figure stood far taller than any man would, body tied in torn, mummified wrappings that dripped red onto the land and mixed in with the rain. Her pale white hair flared out and circled her head, decorated by a crown constructed from molted moth wings and thorny black vines. A cloth hung over the top half of her face, hiding her eyes and the top half of her nose, and red ovals were met
with zig-zagged streaks that flowed down her cheeks to her jawline. Behind the cloth, he knew, were
the all-seeing eyes of death he'd been 'blessed' with, and they stared back at him.

"...You promised you'd make it..."
Twenty years ago, as Niflheim was reaching its prime in their Magitek project, there was still one matter they'd yet to fully address. Along with finding sustainable ways to program and have remote access to the Magitek unites without the need for connecting wires, the crown city of Gralea had a different matter to deal with. That matter was referred to as Nifeli mutants.

Soldiers rushed into the landing zone in drones. They took their places outside the palace walls, guns in hand, before the arrival of the airships. The special cargo delivery had to be perfect; no flaws would be tolerated in the transporting of the Lucian crystal. Aranea's fleet arrived within the hour, and the Imperial Forces were informed of the impending entrance of Chancellor Izunia's personal airship flying in with another surprise, one he refused to announce over the radio waves to keep up the suspense, and yet a third transport from Prince Velox. A path was cleared for the Imperial Science Team to make their way to the opening hatch of the airship's cargo hold, and all were blinded by the light that shimmered off the monstrous mineral. Specks of purple and orange swirled against the blue interior and traveled through the jetting spires. Magiteks grabbed hold of the chain which held the crystal and hoisted it onto a giant wheeled platform with the science team spotting them. At the top of a grand staircase some yards away, a face rare to the outside of the palace observed the actions of all in the crystal's presence. Lead scientist Verstael Besithia watched with his arms folded neatly behind him, his chin pointed high and jaw clenched. His interns flanked him on either side and took notes as they watched with him. One pressed a button on a remote in her grasp and opened a large metal door to the right of the stairway. The Magitek troops were reprogrammed to move the crystal into the freight elevator for transport to the underground research lab, where the science team would begin to pluck live samples off the spires and test them for various methods of use. A squadron pulled on the chains attached to the wheeled platform as another pushed from behind. The creaking of the wheels from the weight of the crystal was heard all throughout the citadel, and just beyond the palace gates many yards away, lower-equipped husks were busy keeping the public eye away from all the commotion. The parked airships hid the entirety of the crystal from the citizens of Gralea and none dared to get any closer than the officers allowed them to. They could only depend on their ears to make out the orders which were yelled between the troops and scientists on hand to determine what was going on for themselves. Verstael turned around and walked back into the palace when the elevator door shut and beckoned for his interns to follow him back to the laboratory to begin their tests.

A child pointed up to the sky and tugged at his mother's sleeve when he heard the familiar whirring of another oncoming airship. The gold and red stripes on the outside indicated it as one of royal transport and the public immediately broke into a cheer, some waving their nation's flag and other jumping for joy upon learning of the return of their beloved Prince. Velox's ship was the next to land, after Aranea's was carted away to the airship hangar to be parked. The soldiers that remained lined themselves on either side of the ship's hatch door, and when it opened, they changed forms to a royal salute. Velox waltzed down the hatch and onto a long red carpet which rolled out before him, followed closely behind by his silent assistant Lex. Handmaids skipped down the carpet and aligned it perfectly with the one that met the stairs before picking up baskets of syleblossom petals to throw before their Prince's feet. The Nifeli Prince turned halfway down the carpet to the gate, just after his
The public was cleared away from the square, told the curfew was being enforced for that night due
to their Prince having just returned and 'other high-risk reasonings they didn't need the details on'.
They obliged without any issues, much to their own disappointment, knowing they could possibly
miss the Chancellor's arrival in the citadel. And Ardyn's caravan landed right after the square was
quiet again, the hatch falling open much quicker than normal for the Chancellor. While he was one to
normally take his time, he was only there to make a quick drop-off and hadn't the time for a leisurely
welcome. The soldiers stood at attention once more as Ravus marched out, keeping a hand on his
sword's hilt. The two conscripts behind him seemed to struggle with whatever fought against them in
the shadows, but a good tug forced Atra out of the airship and into the open space. Bearing her teeth,
she yelled and growled at both the human and robotic troops that kept their stares blank as she was
escorted across the carpeted path and up the stairs to the palace's main entrance. Two others joined
them and marched beside her when they entered the palace walls and turned right. Atra ignored the
gleam of the highly decorated interior and squirmed against the soldiers' grip, eventually getting one
of her arms free and knocking one of their helmets off. Her hand burned from the impact and she
reached for the back of Ravus' coat, only to be thrown into the nearest wall and resecured. Ravus
said nothing, only staring at the commotion until it settled, and walked onward to a small elevator.
He was saluted by the sentries standing at attention and one pressed the call button for him. He
stepped inside, not shifting in the slightest when Atra was thrown in and held with her face to the
back wall, and barely uttering a sound when she cursed all their existences to the infernos beneath
the ground. "Fuck you all" was a favored term used by the doctor, one Ravus had heard so many
times over by one of the Nifeli generals when he didn't get his way. Her profanities were ignored,
and when she dragged her legs on the ground to make movement more difficult for them after the
reached their desired floor, a swift kick to the back of her knees got her walking again. She was
pulled through one hallway after another, and her cursing shifted to demands of knowing where she
was being led. Ravus kept an eye on her through his peripheral vision. It was the first time he'd truly
laid eyes on the sorceress. The inside of the airship had lighting too dim for him to be able to make
out the details in her face. Having only heard tales about her told by citizens of various cities and
soldiers alike, he was intrigued by how heavily her appearance opposed the local stories that spread
across the world. She looked nothing like a lethal weapon, even when she bared her teeth and
snarled at the guard and servants who passed them in the halls.

Her fighting spirit seemingly gone, Atra was thrown into a large room. The soldiers stormed inside
and stood at either side of the sole entryway to block off her access, only stepping aside to let Ravus
through. The doctor sat up and rolled her arms, hissing when the sting of muscle strain hit her. She
got to her feet and spun around, meeting the gaze of the man staring back at her. His unwavering
gaze bothered her and she averted her own, focusing instead on the interior of the room. She'd been
shoved through a small alcove that led into the main space of the room, the south wall lined entirely
by bookshelves. A pair of couches sat in the middle of a carpeted area, and between them and the
bookshelves, a large desk of glossed wood. The room smelled musty, similar to the old books she
was certain sat on the shelves, and she despised how familiar it was growing, bothered further when
she couldn't recall why. Her mind snapped out of recollection when Ravus seized her face with his
human hand. "My, my," he began, "the local tales do you no justice, Lady Interitio. You're much
more beautiful than they give you credit for." Atra shook herself free and leaped backwards. "Tell
me, Atra, how's my sister doing?"

"Your sister?" It took her more than a moment of staring at him to make the connection of the similarities between him and Luna. "You're of the Fleuret royal family."

"WAS. Unfortunately, the royals of Tenebrae are no more...no thanks to your Lucian friends." Ravus folded his hands behind his back and sauntered past Atra to the center of the room, sitting on one of the couches. "My sister and I had a falling out some time ago. She decided to side with your so-called King of Light, choosing a stranger over her own family." A sigh left him. "Losing your family is painful to deal with, as I'm sure you're all too aware. It's a shame I couldn't see the look on Prince Noctis' face as his family was ripped from him. What I would've given to see the light fade from his eyes when Regis' corpse dropped to the ground."

"You bastard!" Atra lunged forward and reached for Ravus' throat, only to be tackled to the ground by one of the guards. Her arm was twisted behind her back when she struggled against his hold. Groaning from the surge of pain in her restrained muscle, her glare shifted from Ravus' face to his metallic arm. She remembered overhearing something King Regis briefly mentioned when speaking to Noctis after their reunion in Altissia. The Ring of the Lucii had been stolen for a short time following the shooting which left the former monarch near death in the invasion, and in the minutes before it was discovered, its savior overheard a blood-curdling scream echo from the room it rolled out of. It was said the consequences of a non-chosen individual wearing the ring could be anything including death, and the screams matched the voice of a man bearing an uncanny likeness to the Oracle. Atra calmed and ceased her struggling. "You tried on the ring, didn't you?" She knew she was right when his smile curled downward into a frown. "I heard about what happens when an unworthy soul attempts to wear it. I'm amazed you survived the ordeal."

Ravus sneered at the memory. "While my trial didn't go as expected, I've not given up on dismantling the Lucian royals. Having you here is only a small part, Lamia." It was her turn to grunt in scorn. "We've got all but one of the pieces in our possession, and the last isn't far off." A knock at the door distracted Ravus from continuing his monologue. He motioned his head for one of the soldiers to answer it, and when he turned back to his commanding officer, Ravus gestured for the others to let Atra go. "Other matters call for me, Lady Interitio. I hope your time here in Niflheim is much more enjoyable than your first." He bowed to Atra, bringing her to raise an eyebrow, and spun on his heel to leave the room. Hushed conversation was exchanged between the commander and whoever stood on the other side, accompanied by occasional glances over the former's shoulder at the doctor. Atra paid no attention to whatever discussion was brewing and curled into herself. She found her footing once the soldiers stepped away from her and lined themselves on the wall near the alcove, their focus on her at all times. She advanced toward the wall of books and laid her hand on their spines. Each title reminded her of something she remembered as a kid, clearing the blocked-out memories. One book in particular - lined in purple with gold and bronze lettering printed on the spine - was a story she recalled hearing from one of her housemaids when she was young. She turned away from it and sucked her teeth, blocking the title with her hand to prevent herself from reading it again.

"Atra." The voice that called her name didn't belong to Ravus. Its tone was deeper, rough on the edges, a standard of the Nifeli accent, and it sent chills swimming through her spine. Atra's posture straightened as she hesitated to face the person who said her name. Fear built up in her feet and boiled into her chest when she laid eyes on the man standing across the room, just out of reach of the door. The crow's feet that tapered from his slate eyes showed age some years beyond Cor, what Regis might've looked like had he aged at a proper pace. His hair, dark blond in hue, was cut short and hung neatly gelled behind his ears. His attire was clad in medals and a monotone color palette: red lining on the lapel of his shirt that stuck out under a cobalt uniform. A cape hung over his left shoulder, white with red lining and the Niflheim insignia stitched in the bottom center. He was
unarmed, wearing no form of protective gear. A faint scar followed the line of his lips just below his
mouth on the right side and buried itself beneath a thin beard, and the longer she gawked at the man,
the wider Atra's eyes grew at the sight of her father.

Callisto Interitio took a step closer to his daughter. "Atra," he repeated, "my precious daughter..." He
converged to her with open arms and a gentle grin, having not laid eyes on her in over five years.
The last time he saw came from a picture in a newspaper reporting on the incident involving Lamia
in the Presidential Palace, revealing her to be the Nifeli sorceress. Atra remained stone-face and
didn't move an inch while he neared her, keeping her arms drawn in. "My, look at how you've
grown. You've turned into such a beautiful young woman in the short time you've been gone. Even
with the world slandering your name, you've stood strong and prevailed." Callisto stopped in front of
Atra, his eyes wandering across the face of the changed woman, and noticed a bruise on her cheek.
Dark circles had gathered under her eyes, and though she refused to meet his gaze, he could sense
the apprehension of their reunion dancing in her head. "You've been through so much, but you're
home again. You're finally home." Callisto couldn't contain himself any longer and scooped Atra
into his grasp, pulling her against him for an embrace. His hands lay on her back and head as he
cradled her. For a second, the stubborn woman felt time reverse and found herself at age seven again,
the best age from her childhood, the age she remembered her father reading her stories until she fell
asleep and dancing with him at royal galas. It was the only time she could recall him being proud of
her. Atra's conscience kicked in before she fell too deep and she pushed on his chest to free herself.
When she took some steps backwards and created space between them, she swung her arm in a hook
and punched the general in his jaw. He staggered as he fell off-balance, holding his swelling cheek,
and regained his footing. When he looked at his daughter again, her fists were trembling and her
breathing grew rapid.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" she yelled at him, ignoring the soldiers scrambling to aim their
firearms at her. "Five years. FIVE years of dealing with the bullshit you put me through for most of
my life. Five years of putting up with your little spies dropping in on my house, trying to KIDNAP
me. And you want to play father now that I've been captured? You think we can just make amends
like we argued over a curfew?" Callisto tried to reach for her, only to be pushed into the bookcase.
"Don't even try it!" The door to the study burst open and a flood of armed soldiers poured in, all
aiming to shoot Atra. Callisto urged them to lower their weapons with his hand, to which they
partially obeyed. Atra wandered further into the room, shoving an Imperial out of her way with a
growl, and leaned her arms on the window sill. The sky was pitch black even with all the city lights
reflecting on it, and she couldn't tell if it was due to clouds or an omen. "...I'm not surprised they sent
you."

"Sweetheart-"

"Don't you DARE call me that!" she spat. Her pupils expanded for a second, alerting the soldiers
once more. They started to retake their aim as Callisto got back to his senses.

The general stepped between the soldiers and Atra. "Stand down," he ordered them. "She's not a
threat." They refused to lower their guard this time, not trusting Atra's erratic emotional state around
their commander. They were witnessing the wrath of the sorceress first-hand, and only obliged when
Callisto laid his hand atop one of their guns. "I won't allow you to hurt my daughter." The troops
backed away again, each one keeping both hands on their gun in case she went ballistic and
attacked. Callisto watched them halt their steps, not trusting Lamia with his safety, and he turned to
face them in full. He folded his arms behind his back and raised his head in an authoritative manner,
resuming the demeanor of his occupation. "I am more than capable of defending myself should the
witch try and strike me," he assured them, making no effort to hide the bruise developing on his
swollen cheek.
One of the soldiers stepped forward and saluted him. "With all due respect, sir, we're talking about the woman responsible for more than two-hundred casualties of our men. The Chancellor and General Glaucia are the only ones to have survived an encounter with her."

"I know what I said." The soldier ceased his words as his general spoke. "Now if you've no business here other than guarding me, you're dismissed."

"We were sent by His Imperial Majesty, my lord. He wants Lord Verstael to examine her as soon as possible."

"Already? I thought he was still playing with the crystal." Atra stared at the speaking soldier and released her tightening grip on the window sill. The name he mentioned cracked in her head like a whip. His name came up on numerous occasions when she was a child, when her father would bring her to the palace medical wing. He always told her it was due to a mysterious disease plaguing her, though she never felt sick when she made the trips. It was the same disease said to have claimed the life of her mother...who, oddly, was never buried. Though the memory of his appearance was a blur to her, Atra had a clearer recognition of his voice. She clapped her hands over her ears as it rang through her mind and crumbled to her knees, curling into a ball.

"That man..." All she could remember every time his voice bounced through her skull was pain. "...Keep him away from me..."

Seeing her in that stance alarmed the troops, and as they readied themselves to surround her, General Callisto urged them to keep away from her. "I'll take her myself," he told them. "Inform him that she'll be downstairs shortly." No one except for him moved, inching ever closer to Atra to keep from scaring her. "Atra," he began, "I don't know what's going through your mind right now, but Doctor Verstael's a good man. He treated countless times when you were a kid, keeping your sickness at bay-"

"I was never sick!" Atra found strength in her legs and shot up. "What you kept labeling a disease was something perfectly normal. I've seen so many people use magic and not once were they ever deemed something sub-human. You only call it a disease because you have no control and you're scared." Pain began to grow in her neck and spread to the base of her skull. "Maybe if you weren't so scared of the crystal and didn't want to destroy it, you wouldn't have left me with that monster!" Thunder cracked outside the window. "But maybe you're right. Maybe you should fear me!"

Throwing her hand out, a flaming tendril ejected from her palm, fading to nothing before it could touch anything. Callisto extended his hand in her direction and immediately retracted it when a spark of lightning shocked his fingertips. "You'd do best to keep your distance, General Interitio. You wouldn't want your name added to my list of casualties..."

A shot rang out from one of the soldiers' guns, the bullet striking her leg. Atra sank to the floor again and was helpless to the men restraining her. "I'm sorry, Atra," General Callisto started as the soldiers hoisted her to her feet. "This is for your own good. You've been away for so long that your sickness has advanced. It's taking over your mind. Doctor Verstael will be able to take care of you, just as he tried to save your mother..."

Atra gasped at the mention of her mother. She was never talked about by Callisto, who avoided the topic for many years. Her sudden disappearance had brought the then four-year old Atra despair for months as she was left with no answers as to why her mother wasn't around anymore. Not once did she recall the name Nebula Flumine ever circulate between the estate staff or aristocrats. For Callisto to even mention her was highly out of character, as was his sudden affection for Atra, and a suspicious knot formed in her gut. "What did you do?" she asked the general. He turned his back to her and wandered to the bookcase, ushering a lackadaisical hand wave for the soldiers to escort her
out. Atra fought against their pull with kicks and screamed at her father again. "What did you do to her! Where's my mother?"

She fought with the servicemen the entire way down the hall, and her tension rose when they walked by the elevator they'd taken upstairs. At some point she threw her body backwards and kicked one of the guards into a pillar, and another took his place and grabbed her legs. Restrained by all four limbs, there was little she could do to prevent them from carrying her down several flights of stairs and to another elevator. The light inside flickered the further they went down, and when they reached the basement levels, the hairs on the back of Atra's neck stood up. The memories of visiting the man Callisto called 'Doctor' flooded back and she found the fight in herself again. Atra freed one of her arms and reached her hand for the gun in the soldier's leg holster. The sentry grabbed her wrist before she could gain a hold of it and she screamed, and a surge of electricity erupted from her fingers. It swam into both soldiers restraining her and danced across her own skin, singing the top layer and destroying the motherboards inside the robotic husks. They dropped her to the ground and she rolled out of the way of the human soldiers who'd jumped out of the way of her attack. Seeing them reach for their own firearms, Atra shot a purple wave out at them and the men froze in place. She tiptoed away from them, keeping her hands up to watch for another attack, but grew distracted by the noises behind her.

The laboratory was just as she remembered. The walls were still covered in steel plates, cleaner than what she recalled, and machines beeped all over the entryway. Tubing with what looked like wires and liquid was bolted to the ceilings, carrying Etro knew what into the deeper basement levels. A click sounded at the elevator and the door locked, a red light next to the door turning on. "Dammit," she whispered to herself.

"Atra Ardere Interitio." The raspy voice echoing from down the hall gained her attention. An old man stopped beside one of the machines on the wall and rested his hand on it. Soldiers were on either side of him, their guns and blades pointed at the doctor. "I don't know why he wants me to continue referring to you by that name," he continued, signaling for the Magiteks to secure her. Atra thrust her hand out at them to shoot lightning but suddenly found every muscle in her body constricting and fell to the floor. "Down here you were only known as #74, but your father thought you were above a serial number." The troops forced Atra to stand and walk when the old man started to move further into the laboratory. His voice sent chills throughout her strained limbs, the same chill she remembered from her childhood "Mutants like you aren't worthy of human names. You're lucky you have someone of such high caliber on your side." He signaled the drones to push her into an enormous glass box and half followed her inside. "Begin the simulation."

She had no time to demand answers before the transparent glass darkened, leaving her in complete darkness. When the black void dissipated Atra found herself in Altissia once more. All the buildings around her were on fire. Only herself and the soldiers were present among the destruction, and they didn't hesitate to pounce. The first three Magiteks fired their entire clips at her. Atra raised a magic barrier and pushed against the impacting metal cylinders until the shield flew forward and knocked the soldiers down. Another shot out its retractable arm and grabbed her by the neck, then dragged her into the path of a katzbalger. Her feet skid on the ground and stopped her body mere inches from the tip of the blade. She yanked on the retracting wire and pulled the soldier and another into the blade's trajectory. Shaking the hand free from her neck, Atra ducked under another's sword and swiped a dropped firearm, unloading every bullet into as many husks as she could target. She threw the gun aside when the clip emptied and threw a fireball out in the bullets' place. Some soldiers' feet were seared to the ground as she leaped backwards, unknowingly into the path of another squadron she hadn't noticed before. The drones threw her into the window of a nearby building and one aimed its flamethrower inside the broken glass. Atra ducked under the window opening and covered her head with her hands, feeling the heat from the flames blasting through. She blacked out, and came to when the room was covered in thick, jagged layers of ice. She grabbed onto the window sill and hoisted
herself outside. The wave of soldiers following her were suspended in the air, impaled on frozen stalagmites through their chest plates. Panting, Atra reached for one of their swords on the floor, and her eyes darted left and right. "Verstael!" she yelled. "Show yourself, you freak!"

Something behind her moved, cracking the ice pillars and dropping the destroyed Magiteks from the sky. Spinning on her heel, Atra swung the sword in her grasp into whatever approached with her eyes squeezed shut. A gurgling noise followed, and when she opened her eyes to inspect her enemy, the katzbalger fell to the ground. Aurum, the teenage boy she'd treated for years, fell backwards, mouth agape and wide-eyed. Blood poured out from a slice in his neck and pooled around his head. "Aurum!!" Atra scrambled to her knees and laid her hands on the profusely leaking wound. His blood seeped between her fingers and dripped down the length of her hands, staining her clothes as the pool expanded. She began to hyperventilate as she searched her body for the necessary energy to perform a healing spell, and cursed out loud when it wouldn't obey her.

"A...tra..." Her eyes shifted to the boy's face, finding his stare locked on her. "...Why did you... I thought...you cared...for...us....." Aurum coughed out a bloody bubble, the liquid spraying everywhere when he settled. "You..." The pained moans escalated from just him, and soon Atra found the Magiteks standing again. Their armored masks fell off and revealed human faces, faces of people she knew, and the last one that rose from the floor shed its mask to expose Prompto's freckled complexion marred by blood and ice. Tears streaked down Atra's face. The Magiteks turned victims began a slow march toward her, and she pulled a barrier all around herself. Aurum clawed at the shield while the others came closer, and as Atra curled into herself and struggled to keep the barrier in place, all the chaos around her vanished in a blinding white light.

"Get it in the chair." She was taken by surprise again, pain surging through all her muscles and leaving her no strength to fight with. The glass room reappeared and she was dragged out of it, her energy drained. The new Magiteks held her down in a metal chair until the science interns could strap her wrists, ankles and torso to the contraption. Only when she was immobilized did Verstael show himself to her, an assistant beside him taking notes when the interns attached nodes and monitors to her body. Her heart rate was erratic, as were her breathing and the readings they got from a machine connected to her temples by sticky probes. "You're beginning to malfunction," the old man told her, his eye on the brain wave scanner's screen. "You've been fighting against the controls for so long that you're destroying my work. I should've just lobotomized you when I had the chance instead of listening to your father."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. Verstael didn't blink at the threatening tone she attempted to give off.

"So you really are that stupid. Just like the others, I presume, though you showed much more potential than those before and after you." He retrieved the remote from his pocket again and stepped away from Atra, continuing until he was on the other side of the room and out of sight. Atra wrangled against the chair's restraints to no avail. "I'm not a man of ample time, #74." His voice rang inside her mind, double-toned in the same manner she vaguely recalled hearing in her flashbacks. Its words were twisted from the human tongue to that of the Archeans in a playback, and somehow she understood what they said. She blinked and shook her head, trying to explain to herself how she could hear his voice without him being there. She couldn't find any loudspeakers around the facility from the entrance to her current location, and none of the interns reacted in a way where his voice would have startled them. Verstael returned from the shadows, holding the remote close to his mouth. "You should've listened to my commands and killed the Prince when you had the chance. But alas..." He clicked the button below it and Atra erupted in an ear shattering scream. Electric currents danced in her muscles and seared her from the inside out. When Verstael released the button he sneered at the woman's hanging head. "There are consequences for not obeying your orders, Lamia."
Atra shook her head and huffed. "...I'm...not Lamia..." Another shock hit her.

Verstael marched to Atra and stopped in front of her, lifting her chin with a metal tongue depressor from the nearby tray. "Atra Ardere Interitio, subject #74 in a journey to finally utilize magic. The lone survivor of said experiment, thus bearing the project's title as your own. Lamia is your new name, and will be it forever." He forced her head up further with the medical tool, the edge of the depressor pressing into the skin on the underside of her jaw, then backed off and set the tool aside. "General Interitio had too kind a heart to tell you the truth behind your frequent childhood visits. You already know I'm no ordinary doctor." She had no strength to make a snide remark, and resorted to using her eyes to express her disgust of the man. "The people of Niflheim have been plagued by mutants for generations, and in recent times, the numbers of your kind have skyrocketed to values we've never seen before. It was a growing problem. We couldn't have little monsters blessed with the Lucian gift playing with literal fire in the streets, endangering our citizens, getting strong enough to start a rebellion..." Verstael, who had begun to pace the floor in front of her, took a vial of shimmering purple liquid from a shelf and studied it nonchalantly. "I'd conducted countless experiments on you creatures since I took over this research facility, and no matter how many mutants His Imperial Majesty gave me, I was no closer to finding an answer to the greatest question since the rise of my Magiteks: how can I pull the gene to control magic and implant it in my drones?"

"And then Chancellor Izunia came to me one evening with a suggestion. 'Approach the problem from another angle,' he said. 'Utilize the magic while still fresh.' He proved a point. None of the regular humans I injected the gene into were able to so much as spout out a snowflake. My only option was to find a way to make the mutants fight for us - a simpler task in theory, but one that required careful planning. Live humans cannot be controlled the same way Magiteks are; there's too much power behind their free will. The Chancellor assisted me in forming an experiment to test on subjects of all ages: the Lamia Project." Atra's jaw clenched as she stared at him. "Mutants were gathered from the streets and various forms of physical and mental control were tested on them. One by one they failed to comply and ultimately died fighting what they couldn't handle." Verstael turned his face to Atra again. "And then I hear that a certain general's daughter is one of these very mutants, and her mother has kidnapped her in order to save her. This woman fled Niflheim and headed for Lucis with a guardian in tow, and they fought relentlessly to protect the little monster from her fate." Flashes appeared in Atra's mind of her four-year old self being carried and covered in a cloak to conceal her face. The woman carrying her had auburn hair and blue eyes, from what she remembered, and there was another. Her appearance was more difficult to remember, but the one thing Atra could recollect was the icy touch the second woman's hands had whenever she would hold Atra's tiny hand. After a few nights the icy-handed woman was gone, and in a few days more, so was her mother. Gone from the pictures, the conversations, and slowly from existence. "Subject #74 was returned to me and the experiment began. You were much more compliant as a child. I wish you'd remained that way.

"In all, there were 156 subjects. There were 82 after you, most of which died early in the testing. You were the sole survivor of the 156 mutants following eight months of experiments and trials. Your device exceeded all expectations, and your Lamia mindset flourished with each test we performed. You were speaking the Archean tongue fluently by age ten - a remarkable feat by human standards." Atra's brow furrowed. "But you've become damaged. The influence of those Lucians has tainted the sorceress I shaped you to be-"
box. "Drain her."
'It's all in your head,' she kept repeating to yourself. 'This is just a simulation. Verstael's messing with you.' Atra was getting tired of repeating the mantra over and over again, and more so, of being suddenly thrust into battle. Thinking of reality was hard to concentrate on when she had to defend herself from the daemons and Magitek drones clawing after her. One husk sent its hand flying out at her and she scrambled to duck in time, remembering how it had played out the last time one performed the action. Her energy was starting to dwindle, and in turn, so was the strength of her spells. Goblins danced around her and the troops, ripping at her pants and sleeves to hold her down. The Magitek's arm curved around and dove back to its owner, gripping her torso as it lowered. It dragged Atra across the rocky battlefield, a Goblin leaping onto her back and digging its hands under her shirt. "It's all in your head," she yelled while reaching over her shoulder to tear the daemon off her body. "None of this is real." It took some fabric with it as she threw the creature into a sword sticking out between some boulders. She stuck her legs out and pushed hard against the Magitek who'd dragged her in, scouring the area to count the rest. Most twitched helplessly on the ground next to black pooling portal, and she noticed a red scorching hand reach out of one. Her breath sped up and she used her hand to help keep her body hovering off the Magitek, then pressed the other on its face. Her thumb slipped into the eye socket of the mask and cracked a hole in it just as she managed to free herself from the drone. Its own appendage flew into itself, and when she got to her feet, Atra's mouth fell open.

A beading yellow eye stared back at her through the hole, not wavering once when she backed away. The Magitek tilted its head and took a step forward, more of the mask falling apart and off its head. Atra gasped at the half-rotting corpse that sat inside. The skin on its face that hadn't been eaten away was a blue-gray, a total contrast to the yellow irises that beamed through black sclera. Blotches were all over the remaining skin, and the soldier reached a shaky hand up in her direction. She shrieked and sank to her knees, sending as much fire as she could create out at the monster. The ground shook when the Red Giant pulled itself out of the ground and marched toward her. It gained speed with each step. She released the flames from one hand and erected a barrier around her body, but the glass started to crack as she forced it to hold together. Seven bounding steps passed before the daemon was next to her, and then, it ran right past her. Still panting, Atra followed it with her eyes and watched it run to a group of hunters far off. She ceased her fire spell and caught her breath, laying a hand on her chest to ease herself. Fire still flickered behind her on a branch, emitting a low light onto the pieces of barrier that still held up. Her reflection shone on the inside wall, and as she leaned closer to it, her gaze drew into a squint. Her face was filthy - a fact she knew should've been the least of her concerns at that moment - but the longer she stared, the more her reflection warped into a decrepit version of herself, with beading yellow eyes and black sclera just like the Magitek under the shell. She rubbed ferociously at her face to see if it would change the image but it only grew more wretched, and when she moved her hands away from her face, the reflection kept theirs up. "It's just a simulation," Atra told herself again, pulling at her hair from the roots to feel around for any kind of device Verstael stuck on her. "It's all in your head-"

"Stop lying to yourself," her reflection retorted, bringing Atra to stop talking. "You're in a fucking war zone, for Etro's sake! Daemons and robots are trying to kill you. And if they don't get to you
first, the hunters will. You're just another daemon in their eyes."

Atra shook her head. "They don't think that. They're confused. They-

The barrier's glass shattered and fell apart, and still the reflection sat in front of Atra, flesh and bone and all. It shot to a standing position and poured fire in a circle around them. "Quit playing games! Do you not remember how the president of Accordo wanted you burned alive in the town square?"

The reflection fell silent when screams interrupted her in the distance. She and Atra watched the hunters fall prey to the Red Giant's flaming sword through the fire circle's burning tongues. "Look at them. All those people want you dead and won't think otherwise. And those who don't only want to use you for their own personal gain. Or have you forgotten about what happened to your mother?" It was the second time she'd heard anyone mention her mother. She'd used Nebula's name as her own after her escape from Nifelheim to keep the empire on their toes. Atra's eyes longed for an explanation, her reflection recognized, and she leaned her head back whilst licking her lips. "You have no idea."

"No idea of what?"

The reflection scowled at her momentarily, then turned her attention to an area close by on the battlefield. Atra's eyes followed, and voices came soon after. Two figures ran across the rocky environment, one carrying an object wrapped in burlap against its shoulder, and legs dangled from the bottom. Cloaks shrouded their faces. A squadron of Magitek troops fired their guns at them. One of the figures stopped and removed the hood, and the other looked over their shoulder when they sensed their companion halt. "Wait! You can't!-" She was silenced when her companion raised her other arm and a blizzard took over the land. Atra shielded her own face from the snowy onslaught while the reflection watch without hesitation. The Magiteks began to freeze in place, their limbs twitching when they attempted to move in the ice. Two airships whirred overhead and each dropped a cargo hold, releasing more drones onto the battlefield. The combating figure turned her head and her hood fell off, releasing platinum blond frost-covered hair and worried sapphire eyes stared back. The other's hood was thrown off. Atra shrieked in silence at the sight of her mother, a near spitting image of herself, and the memory of that night flooded back exactly as it was playing out in front of her. "Ione!" Nebula yelled, watching ice accumulate onto Ione's skin and drain her color.

Ione glanced at Nebula over her shoulder. "You have to keep running! Get her over the border before more come!" Troops started to fire at them, and Ione raised a barrier over them. The bullets caught in its wall and dropped to the floor. "I'll hold them off for as long as I can. Just run!" Another airship paused over them, casting a shadow onto the women. Nebula separated the large barrier into two smaller ones for each of them and turned her attention to the bundle in her arms. She uncovered a child's head, and when she looked down at the young girl, Atra's heart skipped. The memory cleared and she began to see everything through the eyes of the small girl in her mother's arms.

"Momma? Why's Ione stopping?"

Nebula kissed her daughter's forehead. "Ione will be fine. You and I will keep moving until we're in Virent, where we'll make a lot of new friends. She'll meet us there in a little while."

Young Atra grinned. "Really?" Her smile vanished when the ground shook and she hid her head in her mother's bosom with a squeal.

"Go, Nebula!" the woman commanded her companion from across the battlefield. Adult Atra's movements mimicked that of her toddler self in a simultaneous fashion as the smoky reflection continued to observe in silence. Both turned their heads behind them, witnessing Ione's skin take on a blue hue. She thrust her arms out to both sides and stared at the sky, ignoring the soldiers who aimed their firearms at her. Nebula spun on her heel and dashed away from Ione, hearing the woman
whisper a final sentence under her icy breath.

"Shiva...parce mihi est ad finem."

Ione's image ghosted over her frame and expanded out, growing in size. Her hair twisted into long, midnight blue dreads and braids that swiped the legs of oncoming Magiteks out from under them. Icicles popped out from the ground too fast for the soldiers to time and dodge, bringing many to be skewered in midair as they dropped from their cargo cabins. Atra peered over her mother's shoulder, face bouncing against the bag hanging off her back, and saw Shiva take over Ione's mind and body. Magi shot from every limb, some from her mouth, spreading ice everywhere. "Ione!" the child yelled before feeling her mother skid to a halt, and turning to find a wall of the robotic soldiers waiting for them not far ahead. The man standing in the middle marched forward, his hands folded behind his back before extending one out to the woman and child.

"Imagine my surprise," Callisto began, "when I find our home devoid of my wife and daughter. Not even a note left behind. Did you even take anything with you when you decided to run, Nebula?" His gaze drifted to the girl in her arms. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm sorry all the big robots are chasing after you, but your momma and I need to have an adult conversation, and you have to go back home."

Nebula bared her teeth at the Nifeli general. "The time for conversation is long past, Callisto. It was gone when you chose to give my child to that madman!" Callisto took another step toward them and Nebula jumped back, reaching a hand behind her. One of the soldiers fired a bullet that grazed her leg, forcing her to drop to a knee.

"Momma!"

"You'd fire at me with your own daughter in my arms?" The oracle pulled a collapsed guandao from her bag and flicked it into form, pointing it at her former love. "He's going to kill her!"

"Verstael is going to save her," a voice said from behind the enemy line. Ardyn sauntered into view and squeezed himself between two Magiteks to stand next to Callisto. "Her magic reserves are higher than any other mutant we've seen. Had she been born in the lower class, yes, she might have faced death. But you should consider yourself lucky, Nebula, that you married into nobility. General Interitio's status grants Atra protection-

A blast of lightning shot at the Chancellor, who ducked to avoid the spell that obliterated three Magitek drones. "Word it however you want, Ardyn. Nothing will stop me from keeping her safe." Nebula stabbed the butt of the staff into the ground and a purple ring of gas spread out to them. The soldiers that began to charge froze in place, and when she sprinted forward, Callisto's head turned to follow her steps. She rushed her shoulder into one of the troops to knock it aside, and when she got past it, a hand split her and her daughter apart, throwing the woman into a pile of felled husks. "Atra!"

Ardyn held the squirming girl in one hand while raising the other to the oracle. "Has your memory failed you? Or did you really forget that magic does nothing to me?" He whisked his hand upward, summoning an arsenal of sword that surrounded him and pointed at Nebula. "Three thousand years doesn't change a thing, Nebula." One sword was sent at her and she parried it with her staff. "You can be reborn as many times as you want. The end result will be the same." Another was flung forward and managed to slice a line in her skin before being blocked and tossed into another soldier's armor. Young Atra screamed and cried for her mother, and not a moment later, frost layered on her and Ardyn's skin. Shiva and Ione appeared before them and the latter rushed forward, grabbing the child before the goddess blasted him with ice, freezing him in place. Shiva grabbed the Chancellor and threw him far off, his body vanishing the further it soared.
"Ut currere eam!" Ione and Shiva commanded them, the goddess lifting the oracle up with the bend of a finger. Nebula stood and ran to her child, caressing the crying child's cheek. Ione did the same on Atra's right and hugged her gently. "Cum salvus eris..." Ione's head shot up. She pushed Atra into Nebula's arms and forced them back with a gust of wind from her palm. Nebula fell backwards, and a horrified scream erupted from Shiva's lungs. A spear blade stuck out from Ione's chest, blood pouring from the hole at her clavicle. Ione clutched her chest and sank to her knees as blood gurgled in her throat and dripped from her mouth. Fire enveloped her from behind, falling from the sky before it fully consumed the Astral and destroyed her existence.

Nebula watched the fire take on a humanoid form, curling at the top of the head. "Quod miser. Ei rei operam dabat serve Dei infirma, nisi habere illam immortalitatis extinguetur. Quam pulchre irrisorie." Ifrit stood tall by the remains of Ione's corpse and stared at Nebula, who shielded her daughter under her cloak. A fire wall formed behind her and crawled inward to force the oracle closer to him. Callisto sauntered to her from behind the fiery Archean with a smug grin slapped on his face.

The oracle averted her gaze from her ex-husband and lay her attention on the god behind him. "Why do you side with them?" she shouted. "Nifelheim is nothing but destruction; your flame brings life to this world."

"As did my mother's heart," Ardyn called out to her, reappearing through the flames. Nebula brought up a magic barrier to protect Atra and keep the enemy from getting closer, but Ardyn waltzed through with little effort, and laid his hand on the woman's cheek. "But even gods are capable of betrayal, which they exhibited when they took her from me." A pain settled in adult Atra's skull and she fell to a knee as she clutched her head and shut her eyes. The memory began to fuzz over through her childhood eyes, blinded by Ifrit's flames and deafened by their sound. Her mother chanted something in the ancient language, only able to grasp parts of her mantra before the memory cut. When it resurfaced Nebula was unconscious and face-down, and Atra found herself being carried away in her father's arms. Adult Atra felt the reflection's presence melt behind her, replaced by Ardyn's image when she spun around.

"You...you did all of this!" She didn't know when a sword found its way into her hand, but she wasn't going to waste the opportunity. Lightning struck somewhere in the sky when she stabbed him straight through the heart, yet he remained standing. Lightning cracked in the sky again and Ardyn no longer stood in front of her. Cor took his place, stabbed in the same area she'd stabbed Ardyn. Atra let out a pained gasp and took a step away from him, and a hand curled around her ankle. She jumped and saw the bodies of all the soldiers and people whose lives she'd claimed. "No...no!!" She shook the bloodied hand off her leg only to be pulled in by Cor, forced to stare into his eyes. His gaze was stone, and the longer she met it, the clearer an image of a giant covered in dirt raged in his pupils.

The world around her was sucked into a swirling white void, revealing the simulation room of Verstael's laboratory. Atra shuddered, suddenly feeling cold from the sweat dripping down her body, and fell to her hands and knees. Verstael marched inside with a clipboard in hand and Magiteks flanking him on both sides, and their sudden movement scared Atra to a far corner of the room. "What an unexpected twist," the scientist boasted as he pointed at his clipboard. An assistant hurried inside and whispered something into his ear, bringing the old man's eyebrows to raise. "And even more unexpected news. We'll continue your physical testing in the morning." He waved his hand and the Magiteks moved closer to her. Atra raised her hands in front of herself and attempted to shoot out a lightning strike, and when the current died in her palm, her confusion allowed the soldiers to properly restrain her. They forced her to stand and led her to the doorway, stopped by Verstael for a moment on their way out. "Do keep in mind that your magic will only work in this room when I
want it to," he warned her, flashing the remote in his gloved hand. "I haven't the time to fight with my experiments." He shooed her and the drones away with a flick of his wrist, and returned to supervise another experiment.

Atra was thrown into her cell and the door shut. She held her throbbing head in both hands and settled herself against the wall, staring down at her prison attire. She'd been trapped in the research labs for only a day, though the constant testing made it feel like months. Her energy at the start of each test was frantic in her veins, unwilling to come out unless she was in danger, and that's just what Verstael forced her mind to experience. Three back-to-back simulations alone that first day drained her of all the strength but that required for breathing and blinking, and even when they brought her nourishment, she struggled to consume their excuse for food. They didn't inform her of anything she'd see or experience while in the box, and after each session was finished, they stuck probes all over her body to read what was going on inside of her. It was all eerily familiar. Atra tucked her legs inward and wrapped her arms around them, hoping she could get a little sleep before they came back.

Footsteps outside the door pulled her attention away from peace. She scrambled to the furthest corner of the small room when she saw the Chancellor's burgundy locks through the door crack. His arms swayed as he walked inside, and he assured the guards he'd be alright on his own when they gestured an offer to stand inside with him. "Before I say anything else," he began with a bow, "I should apologize for all the stress you're enduring. A lady of your caliber shouldn't have to live under such circumstances...unfortunately, with your history, we must take precautions." He bent down and laid a tray of food and water on the floor in front of him, and motioned his chin to Atra to eat. She only stared at him with wide mesmenir eyes, knowing she wouldn't be able to defend herself if he tried anything. "I'm only here to talk to you, Atra-"

"Don't!" she yelled, shielding her head with her arms. "I don't want to hear anything you've got to say!"

"Even if I have answers to everything you just saw?" She froze at his question and peered between her arms, watching him sit down and remove his fedora. "Verstael kindly shared the results of your latest simulation with me, and I must say, there are many interesting things within your memories. Your magic arsenal is extraordinary. Much more expansive than your brothers and sisters from the Lamia Project. But what fascinated me more than your abilities were the images I saw after watching the recording myself." He extended an arm out to her and remained seated on the floor, observing her flinch in place. "I am unarmed. As I stated, I only came to provide answers to you."

Atra crept forward a step, still hesitant to join him in the center of the room. "I can...ask you anything?"

"All questions are on the table. But first, please eat. I can't recall when your last meal was sent in." The doctor was slow to move, but eventually made her way to the food tray, and she picked off some of the rice from its bowl. Ardyn pointed his eyes to the spoon laying beside it and she got the message. He waited for her to finish eating everything on the tray before he took it away and slid it next to the door. "I hope you don't intend on trying to escape," he reminded her.

She turned away. "I already know you'll kill me if I try." A chuckle escaped the Chancellor's lips, catching her off guard.

"My apologies. It's rude of me to laugh at such a crass accusation, but I understand why you would think so." Ardyn straightened his back. "We don't wish to end your life, Atra. You're too valuable to sacrifice."

"Then what do you want with me?"
"We simply wanted to bring you home. Your father fought a hard battle to keep you from dying by the Emperor's order. The Lamia Project was the only compromise offered. Putting you into the program saved your life."

Atra folded her hands in her lap. "Did he kill my mother trying to get me back?" Ardyn shrugged and shook his head.

"That happened such a long time ago. My memory isn't as vivid as yours."

"Then explain how you know my mother." He parted his lips to answer. "And I mean before she ever met my father. You two seem to have a personal connection."

She wasn't wasting time, the Chancellor realized, and he leaned forward. "Time is different to Nebula and I compared to you and the rest of humanity. We were born before the kingdoms came to be, long before Lucis received the crystal from the gods. But we continued to exist in different ways. Nebula died and was reincarnated throughout the ages, and I retained my original body for over three thousand years." Her eyes widened. "You seem surprised."

"How...that's not possible."

"Astrals weren't thought to be possible, yet you've met three in the course of your short life. You wouldn't think Gentiana to actually be in her eighties when she retains such a youthful appearance, would you? And your precious Ione was nearly two-hundred before she perished." Atra pushed herself backwards at his statement. "You really are Callisto's daughter, you know. Though your exterior shows much of Nebula, his personality and actions course through you much more than you realize. You have his tongue, his stubborn nature...you've each even slain an Astral." She shot up and hopped closer to the corner, causing Ardyn's amusement to grow. "Oh, come now. You can't tell me you had no idea why the Marshal of Lucis was called 'Cor the Immortal'." She remembered coming to her senses and finding his corpse before her feet, seeing his blood on her hands on that night. Atra ran her hands into her hair and paused, sinking to the floor again. Ardyn stood and walked to the back of the room, crouching in front of her. "I know these truths are hard to face, Atra, but I'm only informing you for your own protection. The Lucians who've called themselves you friends these past weeks...they've told you nothing but lies."

She turned her head away from him. "And you haven't?"

"To save you from them. I'm sure you've witnessed what the crystal does to those it's connected to when it's under attack, yes?" Atra nodded with reluctance. "Please, look at me." His tone was soft, and at his request, she met his gaze. Ardyn slowly brushed hair from her face and tucked it behind her hear. "The crystal houses the purest entity of Chaos in existence, one I worked so hard to imprison for humanity's sake. The Lucians stole the crystal from Nifelheim's safe-keeping shortly before their first king came to power, and we've been at war to reclaim it ever since. I am the only one who holds knowledge on the crystal's inner workings, and I can tell you this: that reaction you saw in Noctis occurred because he's drawing chaos out, bit by bit, to unleash on the world." Atra's jaw fell open. "The Magiteks are programmed to track chaos wherever it spreads. That's how we're able to follow the Prince's every movement. He's young; he doesn't know how to properly contain it, and neither did his father. Regis had to die for our safety."

Atra's head shook. "...I don't understand. Then why capture Luna? Why not bring her to him instead so she can help?"

Ardyn lowered his head. "We want to protect the Oracle, too. She's been brainwashed by the Lucians into siding with them. Luna is the only one aside from myself capable of sealing off Chaos' influence over Noctis, but in his current state, there's a high risk of him killing her before control can
be established. Our grounds are the safest place to keep them until she's able to break through and calm his soul. If Luna breaks out, he'll end her life."

"And how do I know what you're saying is true?" she exclaimed with extra strength in her voice. "For all I know, you're still lying to me."

The Chancellor nodded to her and made his way to the cell door, asking something of the guard too low for Atra to make out. He returned to her with a tablet and a paused black-and-white surveillance video. He made sure the resolution was clear before he pressed play and handed it to her. Ravus and Noctis, she could easily make out, had clashed just off to the right while the Prince's comrades were surrounded in the lower left corner. The Tenebraen Prince backed out of the parry seconds before his adversary charged forward, right into the path on an oncoming mobile unit. The barrel pointed at him, and not a second later, Ignis knocked his Prince away from the fire and shrapnel blast that consumed the upper half of his face. Atra flinched and the tablet fell from her grasp, bouncing before it settled on the cell floor. Ardyn picked it up and dusted off the back as he stood. "Magic is a terrible thing in the wrong hands," he concluded. "If he was willing to sacrifice one of his friends to get what he wanted, who's to say he won't do the same to our Oracle?" Ardyn laid his hand on top of Atra's and looked her in the eye. "The Lamia Project was our last resort to understand how to control it before one of our mutants ended up doing something like that. We didn't want war, Atra, but it's necessary in order to establish peace once and for all, no matter the cost." He left her to be alone with her thoughts and closed the door behind him, watching the guard lock it. He didn't wait to see if she'd plea for his help or wish death upon him for spitting more lies; he could feel her anxiety mounting from down the hall. Atra squirmed back to her corner and grasped her head as a new, deeper headache swam through her brain. She replayed the surveillance video in her head, and at some point, she could feel the burn of Ignis' injury consuming her. She writhed and rolled on the floor while holding her face, feeling every fiber of her skin boil. The daemons from her simulation flashed in her mind again and she screamed, unable to tell what was going on. Her eyes flew open and the daemons sat along the walls, watching her. Atra laid herself flat and thrust her hands before her, readying a weak fireball to attack with.
Best Friends Forever

Chapter Summary

How long does forever really last?

Chapter Notes

This is one of the chapters I've been waiting to write for SO LONG OAO

...I'm sorry if you hate me after this lol

Ignis was getting used to the darkness. As sad as it was to admit, his sight returning was highly unlikely, and the truth was easier to accept than the long-shot fantasy of ever seeing the world again. What was there to see, anyway, but a war-torn landscape being ripped to shreds by Magiteks and countless innocent deaths? He'd hoped to get Noctis to Solheim along with Luna and King Regis to begin the resistance, but it seemed Niflheim was eight steps ahead of their every move. Another thing he despised revealing to himself, though he held his tongue when he felt his comrades' eyes lingering on him from the front. In their travels from the Nifeli compound, the men had come up with a system of quiet signals to keep Ignis in the know if they found enemy soldiers nearby. A tap on his chest meant he had to stop, while one to his forearm told him it was safe to continue. If someone pressed a hand on his shoulder, he had to duck for cover; a squeeze told him to stay still and quiet where he stood until the others deemed the environment safe to move through. It was better than nothing and took some practice, but he was a quick learner. Battling in the dark, however, was an entirely different matter he'd yet to attempt. The overload of sounds and sensations around him made it difficult to focus, and even with his friends available to instruct him which direction to swipe his dagger or point a spell in, the enemy held the advantage over him. Sight enabled speed. He now lacked that valuable sense, and it slowed him down a lot. He'd contemplated telling them to leave him behind to better their chances of making it to Solheim and spent a few sleepless nights practicing what he'd say. On the fourth night of darkness, Ignis had some sort of speech memorized, and he waited until he thought everyone was asleep to crawl some yards away from the campsite to recite his final testimony in a whisper. "I am only an added weight on your caravan in my condition," he worded it. "My wisdom can still guide you, but if we're to truly be successful in your ascension to the crown, I feel it's better to leave me behind, so I may guide you from afar. I will miss all of your company dearly, my friends." His breath caught momentarily. He couldn't figure out how to finish off his departure when it was finally time to do so.

"Burying your feelings in light-hearted words won't get past them." Cor's voice rang through the silence of the night, alerting Ignis to his presence. He instinctively turned to look over his shoulder, then stopped himself halfway through and sighed. The Marshal laid his footsteps with enough force to allow the tactician to map his proximity without waking the others, and when he sat beside Ignis, he exhaled hard. "You can't leave."

"Marshal, we both know I'm slowing the group down. It's different when we have a vehicle, but with us all on foot, I cannot navigate the land unless someone tells me where and how to step." Ignis
folded his hands together, trying to imagine whatever haven they'd set up camp at. They were situated - that much he could tell, thanks to the way Cor's feet hit the ground. And they had to be out in the open, he guessed, not isolated in a cave or some interior area. The way the branches rustled in the small breezes he felt blow by told him the forest would be their cover for the night. All his other senses, try as he might to work past the problem, were hindered without his sight. "My role as advisor to the future King is no more. I can no longer provide the same counsel I once was able to."

Cor shook his head and snorted out a breath. "You speak as if your wisdom is solely dependent on sight. That's unlike you."

"How am I supposed to guide him when I can't even walk in a straight line?" Ignis retorted, his voice raising slightly. "If someone hands Noctis a document, I can't read it! He'll have hundreds, thousands to go through when he becomes King. What kind of ruler has an advisor who cannot see his hands in front of his face?" Ignis lifted his hands up and waved his fingers before his eyes, hoping that just for a moment, his sight would return and allow him to see the fool he was making himself to be in front of Cor. But the darkness remained, and that's all he saw when he blinked his right eye, unable to open the left due to the scarring. Venting all his frustration out, he lowered his hands and voice. "...It was my calling to serve by Noctis' side as advisor to the King, but if I am only a partial man, I can't serve my country to the fullest." The realization that he was blind finally set in. He'd been in denial since it happened. Why did his last sight have to be the barrel of a Niflheim flamethrower? He'd been asking himself the question every night after he practiced his resignation speech, but each night left it unanswered.

"...You're the last one I ever expected to crack," Cor began, "but I sometimes forget how young you are. Your maturity is far beyond that of the others. I suppose even those who advise need a moment to vent their frustrations to someone willing to listen." His stare drew up to the sky. It had not only darkened completely since Luna's capture, but the stars that shimmered above were dimming faster than anyone could track. He was sure it would only be the moon's light hanging from above in a few days, and once that was taken away, the world would be trapped in true darkness. "The darkness you're seeing as we speak isn't that different from what's coming. The number of daemons surfacing grows each day. Usually, the sun would exterminate any lingering pests in the morning, but we haven't had a true morning in ages. I know you'll never be able to see it again, but I know you're willing to fight alongside Noctis and your friends to restore that light to the world. Am I wrong?"

Ignis shook his head. "They still need you, and they won't let you go that easily. My brothers in arms were the same way when we were still a team. Now, Weskham's built a new life in Virent, Cid retired to the country, and Regis and Clarus are awaiting our arrival in the afterlife. I'm going to outlive them all, should I survive the war. Don't let something like this disband you." Standing up, Cor pat Ignis' shoulder. "You're strong, Ignis. Be strong for them, and let them be strong for you."

Unbeknownst to anyone, Noctis heard the whole exchange between Cor and Ignis. The guilt settled further in. How could he have been so stupid, he asked himself. He was supposed to be the new King of Lucis, fighting to protect every member of his court and nation, and instead his foolishness cost a dear friend his sight. Some king he was turning out to be. Part of him wished he could turn back the clock on everything - Ignis' blinding, Altissia's destruction, the gala incident, the peace treaty ruse, all the deaths - and stop it all before it could happen. Even in his childhood, there were things he wanted to forget all about - his mother's death, the accident that nearly claimed his life, all the news on the growing war between Niflheim and Lucis... All he craved was a fresh start, a second chance to play things out and correct them before it went wrong.

The one thing he would keep the same were his dreams. Even through his painful healing process after the accident in his eighth year, the most beautiful dreams flowed through his mind to comfort him. One in particular he recalled was a strange dream. Carbuncle, the Fantasian Archean, told him he was trapped in a dream and needed to escape. The god took on the form of a small fox with large
ears and fur white as snow, and a jagged ruby horn sticking out of its head, and it led him through various landscapes to reach the exiting point of his dream. He first ran through a rain forest, traversing the lakeside as Leviathan soared up and over a mountain to another body of water on the opposite side. They jumped into a ringed portal at the end of the lake and resurfaced in Altissia. Carbuncle jumped with a flip and made a gondola appear to carry them down a small waterway that ended by an arena, where they watched wild beasts gallop in circles for what felt like hours. Young Noctis then took the reins and ushered Carbuncle through the Altesian streets, but was halted by the sight of goblins running amok on the balconies above. They jumped down and chased the child and Fantasia through a door - a portal in disguise - which left them shrunken and in a large dining room. Carbuncle was able to return to his normal size and show Noctis the way out, and when the two jumped through the open window, they were on the stairs of the citadel, staring at the setting sun above the palace's outer gates. 'Your friends are waiting,' the fox told him telepathically, though only a squeak left its actual mouth. 'Your father, too. Everyone's waiting for you.' A large daemon suddenly crawled out of the ground and challenged the frightened child, but the Fantasian reminded him that he wasn't alone, to be brave and his friends and family would be fighting right beside him. He fought valiantly as his adult self, and the Regalia rolled into the citadel to welcome Noctis back into the real world when he awoke.

He didn't really know if it was the Fantasian or his friends who guided him out of the dream. Though Carbuncle made them adventurous and exciting, the thought of his friends being there with him truly comforted the Prince. They were there in the times his father couldn't be, when long meetings and royal business kept them apart. Gladiolus was there to train his body and keep him entertained, and Iris would often tag along in attempts to gain Noctis' attention. Ignis wasn't so fun at first. Raised from childhood to advise the future king, he was well composed for a child his age and never stepped out of line. His fun side only came out after Noctis' first try at cooking with him, where the Prince accidentally knocked an entire bowl of frosting onto the young tactician while he was searching for an item in a lower shelf. Instead of scolding Noctis, Ignis scooped a large wad of the frosting on his head and smashed it into Noctis' face. Gladiolus had walked in the second it happened, and all were silent until the Prince broke out in laughter, and the others couldn't contain themselves.

It was only the three of them for years, until the night Prompto was brought into Insomnia. It was 11:30 at night, Noctis remembered clearly. He and his father were preparing to leave a long and grueling evening with the then President of Accordo - an evening Regis insisted his son join him in to gain some experience with political allies. They were ready to get into their car when one of the Kingsglaive members approached the King with urgent news. It was whispered into his ear, and he said nothing to Noctis as they were driven to the city's largest hospital. Security flooded the halls and escorted the royals into an elevator. They got off at the seventh floor, where more Kingsglaive and their commanding officer had gathered. Cor, spotting Regis from around the corner, bowed to his King and updated him on whatever situation there was. Noctis was told to stay in the hallway. It was an order he could only follow for a few minutes before he burst into the hospital room despite the guards' warnings, and he laid his eyes on the bed to the left. Doctors in scrubs surrounded the body of a blond boy, frail and unconscious, who was covered in cuts and contusions. He walked to the boy's bedside and raised a shaky hand over his arm, to which Regis seized his wrist and pulled him aside.

"You need to stay away from him until the Kingsglaive say it's alright," the King warned in a firm but soft voice. "He was found outside of Lucis, and we fear he may have come from Niflheim." Regis didn't mince words with his son. Refugees from the dictatorship were common across the globe, but in the recent years of Noctis' adolescence, fears of Nifeli spies were rising. Lucis took extra precautions after a spy was thought to have made it into the castle posing as a guard. "Niflheim does terrible things to its people. That's something you'll need to remember when you're older,
should this war go on past my rule. Be wary of who you associate with.” It took Noctis some years
to fully grasp what his father meant, years he spent befriending the Nifeli refugee named Prompto
Argentum. His background had bee cleared by the monarchy's security, and though all were hesitant
of it at first, the young man became close with Prince Noctis. Gladiolus and Ignis soon became
attached and their quartet was completed. When word of Noctis' engagement to Princess Lunafreya
broke, it was Prompto who greeted his friend first. "Dude, that's awesome! You don't have to waste
time picking a wife!" He had a way with his words, and was often the comical relief for the boys
when things were down. He'd helped scramble to gather emergency supplies when Niflheim invaded
Lucis during the peace treaty ruse, and helped clear an empty path for the young monarch to run
through when the halls were filled with Magiteks. Prompto Argentum proved himself a worthy ally
and a great asset to the crown's safety, and had the treaty gone on as expected, there were plans to
make him an official member of Noctis’ court.

They were his three best friends, and Noctis didn't want to lose any of them.

He rolled upright and stared at the emptying sky. "I don't know what to do," he started to ramble as
he tucked his legs in. "Everything I try ends up hurting someone I care for. Luna's bee kidnapped,
Ignis is blind..." He squeezed his eyes shut. "...Dad, you're dead. Clarus is dead. For all I know, the
entire Kingsglaive are gone! How am I supposed to win this war if I'm losing everyone I care
about?" Light, padded footsteps broke the silence that followed his plea. Noctis turned to the trees
and found Umbra trotting his way. In shock, he turned to the dog and sat in a half-kneel, and reached
an arm out to pet the dog's head. "Umbra? What are you doing here?" When he let go, the dog
backed away from Noctis a few steps and sat down, pointing his nose to the floor. Black fog seeped
out from beneath his feet, alarming the Prince. He skid away from Umbra and shielded his face from
what looked like a blinding curse, only to notice the smoke never crept his way. Warily, he lowered
his arms and watched the fog disperse, and in the dog's place knelt a figure clothed in black from
head to toe. A mask shrouded its face from the nose down, leaving only a pair of dark brown eyes
and the upper half of the face visible to the Prince.

"Forgive me if this is a shock, Your Grace," the figure began. "I was sent here on the final order of
your father, King Regis."

The realization still hadn't sunken in. "...But you're a dog-"

"I was supposed to reveal my true self to you at another time; however, things have drastically
changed, and we cannot afford a missed opportunity." Umbra stood up straight and bowed his head
to Noctis. "Umbra is the code name your family bestowed onto me when I came into their service. I
am a member of the Kingsglaive, though I hail from a unit separate from those who guarded your
father. My one and only task is to ensure the continuation of your family's bloodline. I do so through
covet surveillance, and I may only intervene and reveal my true self to you if your life is in
immediate danger." The agent reached into a pocket sewn into his uniform and pulled out a purple
crystalline fragment. He took Noctis' hand and placed the stone in his palm. "This is a fragment
plucked from the Lucian crystal when you were a child. This piece is different from the entire crystal
itself; though it retains many of the same powers as the original stone, this piece will allow you to
warp through time and space. Should you wish it, you can return to whatever point in time in the past
you wish to."

Noctis' fingers curled around the crystal. "Time travel...? Is that even possible?"

"Only with my magic connected to it. I can guide you to wherever and whenever you choose."

"...Would I be able to put an end to the Chancellor?" he asked.

Umbra shook his head. "That has already been attempted, Your Grace. Myself and other members of
my clan have done what we could to stop Ardyn Izunia before he reached Lucis. But even decades before the invasion, we were unsuccessful."

"Then what's the point?" he questioned. "Why go back to the past if I can't stop him?"

The agent bowed his head again, closing his eyes. "There is no foreseeable solution to Chancellor Izunia in the past," he explained, "but when I asked your father what could be gained from the stone, he only had this to say." Umbra met Noctis' gaze, and for a second, the Prince could see his father's face reflecting off of Umbra's. "Ardyn is cunning. Not I nor my forefathers know how he's done what he has with so little time in his role as Nifeli Chancellor, but Noctis is the chosen King. Only the King of Light can snuff out the Accursed One. However, he must be careful to not wander too far back. Time is a ripple, as you once warned me, and too much interference in the past can change the future in an unfavorable manner." The ghosted image of Regis faded from Umbra. "Your father believes you are the only one capable of defeating Ardyn Izunia. If you are to do so while wielding this power, you must be very careful. You cannot linger outside your timeline for too long. Do one thing different, and one of your friends may not exist anymore." His words ceased when the others began to stir. "Morning is here. I will trail beside you, and should you need my help, I'll be at your beck and call." Umbra bowed to his Prince one last time, then knelt with a fisted hand on the ground, and transformed back into his dog cloak. By the time the others were awake, all they saw was Noctis staring at an ascending section of trees on the hillside.

They were in the middle of northern Duscae, Gladiolus concluded. A large rock wall skirted the edge of the border between Lucis and Virent. The natural barrier was the only thing standing between them and sanctuary in Virent until they could catch a ferry to Solheim deep eastward, and their only choice was to cut through a narrow pass in the wall by the northern tip of Insomnia. The trek would take at least another day by foot, they concluded, and the harsh travel conditions were starting to get to them.

"A car would really help us right now," Prompto chimed. "We're all exhausted, and my feet are burning." A sigh escaped him. "Man, I wish we had the Regalia."

"It's back in Altissia, unfortunately," Ignis replied. "I can only imagine what sort of shape it's in now."

"It's better that we walk, as difficult as it is," Gladiolus concluded. "We can't leave much of a trail, even in Lucis. Anything that emits smoke can be used to track us."

Noctis wasn't really listening to their banter. He played with the crystal fragment in his pocket, twirling it between his thumb and index finger. He observed Prompto guide Ignis at the head of the pack, letting him know of the slightest change in the elevation of the ground, to the strategist's even slighter annoyance. Cor and Gladiolus flanked him on either side from behind to complete the box around him. They had no clue about Umbra, he thought, and knew even less about the supposed time traveling powers of the Lucian crystal. Noctis wondered if the whole crystal was capable of doing so, or if it was only tiny fragments. He replayed Umbra's warning in his head, and pondered what the shadowy agent meant when he said other members of the clan had done it. There were other people who could shape-shift, and they could also travel through time. Even with all the magic in the world, those were comparable to children's stories to the people of Eos. Were the shape-shifters the only people capable of time travel, or was it vice-versa?

"Noct." Gladio's booming voice brought his attention back to reality. "You listening? We're gonna start to move uphill a little for a better vantage point."

"Alright," he replied, and they all turned left to begin the trek uphill. Cor hurried ahead of them to scan the area for enemy soldiers and ordered them to wait beside some trees with low-hanging
branches for cover. As they waited for the all-clear, Ignis cleared his throat.

"What does it look like outside?"

"Not that different from what you last saw," Prompto explained carefully. "The sky's still black, though it looks like it's taking on this weird purplish color. Kinda like a bruise."

A moment of silence. "...Am I slowing us down?" Before anyone had a chance to reply, he continued on. "I know I'm not as swift as I was before...the accident, and I apologize for that."

"Iggy, it's fin-"

"Please." His voice was firm. "Please...don't. Now that we have a minute to ourselves, I have something I must say." The air was thick with tension, and the growing humidity didn't help. "I'm delaying our arrival to Solheim. My inability to see has left me completely dependent on one of you to be my eyes, and that's not the fault of anyone here." He turned his head in the direction where he believed Noctis was standing based on the way the rocks shifted beneath his boots. Ignis released Prompto's arm and felt around until he touched the closest tree to him, and he rested his back against the trunk. "For the past few nights, I've been reciting a speech to myself for the resignation of my position in the Lucian court. There are no doubts that, aside from my total dependence you to get around, my role as Noctis' advisor will be pointless if I'm unable to read or write. My hope was to stand beside your throne for as long as you ruled, but in my current state, there's little I can do to aid you." The guys exchanged glances when he paused. "Cor tried talking me out of it. His words have left me at a crossroads, and I've no choice but to ask for your input. Please be realistic in what you say; that is my only request."

Gladiolus and Prompto turned to Noctis, their stares lingering on him in a gesture of encouragement. The Prince's lips parted, and before he could get a word out, the ground shook. They heard footsteps drawing closer and drew their weapons. Prompto pointed Ignis' daggers in the right direction, only to tap the strategist's hands to lower them when Cor rushed back to the group. "The town nearby is under Nifeli control. They're coming now to scour the forest. We're changing course!" He drew his katana. "Gladiolus, take the front. Prompto, in front of me with Ignis. We'll direct him together. Highness, stay next to Gladio." The men took their formation and hurried downhill to lower ground to stay in the trees.

It was mere minutes before the first wave of Magiteks appeared in the forest. The Lucians found a group of boulders to hide behind and observed the drones' movements. They were armed as per usual, but instead of attacking the environment, the robots seemed to be searching for something. Cor suspected they were looking for signs of human life and order Noctis and the others to keep low with hand signals. Prompto pointed Ignis' daggers in the right direction, only to tap the strategist's hands to lower them when Cor rushed back to the group. "The town nearby is under Nifeli control. They're coming now to scour the forest. We're changing course!" He drew his katana. "Gladiolus, take the front. Prompto, in front of me with Ignis. We'll direct him together. Highness, stay next to Gladio." The men took their formation and hurried downhill to lower ground to stay in the trees.
power from, but Ignis protected all five of them from the self-destructing Magitek. Metal body parts flew everywhere, and the explosion let the other robots know of the Prince's location. They charged at the group with their axes and swords. Cor broke out from the barrier and began to cut a path through the drones approaching from the south. Gladiolus swiped at the ones lunging from the north. Prompto slapped Ignis' back as he reloaded his gun. "Can you protect him, Iggy?" the gunner asked in reference to the Prince.

"I've got him," Ignis and Noctis said in unison about each other. The strategist lowered the barrier and held his daggers tight, trying his best to focus on each sound. There were too many pairs of footsteps for him to track by sound, so he went by the ones that pounded into the dirt nearest him. Ignis stabbed one of his daggers upward and cut into a Magitek's arm.

"Iggy, nine o'clock!" Noctis yelled to his friend. He didn't know how far off the enemy was. Not knowing how else to go about dealing with the next one, Ignis held a barrier in front of himself with his right hand, and fired a flaming ball to his left. Three drones were set ablaze and melted into each other. "You're getting the hang of it- One o'clock! Dagger!" Ignis had mere seconds to respond, and managed to run his blades through a drone's face and chest plates. The wires fried under the plates as it collapsed, its limbs twitching when it hit the ground.

The Magitek response was feeling more like an ambush the longer they fought, and Gladio and Cor's suspicions were confirmed when an airship whirred just past their location. "Fall back!" the Marshal ordered. Noctis grabbed Ignis' arm and rushed him back to the group. The four men surrounded their Prince as they themselves were swarmed from all sides by the Imperial army. A small crack opened between the enemies when a heavily armored man marched toward them, his cape dragging and catching on pieces in the dirt.

Commander Caligo Ulldor stopped in front of Cor, unfazed by the Marshal's katana tip so close to his face. "You five are very hard, and very, very annoying to track," he said to them. "You don't understand the resources we had to pour into pushing you all the way here. Of course, the fight at Ravus' little garrison was unexpected, but it gave us a sense of your path. Your car's still in the President's garage, by the way." He raised his hand and the inner line of Magiteks cocked their guns. With the other he pulled a photograph from inside his chest plate and flashed it to the men. Turning it over to the matte side, Caligo gave a sly grin. "I don't know which one of you was stupid enough to write your possible vacation plans on the back, but thank you for doing that. It made the game a little easier for us."

Noctis growled under his breath. "Damn it, Prompto," he muttered.

Caligo caught wind of the blond's name. "Prompto," the commander repeated. "Prompto...now, where have I heard that name before? It sounds so familiar, yet I can't place my finger... Prompto Argentum, perhaps?" The gunner's eyes widened. "Looks like I rang a bell. So you're that little brat we chased across the border!" His grin straightened to a flat line as the memory of Prompto's escape from Niflheim flooded back to them both. "Almost nine years now, I've been wondering why I didn't finish you off. You got off way too lucky. If my men hadn't been ordered to pull back, you wouldn't be alive right now." Caligo motioned one finger halfway down to have his troops fire, and a shadow flew out from the trees. Umbra decapitate ten Magiteks and knocked them into the back lines.

Shifting into his dog form, he sank his teeth into Caligo's arm and shook the weight of his body to tear it off. His human subordinates were quick to act and shot the entire contents of their pistols into the dog, who released Caligo's arm and ceased all movement as he changed back to human form. The commander clamped his free hand around his bleeding wound and cursed at his subordinates to bring him a potion. Prompto swallowed hard. They were surrounded with no way out. Umbra - he still had no idea how the dog found them, or was even really a person - was dead. He turned around and kept his gun pointed at the drones between Noctis and Ignis. Five against at least one-hundred
were far from good odds, if they survived the day. He took a moment to memorize each of his friends' faces. He began with Cor, then Ignis, then Gladiolus, and Noctis was last. Caligo motioned for the potion and broke it against his skin, then retrieved his radio and brought it to his lips. "This is Ulldor. We have the Caelum kid surrounded. You won't believe who else I've found: that blond kid we were ordered to let go about nine years back." A voice buzzed from the receiver. "Yeah, the one that ran across the border. He hid with the Lucians!" Prompto forced the lump in his throat down and drew in a deep breath, closing his eyes. "I'm going to bring his corpse to the Emperor as a gift!"

It was time.

The commander raised an eyebrow and turned around when the voice on the radio continued. "The fuck do you mean, don't kill the blond one? He's a traitor to the crown!"

Something cold and hard pressed on the back of Noctis' head. He tensed further when the object cocked and pushed further in. The sound was too close for a Magitek troop's gun, and when the Lucians all turned to find the source, Prompto's gun barrel was resting on the Prince's forehead. "Prompto..." Noctis was lost for words. The grip on his engine blade loosened and his arms fell to his sides.

"Prompto, what are you doing!" Gladiolus yelled at him. He rushed toward the blond, preparing to swing his sword down to knock the gun from his grasp, but Prompto stepped aside and caught Noctis in a choke hold from behind before he could make contact. Noctis' sword dematerialized immediately.

He drew in a second breath and held the gun next to the Prince's face. "You really should've listened to your father, Noct," he began as he rested the barrel on Noctis' cheek. Giving the Lucians a single side glance, he eyed them until they all dropped their weapons. "Daggers on the floor, Iggy," he ordered. Ignis didn't know what was happening, but the eerie silence and the strange tone in Prompto's voice told him to obey before anything happened. "This was a long time coming, you know. For all of us, but especially for you, you royal pain in the ass." His grip around Noctis' neck tightened just enough to keep him from pushing his captor off. "Regis was right to be suspicious of me, what with me coming from Niflheim and just falling on Insomnia's doorstep by chance. Father was right: they weren't going to suspect a kid who showed up near death."

Ignis heard enough to understand what was going on. "I see. So you only befriended us to get close to the crown."

"You Lucians are way too nice for your own good." Prompto's wandering eye noticed the yellow glimmer in Cor's eyes and pressed his gun barrel deeper into Noctis' cheek until it caved into his jaw. The sly grin he wore hardened into the same stare Caligo gave them. "I wouldn't try anything funny, Astral, unless you want your little Prince here to get a makeover."

"I should've gone with my gut when they brought you in," Cor told him. "Everything about you was too likeable. People even fell for your annoying traits."

Prompto shrugged. "What can I say? I have an adorable face."

Struggling against his captor, Noctis' face pushed on the gun barrel. "Why?" he demanded. "I shared everything with you! How could you just turn on us?"

"Oh, Noctis. Poor, naive Noctis." Prompto motioned his gun for Caligo's soldiers to take Noctis out of his hands, as at some of the Magiteks advanced, Gladiolus sank down and grabbed the handle of his sword. The blond was faster than him, though, and shot two bullets into the bodyguard's leg to stop him. Gladio fell to the ground and choked in agony. Wide-eyed, Noctis watched Prompto kneel
next to the fallen guardian when the Prince was secured. "Don't disobey a royal command, otherwise you get shot. Capiche?"

Caligo pushed his Magiteks aside, focusing his eyes on Prompto. "I understand your game now," he said with a scowl. "I just got a direct order from the Emperor... He orders Prince Promptus Nifel Aldercapt, second-born son to Iedolas Aldercapt, is to return home for debriefing on his mission." The Lucians were lost for words. "He also states that all who are not of the Caelum royal family are to be executed on sight-" Prompto huffed, then fired two more shots, one each at Cor and Ignis, who both collapsed.

"There, they'll bleed to death. Now I've been away from home for nine years, and I'm very, very tired. So unless you'd like to get some medals revoked, I suggest you take me home so I can relax." Prompto narrowed his eyes and stared at the commander until he submitted and nodded his head. The Magiteks began to file back to their airships. The blond sauntered to Noctis, still restrained by some of the husks, and motioned his hand to the Lucian Prince's fallen comrades. "Beautiful, isn't it? In a sad way, of course, but you still get the picture." Noctis bared his teeth at Prompto and yelled. "Dude, shut up," the gunner said, and he whacked Noctis across the side of his head with the butt of the gun. The Lucian Prince's head lolled before he fell unconscious, and when they made it to the airship, the young Nifeli Prince relished the sight of everyone bowing to him.
Promptus watched the world shrink below him as the airship lifted off the ground. Laying a hand against the window pane, he stared out into the darkening horizon. The home known as Lucis was a distant memory now; he had his true home in Gralea to look forward to. The airship's crew informed him that they'd immediately heed his order and return to Niflheim to reunite him with his father and brother. He was shown to a private chamber in the ship a short time later, given food and fresh clothes, and word of his impending return was sent to the Imperial Palace. A servant did her best to bathe the dirt and sweat from his body with the ship's limited resources, and as his robes were fastened into place and his hair brushed down, the young Prince was graced with Commander Ulldor's presence when he knocked on the heavy metal door. "Leave us," he ordered the servant before she could finish her preparation. She bowed before Promptus and departed, closing the door behind her. Caligo stared at Promptus for a moment before crossing his arm over his chest, and with reluctance twisted in his gaze, he bowed to his Prince. "Now that I see you all cleaned up," he began, "it's all coming back to me. The illness His Radiance said afflicted you, and the funeral shortly following your tenth birthday...they were all just a ruse."

"Father didn't trust anyone to keep their mouths shut," the Prince started to explain. "He needed to be sure the operation was swift and silent. He didn't even inform General Glauca. Only the Emperor, General Interitio, and Chancellor Izunia knew about the plan. We even went as far as to implant a dud tracker into my neck to make it all the more believable." Promptus' hand slid off the window's glass as he clasped the back of his neck, tracing his fingertips over the scar. "My appearance had to change so they wouldn't recognize me; then again, I doubt they would've anyway. Not even their Marshal could tell I was of royal descent." He let go of his neck and settled down on the small couch adjacent to his cot. "The Lucians' little Shadow Agreement with Interitio's daughter functioned in a similar manner, ironically. I suppose we have similar tastes in secret contracts."

Caligo bared his teeth at the mention of Atra. "Forgive me for being blunt, Your Highness, but your brother's incompetence cost us an early chance with securing Lamia. His lust for the opposite sex clouded his judgement, and Chancellor Izunia had to clean up his mess."

Promptus shrugged. "That's Velox for you. I'm amazed he was actually successful with the infiltration of Accordo. Espionage was never his strong suit, but I have to admit, even I had a difficult time recognizing him at first. He looked nothing more than a common busboy on the ferry ride there." The Prince leaned back on the couch and extended his arms until they reached each end, and folded one leg on top of the other.

"Your father won't be pleased when he sees how quickly you've forgotten your etiquette, Your Highness."

Another shrug. "I suppose the commoner's life grew on me somewhat. Will that be all, Commander?" Caligo nodded. "Go check on the prisoner. Make sure you don't make the same mistake Velox did." His statement brought a scowl out from the Commander, who could only nod and follow the given order. As he left the room he bowed to Promptus, then swiftly shut the Prince's
Gladiolus wondered how he and the others hadn't perished. Even though Prompto, Promptus - whatever the hell that traitor's name was - didn't shoot him in a vital area, he'd seen where Cor and Ignis were punctured by the blond's bullets, and it wasn't pretty. Ignis was shot somewhere in the diaphragm area, a place he knew could be fatal if the victim was left to bleed out as the Nifeli prince intended. Cor's suffering appeared much more painful; though the bullet didn't fly through his body, it sliced his jugular open just enough to leave him writhing and fighting to stay alive. He, too, saw the yellow glow of the Marshal's eyes that Prompto saw before shooting him. Cor rolled onto his side, holding his neck, as small rocks bounced on the surrounding ground. The Prince and Commander were already on the airship when a boulder was pulled from its place beside a tree and launched at a departing horde of Magiteks, the best he could do in his condition. He cursed in the ancient tongue for being unable to utilize the full extent of his powers, and mere moments later, a drone's foot swiped upward and knocked the Astral unconscious. The King's shield was kicked around like a ball by the robotic husks, who only stopped when a new command was buzzed into their systems.

When he regained consciousness, everything was cold. His body, the ground...he wasn't sure if the cold meant he was actually dead and waiting to cross into Paradise. His blurred vision was slow to clear, and when it did, Ignis and Cor weren't in the same place they'd fallen. Gladiolus shot up, pain radiating upward from his leg. He somehow missed the pair of arms trying to settle him back onto the ground. "Please," an accompanying voice pleaded with him, "you must remain still. The bullet is still lodged inside."

"Hang on, I've got him," another said, and cold hands were replaced with much warmer, gloved ones. Gladiolus stared up at Nyx, ice crystals caught in his hair and stubble. "Can you hear me, big guy? You remember my face from the Kingsglaive, yeah?" The recognition hit him, and when the bodyguard calmed, Nyx helped him to sit with his back against a tree trunk. "Here." He shoved a potion into Gladio's hand and encouraged him to drink it. "We found you four in the nick of time," he began to explain. "Nebula and I just happened to see the airships leaving this area, and Shiva sensed something was off-"

"Iggy! Cor!" Halfway through his potion, Gladiolus set the vial down and forced himself to hobble over to his friends, seeing a body cloaked in black not far off. The elder stirred from his unconscious state, rubbing his face with his hands, and peered over to the woman whose hands laid on top of Ignis. A green glow surrounded her skin and spread into the tactician's injury, sewing the flesh back together and stopping his blood from pouring out. Remembering what had happened, Cor's eyes scanned the immediate area as his hand searched for his katana, until they landed back on the auburn-haired woman healing Ignis. He squinted the longer he stared at her.

"You..."

"I never imagined I'd have the honor of meeting Titan's Astral," she started. "And I must say, I wish it occurred under more positive circumstances." She watched him study her features. "You stare like you're seeing a ghost."

Cor sat up. "I am. You and the witch have the same face. And if I heard Nyx correctly, the same pseudonym. Yet you know of my true nature." Nebula finished healing Ignis and pulled his shirt back into place, and gave him space to recuperate as she shifted over to Cor. She took the man's hands in hers and closed her eyes, opening her mind for him to explore. He'd seen oracles use the same action many times in the older days to prove their loyalty to the Astrals. It was a technique long
forgotten, and it took him by surprise to see someone use it in the day of advanced technology. He, too, closed his eyes to observe every thought hidden in her mind, and when he was finished, the rarely stunned Marshal was left mouth agape.

Sensing Gladiolus' confusion, Nyx's lips parted to explain everything. He was silenced when Ignis and Umbra stirred from their unconscious states and joined their confused comrade. "Good, you're all awake. Now I don't have to repeat myself." He pointed to the woman conversing with Cor. "That's Nebula Flumine, the REAL Nebula. She's Atra's mother, and an oracle. We'd all be dead if it weren't for her." The cold and ice around them began to wear off, and Nyx examined the clouds. "Guess that means we're safe for now." Standing, the Glaive helped the men to their feet one at a time, and it was then Gladiolus realized he didn't know the individual clad in black standing beside him. Nyx caught on and pat the Crownsguard's shoulder. "Remember that dog you and the Prince liked so much? That's him." Gladio's jaw dropped, and while he and Ignis tried to comprehend Umbra's new form, the Glaive scanned the immediate area. "Did they capture Blondie, too?"

"Prompto betrayed us," Cor cut in, releasing Nebula's hands as they stood. "He's really Prince Promptus Aldercapt of Niflheim. And I let him get close to Noctis!" Sensing his distress, Nebula backed away mere seconds before cracks formed a circle in the earth beneath his feet. The ground shook, causing all to grab onto the nearest object for support.

Nebula waited to find stable footing before jumping over a protruding rock and grabbing Cor's hand. "You have to calm down," she told him over the rattling. When he didn't respond she squeezed tighter. "The shard. You must keep it suspended for the good of the land. Hoc non poterit terra sustinere suum impulsum. Et peribit anima vestra sine vi: pulcrum Titana ferebant."

Hearing the difference in her voice, with Shiva's overtone as she pleaded, calmed his rage somewhat. The crackling stopped and everyone stood tall again, and she released her grip on him. "There is no changing what has happened. Niflheim has both Prince Noctis and the crystal, along with Lady Lunafreya. The only thing we can do now is formulate a plan to get all three back." She didn't mention Atra, having seen into Cor's mind as he explored hers.

"And how are we going to manage that?" Gladiolus questioned. "All the tactical members of the circle have been slain!"

"All but two." Everyone's attention fell onto Umbra, who emerged from his unconscious state and stood between the shield and the Glaive. "As it is known now, Niflheim believes the entire Crownsguard and Kingsglaive are dead. We must use that to our advantage." He gestured his chin first to Nyx, then to the still unconscious Ignis, then Gladio and Cor. "We still have one Kingsglaive and three Crownsguard who are more than capable of creating a rescue plan. My service to the Lucian royals is eternal, and I will fight beside you for however long it takes." Umbra's eyes shifted to Nebula and lingered on her, noticing the ice that still clung to her hair and shoulders. She met his gaze, unaffected by his almost suspicious stare. "The only safe haven left for us is Solheim. Virent will join our cause, but not without meeting the surviving court in person..." His voice drifted out of the oracle's mind. Nebula knew of his kind: able to force their forms through space and time, the select few of the human race who were said to be reborn from Eos' heart after a first life of an animal - the animal they shifted into. She didn't know if it had been Umbra or another, but in her past, she recalled seeing a pair of shapeshifters in a confrontation with Ardyn in an attempt to end the Chancellor's life. One of the shifters failed and was killed when Ardyn's daemonic aura overwhelmed them, something well beyond her abilities at the time, and the other barely escaped. If the latter had been Umbra, she wondered if he remembered her.

"Along the way," Nebula added, "we shall set the Hydrean free. I can feel her pain from where we stand; she shouldn't be far off." Laying her attention on Cor, her eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to withhold your true strength for a little while longer. Only when we have the Oracle again
will it be safe enough for you to lower the shard onto the earth."

"And how will you contain its power?" The elder Oracle didn't reply, only turning her body and beginning her trek in the direction she felt Gentiana's rage radiating from.

Luna wasn't the least bit surprised to have someone high in Nifeli power watching her at all times. When she awoke in her prison cell, she was greeted by Chancellor Izunia and offered food. Had she not been hungry she would've denied the offer, believing he would poison her or put something in her meal. "Do you really think I'm that conniving, my lady?" he asked her one time, not long after she'd arrived in Gralea, the bruise on the side of her face still visible. "I swore to bring no harm unto you, and though I've broken that promise one time, the circumstances left me no other choice. At least you're a compliant guest."

"You mean prisoner," she corrected him, silencing the man. "How long does the world have now that Niflheim owns the crystal?"

"You believe the world will just disappear in a puff of smoke now that the crystal is ours? Please, Luna, give us more credit. There's still much more to do before we reach that stage." She had a sense of what he meant, but the full realization hit days later, only when her unconscious fiance was dragged down the hall, his arms chained behind him as Magitek soldiers pushed him forward. She shot up and ran to the cell bars, grabbing onto them and reaching a hand out to try and touch him. Luna was knocked backwards before she could touch him. Scrambling to her feet again, her jaw dropped open when she laid eyes upon the man whose hands hers landed in those belonging to a familiar crop of blond hair.

Promptus rubbed the tops of her hands with his thumbs. "It's so good to see you again, Princess."

"Prompto..." Her hands slid out of his as she took a step backwards. The taste in her mouth went sour as she stared at her friend and saw a stranger in the royal Nifeli robes.

"I promised you and Noctis would be reunited, though I was a little vague on the details." He moved away from the cell bars to give Luna a full turnaround view of his ensemble. "A bit much, I know, but it's what Father would want to see me in for our little engagement. I'll be sure to tone it down when he holds his usual celebratory festival in my honor. Will you be attending, my lady?"

"You turned on us. You turned on Noctis!" A glowing mechanical device strapped to her ankle kept her from summoning her trident at will or using any magic, but the Prince knew her retaliation would've been costly for him if he were any closer to the cell bars. "Just to save your own skin!"

His smile faded as he leaned closer to one of the bars and wrapped his fingers around it. "I did what I had to, Princess. This world is changing faster by the minute. The darkness is consuming the light too quickly to keep up; the fight for survival is upon us. And if that means sacrificing a few lives for the greater good, well...what kind of person would I be to turn my back on my kin just because a Lucian rat might be the 'Chosen King'?" He watched her eyes widen in disbelief, the hand reaching for his lapel falling limp at her side. Someone called for Promptus further down the hall and he stepped back. "Excuse me, Lady Lunafreya. As I am, my father is an impatient man, and he wouldn't want our reunion delayed any longer. I'll send for you when the celebration commences tomorrow."

Promptus walked away with little more than a nod in her direction. A Magitak guard took his place in front of her cell, leaving Luna alone with the silent wind blowing through the air vents.

Between the night she saw the vision of her mother and the Lucian Prince's capture, two days of experimentation and torture passed Atra. The days were beginning to blend together into one long
nightmare, even with the sleep she got. The few moments her eyes remained closed were filled with hallucinations much like those she saw in the simulation room, and left her skin crawling when she awoke screaming. Her most recent bout left her clawing at the concrete floor until her fingers bled, and unknown to her, with bits of metal and skin under her nails when a guard dared to march into her room to serve the next meal. The human sentry ran out of the cell holding his bleeding wrist, doing his best to shake off whatever magic she'd cast in her state of fear. Breath uneven, Atra was powerless to fight off the Magitek husks in the same manner when they came to retrieve her for more testing. By then she'd been taken out of her old clothes, torn to shreds by her own doing and that of her resisting the empire, and placed in the medical scrubs she'd worn the one summer she worked in Lestallum's largest hospital. Hers quickly grew dirty, the hems of the legs ripped up from fighting and scraping. She no longer struggled against the Magitek husks who dragged her from her cell to the lab and back, and by the fourth day, she was completely silent on the walk to the simulation room. It was a good sign, according to Ardyn, who considered her rapid obedience as her taking his words to heart. With the Lucian Prince now secured he could lay all his focus on reforming the country doctor into what she was meant to be. She'd crack sooner or later, he informed the impatient Verstael, whose desire to simply lobotomize her for quicker control grew stronger by the hour. "Give her time," the Chancellor encouraged him. "With everything she's witnessed since banding together with the Lucians, she'll need more than a moment to process everything. You cannot rush perfection."

Atra was thrown inside once again and pushed herself up as the simulation commenced. The walls and ceiling went white, then the environment changed to that of a classroom. Prepared to fight, Atra was taken aback at the scenery. Her attention was drawn to a corner of the room, where a red-haired girl had been cornered by half of the other students. They pointed and sneered and yelled things as she cowered in the corner, shielding herself from whatever objects they threw at her.

"Get out of here! You're not one of us!"

"Yeah, that's why your mom didn't want you anymore."

"I heard the first sign of a witch is red hair."

"My dad told me you were cursed with magic. Are you too chicken to show it?" An older boy began to pull on the girl's hair, and Atra felt the tug on her own scalp.

Nine-year-old Atra slapped his hand away. "Stop! You're hurting me!" Unknown to her she'd channeled some of her magical energy and infused it with her slap, electrocuting the boy's entire arm. He yelped and jumped away from her, alerting and frightening the other kids.

The child she hit fought against the tears welling in the corners of his eyes. "You see? The mutant wants to kill us!"

Another child screamed and hid under her desk. "Please don't hurt me!" Atra lifted her other hand in an attempt to comfort their worries but all the children ducked and yelled at the top of their lungs. Atra's hands fell to her sides as they all ran away from her.

"Wait!" she pleaded to them, and ran out of the classroom after them. The last of the children ducked around the corner at the end of the hall. Young Atra vanished, leaving her adult self in the same spot she once stood. "Fine! Be scared of me! You should be!" Atra turned around the leave the school, only to find herself transported to her childhood home, sitting up in her bed. A fire had started in her bedroom, smoke and ash leaving her palm. The door to her bedroom flew open and her father stormed inside, mouth agape and stance stiff.

"Atra...what have you done?"
"There were daemons!" The words left her mouth before she even knew what she was saying. "They were climbing through my window!" Atra remained stunned and watched her father scoop the younger version of herself into his arms and carry her away, leaving her adult form to be consumed by the flames. The woman sent ice flying out from her palms and put out the flames, only to watch them rekindle when a burning hand reached through her window. She jumped backwards and fell forever through a dark vertical corridor, not knowing what was going on. She hit an unknown ground hard and bounced on the floor, and when she was able to take in her new surroundings, she was back in her cell.

The door was wide open, allowing daemons and rotting Magitek corpses to roam inside. Atra forced herself to the farthest corner of the room and tucked her legs inward, shielding her head with her hands. "This is my mind," she began to tell herself. "I'm bigger than these bones." The larger daemon split in half and thousands of spiders spilled out of their bodies, the Magiteks meeting the same fate when they succumbed to their rusting. The arachnids ran to the back of the room toward Atra and began to climb onto her limbs. She shook them off and threw fireballs at the horde to disperse and destroy them, only seeing more climb out of the daemons. High-pitched shrieks left the spiders, mimicking the chills they sent into her when they climbed on top of her. Soon they'd created a mountain up to her waist, then her chest, and then her shoulders. They bit and clawed at her skin. She felt venom pump into her veins, her movements becoming sluggish. All the memories of her life flashed before her eyes as she raised an arm above her head. The pile of spiders reached her chin, then her nose, and as she sank into the horde like quicksand, she saw the few good memories of her short life deteriorate into nothingness.

The simulation ended, leaving Atra unconscious on the floor of the glass room with no spiders or daemons eating away at her. She was dragged out of the room and strapped onto a metal table, probes attached to her arms and head. Verstael sauntered to his surviving experiment, assistants close behind him, and read over the monitors displaying her brain activity. It had died down almost entirely, much to his disappointment, though he had few expectations of her renewal being a success. "I've wasted twenty years of work on you," he began, "and even though he knows what kind of man I am, Chancellor Izunia persuaded me to wait four more days, to give you a second chance. I should've disposed of you the second you were brought back to me." He glanced up at the skybox ten yards above, where Ardyn stood in silent observation. Velox had come by when she was still in the simulation room and left before she came out upon hearing of his brother's return home, and he asked the Chancellor to let him know how it all ended once the private reunion was finished. Her heart beat slow and monotone, the aging scientist picked up the girl's drooping head by her cheek and faced her straight upward. "How the mighty have fallen. You put up all that fighting for nothing. You can't even keep yourself awake. Such a waste." He let her head drop to the side and motioned his hand to one of the assistants, who handed him the control remote. He waved the device in front of her face and chuckled. "You've picked up so many bad habits by living among those Lucians, Lamia; I'm sure many came from that precious Prince of yours. By the way, he's also our prisoner." Verstael tapped her cheek hard with the piece of plastic. "But it appears you're no longer needed if you're just going to lay there. I've plenty of cadavers already. If you can't even sustain consciousness, what good are you to Niflheim?" He watched her heart monitor continue in the same pattern, picking up a moment later. Its pace grew more rapid as the seconds passed. "What's this, your last hurrah?" Verstael turned his back to her and waved a hand to his assistants. "Her heart should stop sometime soon. Let me know when that happens so I can inform His Radience of the end of the Lamia Project."

An electric impulse jolted through the probes attached to Atra and soared into the machinery, frying them inside. One screen exploded and glass littered the floor. Verstael spun around as the unconscious Atra rolled forward and fell onto the concrete ground, barely catching herself on her forearms and knees. She staggered to her feet, putting all bodies in the room on edge. Her hair caught
between her eyelashes and the crusted skin of her parched lips, and she drew in a deep breath. The heart monitor's beeping sped up too fast for it to register before the entire machine exploded next to her. Verstael shielded himself from the flying debris and watched his experiment open her eyes. Her mydriated stare remained fixed on the ceiling for a long, drawn out moment, then shifted to Ardyn, who held his chin with curiosity. "Well, it appears you're not so defective after all," the scientist commented as he inched closer to her. "I must admit that I'm amazed you're still able to stand after all your testing. Your results were far from promising, but perhaps there's hope for you yet." He clutched the remote tight in his grasp, his thumb rolling over its large buttons. "Now that you've awakened, let's see what you can do." He pressed the larger button and held the remote by his chin. "Your god communes with you. Respond, Lamia." He waited for any sort of response from the woman, and when she said nothing, Verstael scowled. "Respond to my calling. Your god commands you." She refrained from responding, keeping her eyes on Ardyn. Verstael growled under his breath. His grip on the remote tightened, and his thumb shifted to the smaller button near the bottom. "Defiance will get you nowhere." He pressed the button, and not a second later, electrical sparks danced around the remote, forcing him to drop the device. The remote convulsed on the floor before frying on the inside, melting the outer plastic shell. The electrical surge it was meant to send through her body hovered over a small arced barrier on the back of her neck. The bolt of lightning rebounded and hit another machine far behind her, causing the lights in the laboratory to flicker.

"...I see it now." Verstael and his assistants watched Atra's posture straighten. "The mistake of my innocence is so clear. I am but a toy to these lowly wretches, destined to be nothing more than a pawn to keep others alive." Ardyn laid his hand against the glass wall of his skybox. Her eyes were still on him, and from what he could tell, there was no longer any mydriation of the pupils. They remained their normal size in her gray eyes, not covering her irises. She was aware of herself. Atra shifted her gaze to Verstael, who noticed the change in her eyes and pursed his lips. "Do you consider yourself to be one of these men, Verstael?" The way she spoke sent chills down the spines of his assistants, who quickly backed away from her. "Do you call yourself a man of science to mask the torture you bring upon souls like mine?" Verstael grit his teeth and jumped for the remote again, only to be thrown backwards by a thunder bolt and into a shelving unit. 

"Quemadmodum Praecipe nomine Etro." You distorted your voice and told me those words every time you wanted to maintain control. You clouded my mind with denial for so many years, caused me pain that forced me to lay awake night upon night until death saved me from my own madness...I must say, your selfish efforts were quite irritating."

He no longer had any control over her. Verstael would never openly admit it to his emperor or assistants, but they all knew. The lead scientist reached behind him and pressed an emergency button on the wall. Hidden doors opened and a dozen Magiteks stormed into the facility, knocking past anyone in a lab coat in pursuit of the witch. They immediately fired their bullets at her, not stopping even when the humans in the room noticed each bullet was halted in place a foot away from her. They dropped to the ground like rain, and when all the magazines were empty, Atra's eyes flashed open wider. The insides of each Magitek was set ablaze, incinerating the robotic husks in mere seconds. Atra raised her hand in his direction, watching the old scientist squirm as far away from her as he could. "Let me be clear of one thing, Verstael," she concluded. "I am no man's play thing. You had your fun for the last twenty years; but alas, all good times must come to an end." The old scientist rushed to his feet and scrambled toward the nearest exit, only for his entire body to be immobilized by an invisible force. He was forced to face Atra, who unleashed thick maroon wisps from her palm that swam to him and forced themselves down his trachea. Sparks erupted in the energy as it swirled into his throat, invading the space in his lungs and bursting the small oxygen-collecting sacs deep within. Whatever oxygen remained was sucked from his form and the wisps dug holes through his blood vessels to reach his heart. They wrapped around the life-giving organ in a boa's fashion, squeezing ever tighter around his heart. Verstael's breathing hitched as he felt his heart be forced under the extreme pressure. The organ ruptured when it could take no more and the
scientist fell dead face-first, eyes wide open and blood gurgling in his throat before pouring from his mouth and pooling around his head.

Atra set her sights on wiping out the assistants next. She aimed her palm at them, and as she took a step closer to the cowering people, a hand laid on top of hers and ushered her palm closed. “Now, now, Lady Interitio,” Ardyn pleaded, “there’s no need to do away with the entire science department. We will, after all, require a replacement for Verstael now that he’s...retired. Besides...” His fingers curled around her hand and brought it to his mouth, and he laid a kiss atop her knuckle. “You have an important meeting with your people. You can’t keep them waiting while you bloody your hands, can you?”

“My...people...” It took some time to sink in, but when she understood he meant the court and public of the capital, she gently removed her hand from his grasp. “And will this public tie me to a stake and wish me burned alive?”

“Heavens, no. They'd never wish something so horrid upon Niflheim's Shadow, Lady Interitio.” She raised an eyebrow at his comment. Ignoring the sudden light-headedness which swam over her, Ardyn's arm was around her waist before she could even register she was staggering backwards, and he helped stabilize her balance. “You've become Niflheim's beacon of hope. Only those with connections to the royal family of Lucis are able to gain access to the crystal's presence; yet when you arrived in Insomnia, you were able to find your way into the chamber without a problem. It's as if the gods themselves have witnessed your fortune. And if that wasn't proof enough, you did what no regular mortal could do.” Ardyn leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear, “You slew an Astral.” Her lips parted to argue but the Chancellor's finger on them beat her to the punch. “Pay no mind to the stories Verstael fed you. You create your own destiny, Atra. Neither your powers nor your lineage can define you.” As she measured if going with him was worth the risk, Ardyn sauntered toward one of the open doorways. "I've already promised to provide any answers you may seek."

"Not before feeding me to the very wolf I've had the pleasure of slaughtering." He couldn't help the corner of his mouth turning upward at what she said. When he paused briefly to lean by the door frame, gesturing for the remaining scientists to clean up the mess of Verstael's dead body, Atra marched up to the Chancellor and grabbed his lapel. "Your answers are those of convenience, Chancellor. I know you'll cease your assistance the second I refuse your offer to join the Empire. I serve no man."

"Surely you wouldn't prefer to stay here and be experimented on, no?" He laid his hand on top of hers. “You doubt my capabilities, my lady. You're now on the side of redemption, and I am a man of my word. I will guarantee your freedom if you will do Niflheim the favor of assistance in one last battle."

Her eyes narrowed at his request. "You have the audacity to ask for my help?" Ash particles started to gather on top of their hands.

"And you've forgotten a lesson from one of your tests. I'm immortal."

"Immortality only means you'll take longer to kill," she spat back with a twisted grin, and she released her hold on him as her magic calmed. Atra took a step back and brushed her hair from her face. "Lead me to your emperor. I'll decide if he's worth my time." With a smirk, Ardyn gestured for her to follow after him out of the laboratory, and she walked behind him without hesitation.
The palace guards and servants were left aghast when they saw Atra walking freely behind the Chancellor. Still barefoot and in her torn prison clothes, the mere sight of her was enough to frighten those who remembered her rampaging when she arrived in Gralea. Atra's stare remained forward for the most part, but in the rare moments she did meet their eyes, the servants felt their souls burn and freeze all at once. No longer did her pupils expand to the edges of her irises; they remained intact, and she carried herself with such a power that, when combined with her appearance, petrified all who observed her. Atra didn't ask where Ardyn was leading her; she assumed they were going straight to the Imperial Palace's throne room so she could listen to Iedolas prattle on about his power and why she should bow to him. After all, that's what her being there was all about. She expected that he, the Chancellor, Prince Velox, and all the high-ranking military men would sit and stand before her, waiting for her to bend the knee before the council and proclaim her loyalty to the Empire. And as she warned Ardyn, she'd refuse to serve them or any man ever again - a lesson he observed Verstael learn the hard way mere moments before. So when a frightened maid opened a set of double doors with her trembling hands, the doctor raised an eyebrow and wondered why they'd entered a large suite instead of the throne room. "Did you honestly believe you would be able to see His Radiance when your appearance is so unacceptable?" he asked her as he gestured her into the suite. Cautiously, Atra stepped into the main room. She stopped before a couch and polished wood coffee table when footsteps approached from another door, and six more maids caught sight of her. One shrieked and turned to run, but Ardyn had warped beside her before she could get to the door. "Nothing to fear, madam," he reassured her, and led her to Atra with his hand around her waist. "Come now, all of you. I've a task for you to complete." One by one, the maids heeded his words and lined up beside their colleague, wringing their hands in their aprons. "Before you stands an honored member of the Nifeli court, Atra Interitio, Marchionissa of Nifelheim and our sacred Lamia." All the women were baffled by his words, though Atra hid her confusion well and remained silent while he continued. "These chambers now belong to her, and you will follow her every command. Your first task, ladies, is to make her presentable for an audience with His Radiance within the hour. Nothing too flashy; just get her hair in order and her body out of these rags." Ardyn waited for the women to nod in understanding before he laid his attention back on Atra, and took her hand in his once more. "Do be nice to them, dear. They scare easily."

"I assume you'll return to escort me to the throne room," she commented, remaining emotionless even when he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not. Other matters of the state require my immediate attention, but we will be reunited during your highly anticipated meeting with Iedolas. I shall send Ravus to escort you."

Atra crossed her arms. "Remind him to practice a better grip on his way back. We wouldn't want an accident to befall his other arm should he hold me the wrong way."

Ardyn smirked and let go of her hand to tip his hat. "Don't miss me too much," he departed with as the door closed on him, leaving the doctor alone with the seven maids.

The servant girls moved very slowly so they wouldn't upset the sorceress. Their fear was evident as they unclothed her and prepared a warm bath. The maid assigned to combing her hair swallowed hard when she saw the knots all over, and prayed to the gods that she'd survive Atra's wrath when trying to comb through them. The hot water stung Atra's battered skin momentarily. She bared her teeth and hissed when a washcloth was pulled across her arm, and the young maid nearly screamed and dropped the cloth. As she got back into position after muttering a thousand apologies, Atra sighed and rolled her eyes. "Shut up already. I'm not going to kill you," she told the girl, "so stop
acting like a mouse and just do your job." The girl nodded and got back to work, and signaled for
another to bring the doctor a potion to heal her wounds.

By the time Ravus arrived to pick her up, Atra looked proper for a meeting with the emperor. Her
skin clean, she held no evidence of imprisonment or torture. Her hair was brushed back into a neat
ponytail with her bangs pinned to the side, and she wore basic black clothes under a maroon cloak
with slits in the sleeves. Gold bracelets and clasps adorned her arms and held the cloak in place.
Ravus gave an approving nod when she approached him, her gaze unwavering. "Oh, how the winds
have shifted," he said with his hands folded behind his back. "This appearance is much more
befitting for the sorceress of Niflheim -"

"I bear no such title, Ravus," she corrected him, "nor should I be called Marchionissa. Iedolas can
shove that title up his ass."

"I see your tongue hasn't changed. Never the matter. You can discuss that with His Radiance when
we arrive for the meeting." Ravus gestured his hand to the hallway, allowing Atra to exit her quarters
before he started their walk to the throne room. The sharp change in her demeanor was shocking to
him; her words were the same, yet the way she said them - the way she did everything in their walk -
was different...more vigorous, if he had to pick a word to describe it. Whatever had happened in
Verstael's laboratory was more than effective. And the biggest surprise to him was her choice of
words. Not once did she ask about Lunafreya or Noctis, or any of the Lucian retinue. He felt the
urge to ask what happened to make her suddenly not care about any of it, but with the way she stared
ahead of them and what he heard from Ardyn, the Tenebraen prince felt it was better to remain quiet
unless she spoke first. She never uttered a word, though, and when they reached the throne room, he
pulled the doors open and ushered her inside.

"Presenting Atra Ardere Interitio, Marchionissa and sorceress of Niflheim." He walked beside her up
the long red carpet until she stopped in front of the throne on her own. Twelve feet stood before them
and Emperor Aldercapt, a man she hadn't seen up close in years. Chancellor Izunia stood to his
immediate right, and on either side of him two blond men in white and red robes: Velox and... It was
the first time in days Ravus saw any emotion on Atra's face. Her eyebrows raised and scrunched, her
eyes widened, and her jaw opened at the sight of Prompto on one of the Nifeli thrones. He locked
eyes with her, and as she had earlier, hid his emotions much better than her. She barely
acknowledged the other men in the room: Caligo, Loqi, General Glauca, and even her own father
were forgotten in the twisted thoughts coursing through her mind. Ravus took her hand in his before
she could lose her composure entirely and held it forward to officially present her to the emperor, and
Atra closed her mouth.

Ardyn stepped forward and stood between the woman and the emperor. "This is the beginning of
many auspicious days," he started. "Not only has Lamia returned to us, but we have reunited two
beautiful families." He gestured his right hand from Iedolas to Prompto. "I'm aware you already
know this young man, Atra, but allow me to re-introduce you to your good friend, Promptus Nifel
Aldercapt, second-born prince of Niflheim." Atra didn't know if it was the shock or Ravus' motioning,
but she found herself crossing her arm over her chest and bowing before the royal family.
"And now that introductions are out of the way, let us get to the real matter." The Chancellor stepped
aside to allow the emperor to speak for himself.

"I've heard a great deal about you, Atra Interitio. You were born a mutant - not a good look for a
noble family. Yet in all your trials in life, here you stand with nothing but accomplishments on your
belt. You were the only person capable of freeing the crystal from its chamber. You led us to King
Regis, to that traitorous Frons Speculo, and helped us dispose of them both. And now I hear that you
are no mere experiment, that subject #74 has full control over her powers and is a true sorceress."
Iedolas gestured his hands to both Velox and Prompto. "My sons have shared their stories with me as
well, and they all come back to your feats of astounding abilities. But what amazes me most is that you, a mutant and experiment, lived up to your father's legacy, and slew and Astral."

Caligo leaned forward, mouth agape. "She what?"

"Which one?" Loqi asked.

"Cor the Immortal." Everyone's eyes fell on Promptus, who rose from his throne and walked down the small stairs before it. "Not even the Lucian Prince knew he was truly immortal until he told us the story of his existence. But you forget one detail, Father." Prompto pointed a finger up. "Atra slew the Astral, then brought him back to life. Calling her Etro's agent was no mere coincidence; she was destined to pick who lives and dies. The Lucian King and Accordian President met their end according to Etro's will, carried out by Atra."

Ardyn nodded with a hum. "And let us not leave out one of her most compelling feats." One glance in Glauca's direction was all it took for the general to utter a growl and glare at Atra before excusing himself, locking eyes with the woman who scarred his face. "Nevertheless, Atra, you have proven yourself capable of holding your own in battle. And now we ask that you humbly offer your services to the Empire. Help us bring this war to a close-"

"I serve no man," she cut him off. "Any and all who have attempted to control me are dead."

"Except for me," Velox interrupted.

Atra scowled at him. "You got off lucky. I was still naive then, hoping for the best to come out of every situation. Look where that ended me up." Her hand still in Ravus' grip, she released herself and took a single careful step closer to Iedolas. "If you're so powerful, why request my help? You have the crystal now; you shouldn't need me if you've the Prince in your grasp as well."

Caligo spoke for the emperor this time. "While that Lucian brat is with us now, we still require the Ring of the Lucii and a way to control him. HOWEVER," he emphasized, "you've left our entire science department searching for a replacement for the one man who could've achieved total control within the week! The final stages of our plans are delayed because of y-" His sentence cut short when the room suddenly grew cold, and stalagmites icicles broke through the marble tiles, all pointing at Caligo. Ravus moved to draw his blade but was intercepted by the Chancellor, who shook his head, and he backed away from the creeping ice.

"Verstael is dead because he tried to play god. He paid for his crimes in the only way he could. Do not test me further, lest you share his fate." Magitek drones deployed into the throne room, but didn't get far when they were speared by more icicles forming from the ground. Iedolas watched in silence, less alarmed than either of his sons or the military officials at his side. He motioned Loqi's sword down when the knight unsheathed his weapon.

"She didn't know when Ardyn appeared beside her or when his hand closed around hers, but the heat of his skin suddenly calmed the fire within, and the stalagmites melted away, leaving the floor undamaged. "Then do not serve under our regime. Rather, consider it an alliance between the gods and the protectors of Eos." Atra turned her head his way and followed the Chancellor around the room as he sauntered in circles. "Think about what the public will say when they hear the sorceress Lamia has gone out of her way to help the world win the war against darkness. They'll chant your name in the streets, bow before your presence, and give offerings in the name of their lives."

He pointed a finger at her. "In return, you're free to go with no Imperial forces chasing you across the globe. You'll live the life you always wanted to." Images of a dream took over her mind. She lived in peace, not a soul chasing her or attempting to end her life. The prospect of finally having a tranquil life felt good; so good, she didn't realize the aura she was spreading through the throne room. When
Atra opened her eyes, a golden glow had taken over the room, and everyone was staring at her. Her father, who'd seen her exert magical aura for years with little to no control, was left mouth agape at the display she presented to the witnesses, having only seen the destructive side of his daughter. "I'll take that as your acceptance, then."

As her magic energy settled, Atra laid her focus on the emperor again. "I serve no man, Your Radiance," she repeated, "but..." Ardyn released her hand, which she balled into a fist and crossed over her chest. "...If your wish is to end this war, once and for all, perhaps I could reconsider offering my assistance. But my charity end there, and I do what I see fit." She awaited the panel's response, exchanging glances with Promptus every second that ticked by. Ardyn was by his liege's side again, whispering in the old man's ear as the latter nodded with an intrigued glare in his eyes.

After deliberation that stretched on for what the sorceress considered ages, Iedolas dismissed Ardyn back to his post. "Very well, Atra Interitio. Niflheim will accept you as our ally, and together, we shall finally end this war. We will begin the preparations the day after tomorrow. I've still yet to properly welcome my son back home." Caligo gave the slightest sneer at the mention of the upcoming celebrations. It was arranged the moment Promptus and his father were reunited, and with the sorceress accepting their offer of an alliance and the crystal in their possession, there was much for Niflheim to commemorate. Though, if the commander could have things his way, the brat wouldn't have any part of the affairs of the royalty, even if he was the emperor's son. His escape from the wall all those years before still weighed heavily on him: the only blemish on his perfect career in the service. For now, he would play the part he was given and remain quiet, but something about the boy irked him deep enough that, if he were a different man, he'd risk every medal on his shoulder to put the rat in his place for embarrassing him. Unfortunately, he'd have to play along with the charade until his final day came, or if something 'unfortunate' befell the second-born prince, something he secretly hoped would come true. "How are the preparations coming along?"

"Everything is set for tomorrow afternoon, Your Radiance," Loqi responded. "The parade floats and procession are complete. General Interirio's guard has been deployed to keep everything in order." He glanced at the general, whose stare lingered on his daughter, waiting for her to meet his gaze and smile. "Lady Interitio's float has been equipped with the proper-"

"My float? What do you mean, my float?"

Her father cleared his throat, thinking of how best to explain her presentation to the public on the morrow. She'd never been one for formal events; Atra only attended them as a child by force and the desperation for companionship. Callisto sighed in relief when Ardyn took charge in answering her. "As I explained earlier, my dear, you have a country to greet. That chanting you just imagined will be a reality tomorrow, when the streets are filled with your adoring public, who will all crave your blessing. They want to praise you, not set you ablaze." Atra averted her gaze from Ardyn and scanned the room. Her eyes landed on her father's. She studied the crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, observing the way he nodded his head and smiled at her. It was the return of the father she knew as a child, the one who held her in his arms when they met for the first time in over five years, and the knots in her heart seemed to loosen a little with the way he watched his only child.

"...Fine. If it must be done, let us get it over with in an orderly fashion." She tore her gaze away from Callisto.

Ardyn clapped his hands together. "Wonderful. And now that all the preparations have been accounted for, let us return to our posts. Loqi, see to it that the Hydrean remains in custody until the day of reckoning arrives." The young blond soldier bowed his head with his arm across his chest and exited the room.
"I'll see to finalizing the invasion plans with General Glaucia," Callisto informed his emperor with a bow. "Your Radiance, Majesties." He turned swiftly on his heel and, halfway down the long red runner lining the throne room, he stopped in front of Atra and caressed her cheek. "...Welcome home, Atra," he uttered, and left her silent with a light peck to her cheek before he departed.

Startled, Atra nearly forgot about the others in the room, and marched up to Caligo. The commander flinched defensively when she halted before him with her arms crossed. "Take me to the prisoner."

"Wha-"

"We're getting this over with," she interrupted him, and laid her hand on his forehead, shutting her eyes. He froze in place, expecting more icicle stalagmites or one of her now well-known electrical attacks, and was surprised to feel a gentle chill swimming over her palm. Atra retracted her hand and turned to Ardyn with displeasure. "He's not going to, so you'll take me to him." Ardyn had a sense of what she might have planned, but was still curious to see if she'd go through with it, so with a tip of his hat he gave her a single nod.

"As you wish." He glanced at Ravus. "You're dismissed, Lord Fleuret. See to Atra's escorting tomorrow before the parade." The disgraced prince turned on heel and followed after General Interitio at the Chancellor's command. "Come along, Marchionissa, Commander Ulldor." They exited the throne room in a single line, Caligo bowing to the royals before he left with them. They were met with more stares from the palace staff and guards, some who had yet to see the sorceress walking freely through the halls. A passing maid recognized Atra's face from television and fainted, her colleague catching her before she hit the floor. Atra rolled her eyes at the maid and returned her focus forward, following Ardyn down a flight of stairs and into a dimly lit corridor. It reminded her of her imprisonment in Altissia. Atra shook the thought from her mind and slowed her steps when the Chancellor motioned to the cell in front of him. She crept toward the iron bars and peered inside, spotting an unconscious Noctis on the concrete ground, and watched him without uttering a word.

Caligo grunted after a couple of minutes. "And you asked to come here for what reason-"

"Shut it." The commander held his tongue at her tone. The Lucian Prince stirred, rolling his body over, but never waking. After more minutes passed she turned to the Chancellor. "He doesn't have it."

"As I thought." Ardyn took a step back from the cell. "I had to make sure, but I had a feeling it was in Lunafreya's possession." He gestured for Atra to follow him down the hall, and before she took a step, Caligo took her wrist in his grasp.

"How do we know you're not lying, witch? You were fighting for the Lucians just days ago; you could be plotting to turn on us, for all we know."

"Caligo Ulldor, was it?" she asked. "What a pity it would be for His Radiance to hear every little thought I read in your mind regarding Prince Promptus. How do you think he'd feel knowing all the nasty things you want to do to his son?" Caligo couldn't respond, his every word eaten by the dismay of hearing her words, which brought amusement to Ardyn. "Exactly," she replied for him, and tugged her wrist free from his hand.

Luna was praying to the gods when they reached her cell. At the sound of footsteps she jumped to her feet and took a hold of the knife she'd received with her meal, ready to defend herself if necessary. Her hand and jaw dropped when Atra sauntered in front of the cell bars, her expression unreadable. "Nebula..." Luna's jaw tightened when Ardyn walked beside her, giving the Oracle the slightest of bows, and Caligo watched them from behind.
"How have you been, Lunafreya?" Ardyn inquired, not expecting her to reply at all. And when she
did just as he assumed, he shook his head. "I'm quite sure it's in her possession, but she's hidden it
well."

"Men," Atra mumbled sardonically, and exhaled in an annoyed fashion. The Oracle had less than a
moment to ask Atra what was going on or register what was happening before her body froze into a
statue, her arms petrified at her sides. The guard standing at attention had no time to find the correct
key and unlock the cell before Atra bent the bars out of the way with her magic and climbed through
them. The sorceress grabbed her by the back of her head and pressed their foreheads together,
staying still and quiet until the answer came to her. Her hand plunged into Luna's shirt and between
her breasts, digging in the right side of her bra, and she retrieved a black and silver ring. Atra stepped
back through the bars to the outside and bent them back into their proper shape as she set Luna free
from her spell, and she handed the ring to Ardyn. Her gaze left him and landed on Caligo, who
couldn't find any words to say in response to what she'd just done. "Maybe now, you've learned to
not dawdle when you can apply yourself better, 'Commander'," she spat, and sashayed down the
corridor to return to her quarters.

"And that," Ardyn concluded, "is how she's passed her test."

"Wake up!"

Noctis' eyes flew open. "You must wake up!" the silent voice urged in his head. His skin burned the
moment he was able to fully awaken himself, and the Prince sat up, only to discover he was laying in
a remote rocky land. Moss bunched up in his hands when his fingers curled in, moistened from the
evidence of recent rain. The Lucian monarch got to his feet and surveyed his mysterious
surroundings, taking in the sound of a rushing creek, and insects and animals prattling about the
landscape. "Noctis!" the voice called again, and he spun around to locate the source. Paws hopped
across wet leaves, and when Noctis took notice of the steps, he caught sight of a small fox standing
between him and the creek, its fur glittered with gem dust, and a large garnet horn protruding from its
forehead.

"Carbuncle...!" Something was wrong with his voice. Its husk was gone, leaving it with a juvenile
tone. And the longer he stared down at his hands and feet, the more he realized his attire was off.
Black, yes, but he hadn't worn sneakers like those since he was a kid... "What's happening?" he
asked the fox.

The Fantasian chirped and barked, and a translation sounded in Noctis' head. "You have to wake up,
Noctis! You're in danger!"

Noctis rested a hand on his hip. "No I'm...but...why? What's going on? Where are we?"

"Don't you remember? This is your safe haven. You were here a lot after your accident all those
years ago." He did recall dreaming a lot as a kid. The accident had left the then eight-year old Prince
in a comatose state for nearly two weeks. But the days were all one long blur to him, lived out
playing in the streets of dream-Altissia and the dream-palace in dream-Insomnia. Carbuncle was
there to comfort him when his father was suddenly absent and he needed a companion. The need for
the Fantasian's company dwindled as he grew older and gained friends in the real world, and Noctis
never thought he'd see the fox again. Seeing the Archean, though a small relief to know he was still
there for the Prince, alarmed him of what could be wrong. "You've been captured by the enemy!
They've trapped you in the palace and-" The fox shrieked and jumped out of the way of a spike
shooting up from the ground.

A low, throaty growl emerged from the spike, which turned to putty and flattened to the ground.
"Oh, don't ruin our fun, Carbuncle." Noctis took a step backwards, watching as the plant life around him wilted to gray, shriveled stalks that crumbled instantly when the magenta putty spread across it. Carbuncle jumped between it and Noctis and growled, his tail sticking up straight and puffing out. "Try as you might to be threatening," the voice continued, "your bark still rings louder than your bite. Perhaps if you could make children's dreams real, you'd be a force to reckon with. But you are only a creature of fantasy, and a fantasy can be snuffed out with one simple motion."

A sound rang through the space and all light vanished, leaving Noctis gasping and looking for anything familiar. "Carbuncle!" Noctus called. "Someone, anyone!" The throaty voice chuckled as the Prince scrambled all over the plain, tripping over himself in the darkness.

"It is by your hand that chaos shall run free."

A purple light sparked. Noctis shielded his eyes from the blinding light just as he began to fall. His body spun, hair whipped around, and he felt his dream self growing back to his reality self. The Prince hit a hard surface with a thud, coughing when dust settled in his throat. The light settled down, losing its color and luster, and the space suddenly felt colder. Pushing himself up, Noctis hit his head on an iron bar when he leaned forward. He held his throbbing skull and sat down, and only then did he realize the small cell he was in. Then every memory of what happened before his awakening flooded back, much like whatever he'd seen take over his dream. Prompto betrayed him, betrayed all of Lucis. He'd been an agent for Niflheim all along - the damn prince of the empire, for Etro's sake - spending the last nine years collecting information and getting close enough to formulate the perfect kidnapping. Noctis felt a lump forming in the spot he'd been smacked with the butt of Prompto's gun. Oh, how he couldn't wait to give that bastard what he deserved for turning on everyone.

Another noise startled him. Scrambling to his feet, the Prince watched as the Chancellor marched beside his lonely cell and stopped to give him a bow. "You're handling yourself much better than Atra initially did," he said to Noctis, who bared his teeth at the burgundy-haired man and stuck his hand out to throw a Fire spell at him, confused when nothing sparked from his palm. "Ah, ah, ah!" A single wave of Ardyn's hand sent Noctis flying into the cell's back wall, knocking the breath out of him. "You seem to forget that you're no longer on home soil, my boy. The rules have changed since you were brought to Gralea, and they all rule in my favor." A shock rode across his skin, paralyzing him and making him scream. "I wouldn't try magic if I were you. Your new bracelet isn't too keen on the stuff." He pointed to a metal cuff secured around Noctis' ankle, matching the one Luna wore.

"What are you-" The Prince shrank to his knees at the onset of a powerful headache, rendering his words no more than primal snarls and sounds as he held his skull once more.

The Chancellor shook his head. "Oh, dear. I apologize for this rude interruption; it seems the scientists have finally chosen to begin their tests on the crystal." He ignored Noctis' pained heaving and continued on with his words. Tiny crystal fragments began to form out of the air and settle on his shoulders and hair. "Don't worry. It'll cease shortly." True enough to his word, the headache eased and wore off, but not before Ardyn spotted the silver flare in his irises. "Ah. I see Velox's information was correct. If the crystal is tampered with in any way, you are immediately effected. Of course, the first time we tried it, it was merely the magic barrier, but Atra took care of that for us." His words left Noctis baffled, which he noticed right away, and the Chancellor chuckled. "Oh, haven't you been informed? Lamia fights with Niflheim now. Stubborn as she is, we've managed to come to an agreement. And even I have to admit that she's scary; just wait until you hear what she did to our chief scientist."

Everything flooded back into his memories: the escape train separating, his father's death, Atra's
capture, Prompto betraying them, then shooting Ignis and Gladiolus-- His rage exploded inside of him and crystal fragments swirled around his body. His eyes flashed between silver and red, triggered by his anger and the continued experiments on the crystal, but he could summon no weapon or spell to take out the man standing before him. "I remember that look," Ardyn continued. "You gave me a similar one shortly before you departed for Altissia. You should've heeded my offer then and split the crystal with Niflheim."

"So you could attain its powers and destroy everything?" the Prince spat.

"We're already destroying everything, crystal or not. The speed at which we do it is what's determined. But no matter." Ardyn snapped his fingers and the cell doors opened. Noctis' eyes darted left and right, and he ran out without thinking, knocking the Chancellor aside. He didn't know where he was going. The corridor was a maze of hallways and Magitek drones marching about, but he didn't stop. The further he sprinted, the less he saw the robotic husks, and he believed he was getting lost, until something whispered in his head to go left. He followed the directions and skid to a stop in front of a set of double doors...

"...Train doors...?" he whispered to himself. It made no sense. Looking behind him, only a dim light shined from the corridor, but he could hear mechanical marching gaining on him. He turned back to the doors and saw Pryna sitting beside them, waiting for him to move. The dog barked once: an order for him to get moving. Noctis didn't give the opportunity to run another thought and dashed through the double doors, nearly stumbling into someone inside the train car. No one followed him inside and the train departed wherever it'd stopped. None of the other passengers had faces. He walked to the other end of the car, trying to figure out where he'd ended up, and for a split second, he thought he saw blonde hair and familiar blue-gray eyes reflecting in the window. There was no reflection, though, as the train pulled into the next station, and Pryna urged him off the train when the doors slid open.

"Turn back!" One foot was out of the train when he heard the voice from his childhood. Carbuncle hopped onto his shoulder and jumped between the Prince and Pryna, puffing his tail at the sight of the white dog. "You have to go! It's a trap-" Carbuncle could say no more as Pryna pounced on top of him and bit into the Archean's neck, and began to thrash back and forth.

"Pryna, STOP!" Noctis ordered as he reached out to separate them, but a sudden circle of Magitek drones surrounded and separated him from the warring animals. His sword appeared in his grasp and a fireball in the other, the magic-jamming cuff gone when he glanced at his ankle. He didn't question what was happening and laid his focus on the growing horde, who pointed their firearms at him and ordered him to stand down. Noctis spread his legs and deepened his stance to be ready for battle, and held his sword above his head. Bullets began to fire. He summoned a barrier to deflect the bullets, some ricocheting back into the soldiers, and warped above one of them. He landed with his knees on its shoulders and twisted his legs, decapitating the drone. His legs swung its body around, sweeping other husks off their feet. His foot dug under one of their firearms and Noctis pulled it into his free hand, shooting out the farthest Magiteks while backing away. "Carbuncle!" he yelled, waiting to hear the small Archean whine and leap next to him to suck him out of the nightmare surfacing from, what he was sure, was his still unconscious mind being dragged to Gralea. But the fox had vanished, as did Pryna, leaving him to fend off the Magiteks by himself. The blade swiveled in his grasp, whirling behind him as he dropped the firearm and switched both hands and swords, taking on the greatsword he and Gladiolus worked together to unlock from one of the royal tombs. The sharpened edges swirled under his arm as he reached for its handle and he whipped the Magiteks away in fives. He jumped and backflipped mid-warp, throwing a fireball at the same time. The blast consumed the front line of drones and blew the others backwards when he landed. And suddenly, time slowed, allowing him to take in the full extent of the blast radius. The armor the Magiteks were made up of was different than he remembered. Rust was visible through the flames, and the tapestries hanging
from their necks reminded him of old newspaper clippings his grandfather saved. The design had to be at least sixty years old... Noctis' mind returned to the fight and he threw his sword to the far side of the battlefield and warped out of the danger zone, and when he was a distance away, he pulled the tiny crystal fragment from his pocket, relieved and somewhat shocked it was still there. He stared at Pryna, the dog suddenly calm and attentive as it waited. Had they leapt through time? He didn't notice any changes from the moment he escaped the holding cell... And why hadn't Ardyn gone after him? With him in Niflheim, every soldier in the army would've been on his trail.

A bullet whirred past his ear, putting him on guard. Noctis summoned a lance and pointed it in the direction it flew from. One footstep, then the other sounded from fur-lined leather boots that carried the offender closer to the Prince. Prompto sauntered in front of him, twirling his gun round his index finger as he kept eye contact with Noctis. "You..."

"Were you honestly surprised?" Promptus asked him as he came to a halt. "I mean, I AM a Nifeli, and Daddy did try to warn you. You even pull this stunt with Atra, and you only knew her for- what, 22 hours? Barely!" The gun handle settle in his palm and he pointed it at Noctis again. "You're either really stupid or just desperate for some companionship AND really stupid. Come on, man. Get your shit together...or do you like seeing all those people die because of you?"

"You son of a-" Noctis charged at Promptus and launched the lance toward his throat, only for the Nifeli prince to vanish in smoke. Noctis landed where the blond once stood and scanned the area for him, finding no trace of his form until he fired another shot, grazing the Lucian prince's cheek. He spun on heel and traded the lance in for his engine blade, leaving the remaining weapons to circle around him and form a barrier.

"Typical Noctis. Letting others do the dirty work whilst you watch from afar and take a nap."

Another bullet flew into him, shattering against a piece of crystal. "I know Etro's eyes let you see the final thoughts of a departing soul as they join her, but have you ever actually SEEN them dying?" Two more bullets collided with the shield before Promptus showed himself again. "You ever feel the metal slicing their flesh into pieces? Or the rain of bullets poking holes through their lungs?" Noctis looked away for a moment in guilt, long enough for Promptus to break through the crystalline barrier and tackle him to the ground, his knees sitting on his arms. Promptus grabbed him by the neck and pulled his head forward. "Open your fucking eyes, man!" He jerked Noctis' head to the left, where more human-shaped figures appeared. "All these people are fighting for you, and you haven't done shit for them!" The blond's eyebrows furrowed. "And if any of your servants did survive somehow, they still gave more than they can ever get back." And then Promptus was off of him, swatting away the spinning weapons like flies. Noctis got to his feet, only to be yanked backwards by many hands that shoved him into the center of another ring.

He knew every face in the crowd, and when he met their eyes, the images of their deaths pulsed in his mind. Noctis fell to his knees and held his head. The people remained silent but their voices screamed in his mind, whether in agony or rage or fear. He heard Clarus' final words of bravery as he tried to conceal his fear while fighting in the small hospital, protecting the patients from the Magiteks attempting to self-destruct. The man stood before him with blood leaking from his gut and Magitek shrapnel embedded in his skull and throat. Pelna gasped for air as his lungs froze and icicle stalagmites broke through his skin, stabbing him all over from the inside out. He coughed violently when Crowe was filled with the lead of Nifeli guns and her throat was sliced open by a woman who looked an awful lot like Gentiana. Thousands of other voices cried for help or cursed in their final moments, falling to blade and gun, their cities trampled by the likes of Niflheim. Noctis shut his eyes tight and curled into himself. His eyes were red, he knew they were, and they were starting to burn from staying that way for so long. He swiped his sword aimlessly around him, trying to scare off the poltergeists, his energy suddenly lost when he heard Ignis scream as his face was burned by an explosion, and he screamed himself when he saw his father be run through by General Glauca's
blade, then kicked off like common dirt.

"You're forgetting someone." The Marshal's voice rang like needles stabbing him. The crowd parted and made a path for Cor to walk through. He stopped a few feet in front of Noctis and stared down at him. "How selfish. I was the first to die for you, yet when I came back to life, you still didn't bat an eye." Noctis blinked once and saw red spreading across Cor's shirt, leaking from his chest as he fell face-down. Behind him stood the description of Lamia which spread all throughout Lucis before her reveal: a woman shrouded in shadows, her eyes large and black, and spreading dark magic all around her - evident when all who fell victim to her collapsed. Even Regis' body fell, something Noctis nearly didn't notice until the King's hand landed on top of his own. He glanced from Lamia to Regis' corpse for just a second and blinked again when his gaze returned to her, only to find Atra staring down at him with blown-out pupils and a sword pointed to his throat. A fire replaced the people encircling them, and even Promptus was gone. Atra dropped the sword and held out her hand to Noctis, magenta and purple energy swirling around her.

"It is power you seek, is it not?" The energy gathered on her arms and shoulders, thickening to a bubbling goop that dripped over her feet. Her eyes shifted from gray to magenta, her pupils retracting until they were almost gone. "It is by your hand that Chaos shall run free," Atra repeated, though it was no longer in her own voice or that of Lamia's. "The evidence is all around you, Noctis Lucis Caelum. Your presence has left all but destruction in your wake. I tried to warn your father, but his love for you got in the way of seeing the truth." By the end of the sentence Atra's form was taken over halfway by the murky substance, the same one he'd seen before waking up in his cell. "He said the future King would take responsibility for the actions which he and his family are guilty of carrying out. But you are far from ready...unless you're finally prepared to repay your debt to society." Noctis had never communed with Chaos. Regis never allowed him to as a child, saying the power he was to one day contain was too much for his young heart to bear. Even as he was preparing to take on the responsibility of being king, his father was wary of revealing the brunt of the powers which Chaos carried inside the crystal, even when the monarch was in a coma. With Regis gone, though, Noctis felt a shift in the crystal's power. It seared in his veins every time he drew some out, even burned his skin a little, and a savage growl would erupt in his mind with each warp and weapon summon. When he looked up at Atra again she was gone, only a fresh surface for the slime to spread across and reshape. "Perhaps Regis was wrong after all. You are no king...not yet." The blob melted into the ground, taking all the fallen bodies with it. "I will be waiting, should your resolve reach its peak."

And then the ground collapsed underneath him, and he fell through.
Prelude

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The moment Lunafreya was allowed out of her cell, she knew something wasn't right. Yes, she had an escort at all times to make sure she wouldn't remove the bracelet from her ankle - not that she'd be able to either way - and she would be forced to attend all national gatherings, including the parade and gala to come, but she was otherwise allowed to roam the majority of the palace as she pleased. She knew she was a prisoner nonetheless, even with the lavish suite Iedolas and Ardyn 'gifted' to her, neatly tucked into the corner and sandwiched between the Chancellor's chambers and a nine-story drop - which wouldn't have been a problem if her prayers were heard. The only god lurking about, though, was Ifrit, and his stare threatened to burn through her skin if she dared to ever speak to him. It was the first time in a long time she felt helpless, and as cherished of a relic as she was treated, Luna wanted nothing more than to have Gentiana and Leviathan by her side to destroy the entire Nifeli palace. There were rooms in the palace that made her imprisonment a bit more bearable. She was allowed access to the library and kitchen; so long as she remained indoors, she could roam free. It reminded her of the day Niflheim invaded Tenebrae and absorbed it into their nation... At least then, she had her family to bear the struggle with. Her mother Sylva, father Ferro, and brother Ravus. Ferro and Sylva were lost when Tenebrae fell, presumed dead even when no bodies ever surfaced. She hadn't seen Ravus since the Insomnian invasion. Luna was certain he was within the palace walls, probably chatting with the generals about their next move, what country to take over next. She never understood why he turned against her and joined those who destroyed their homeland; he, in turn, couldn't understand why she sided with Noctis every time. Luna searched the palace but never found him to confront him on the matter; instead, she'd stumble upon the Chancellor musing about as if he weren't just following her around for the sixth time that day. But now he seemed distracted, consumed by preparations for the celebrations and plotting Niflheim's next move. He never spontaneously appeared when she was escorted to the dining hall for breakfast, nor did he pop up in the library or in any of the halls. She snuck past him with ease and overheard from a passing maid that the entire advisory board was still up in arms about the events coming later on that day.

"Well," one gossiped to another while unfolding freshly washed tablecloths, "I overheard Sir Casia muttering to his assistant about the parade. He is NOT happy with how much it'll cost Niflheim. He said - and I quote - 'I'll be able to hang myself with the receipt once the fun's all over.' " The maids' yakking and laughter silenced when Luna walked past them, more put off by the Magiteks following her than the Oracle's presence. When she and the drones were far off, they continued on. "Anyway, he and the rest of the advisory board are in a conference with the..." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Sorceress."

"No!" the other gasped. Her senior shushed her and quickly scanned the room for any listeners.

"Do you want her to snuff you out on her first day here? She's the most powerful thing in all of Niflheim! You'd better pray hard to Etro tonight she doesn't send her agent out for your head..." The maids headed in the opposite direction as their voices died down, and Luna continued to wander through the halls aimlessly, paying little attention to her robotic babysitters.

"...sh I could change your mind," a voice sounded from down a darker hall. Curious, the Oracle tiptoed closer to the sound's source: a half-open door, and peered through the crack. A man paced the floor back and forth as a woman shook her head and leaned against the desk positioned by the wall. "Are you sure you want to leave this all behind, Highwind? You'll be leaving your pay, your lavish
"I know what the terms are," she interrupted him with a sigh, "and my decision hasn't changed. I'll be leaving after the gala tomorrow night." Aranea handed Callisto the resignation papers, signed with her name on the bottom, as her weight shifted to the corner of the desk. "To be fair, I don't really fit in with all you stoic military men anyway. We're oil and water, and I'm not too keen on following orders from anyone else. But I'll at least depart in a respectable manner and attend your daughter's welcome party before I take my leave." Her words paused momentarily as she remembered first meeting Lamia in Insomnia, seeing the fear in her eyes when she realized what became of the crystal. Even she, having come face to face with daemons on a regular basis bounty after bounty, couldn't imagine what in the empire drove the innocence out of the doctor's soul and morphed her into the full image of the woman she'd be displayed as the following day to all of Gralea.

"But of course, Highwind," the general added. "You're being honored tonight; His Radiance wished to congratulate you personally on bringing the crystal to him in one piece." His thumb traced over the Nifeli royal crest, pressed on the paper with melted wax as the emperor's sign of approval. He'd been reluctant to let such a fine warrior go so easily, he admitted only to himself in his mind. General Glaucia said nothing of the matter, still fuming over the new scar Atra had given him with her lightning bolt; perhaps it was better if he stayed quiet and brooded in his quarters before attending the gala. "But it's still a shame that you're leaving our cause."

"Like I said, the pay's not worth it." Aranea saluted her superior and turned to leave his quarters, then halted halfway to the door. "...Before I depart, General Interitio, there's one thing I've wanted to ask you for a while now." Callisto gestured to the larger of the two couches as he sat in an adjacent armchair. Aranea joined him, turning down an offer of tea when a maid entered and served the general. He crossed one leg over the other and lifted the cup and saucer to his lips. "The Lamia Project." Callisto paused mid-sip. "You subjected your own daughter to years of experimentation. Was there really any benefit from sending her and countless others to the devil?" His gaze met her narrowed eyes. "I've heard stories about what went on in that lab, horrific ones. Adults and children being probed and force into fights against each other to see whose magic was stronger. The individuals were mainly taken from lower class quadrants. I don't know whether or not that's worse than the rumors of Verstael requesting war prisoners." The teacup lowered to the glass table in front of the general. "What happened to all the others who didn't achieve Lamia status?"

Callisto knitted his hands together and placed them on his lap. She had guts to ask those kinds of questions to a military official, let alone face-to-face. His finger traced along the edge of the cup, and he couldn't help the smirk that curled up on the left half of his face. "There's a reason you weren't a part of the science division, Highwind, something you couldn't have understood at any time. Verstael hand-picked both the individuals who'd work under his guiding eye, and those who would possibly achieve the ultimate warrior's status. Had you been born a mutant like my beloved daughter was, you may have had a chance at redemption; but alas, you're but a mere daemon huntress." Callisto paused his monologuing to gauge Aranea's reaction so far; she remained stoic. "To put it simply, those who weren't worthy of becoming Lamia were taken care of. Some had died during the tests, and those who still stood and lacked the mana to achieve reaching the title..." A chuckle escaped him. "Well, let's just say you may find a couple of them on your bounties."

A hard lump formed in Aranea's throat. "He..." Her mind comprehended the information but it turn to mush by the time it reached her mouth, instead applying all its energy to fully take in what she'd been told. Her widened eyes shifted to a scowl. "Now I understand why the outskirts have had so many daemon incidents." She grit her teeth. "That fucking monster! How could he just turn innocent people into daemons?" She abruptly stood, pushing the table in front of her when her knees hit it.

"Innocent people?" Callisto sipped his tea. "You really don't get it. The mutants were a burden on
Niflheim. They halted all our missions to the last thread, and when the government decided to take action, so did they. Riots broke out day after day. It was decided that the mutants no longer had any self control. They could turn on their own kin in a split second." He added a spoonful of sugar to the drink and stirred it. "Think of it this way, Aranea: do we really have room to confine all these criminals? And even if we did, they'd use their magic to escape. Daemonic transformation cleaned the population within a heartbeat. We change them, release them just outside the borders, and the citizens take care of the rest should the creatures somehow return. Saves us a lot of money."

"I should've guessed you'd see it his way," she retorted. "So what's next, 'General'? Your daughter's now Lamia, the last 'mutant' alive in Niflheim. You're out of potential army rats." She couldn't hear any more of it. Aranea gave a weak salute and walked toward the door.

"You don't want to hear of our backup?" She didn't respond as she passed his desk and, with a force of finality, smacked her open hand on top of the resignation letter. "That's where the Lucians come into play." Aranea stopped in her tracks, hand halfway extended to the door handle. "So we were a little reckless with our disposal; oh, well. What's done is done. But why cry over the loss of a weapon when you can just appropriate a new one? Lucians have a greater understanding of magic. All it would take is one prick to the back of the neck, and they'd be loyal." She twisted her body to stare at him. "Don't believe me? We have one of their best mages in the research lab as we speak." A face-down paper lay next to his drink and Callisto peeled it off the glass surface, and held it up for her to see. A mugshot, from what she could tell, of some woman with brown hair and eyes. Her face was a mess, covered in blood and some kind of residue smeared by her mouth. "This is Lucis' best mage."

"Bu-but... Prince Velox-"

"He had his pet create the illusion. She was a tough specimen to catch; however, in her weakened state, even she couldn't fight us off entirely. She was brought in the same time as Lunafreya."

The oracle in question was still eavesdropping on their conversation, though she found it difficult to keep her shrieks of terror and surprise bottled up. The Magiteks, still standing beside her crouched frame, had no programming to keep her moving should an opportunity like this arise. Even from far off she could make out the profile in the photo. "She's alive..." Luna whispered to herself in the quietest of voices. She pressed a hand to her heart and fought off tears of elation.

"Yes, the mage still lives." Luna gasped and spun around, her back to the wall, seeing Prince Velox standing at the other end of the carpeted floor runner. He didn't seem to be paying attention to her reaction as he studied the patterns in the hem of the rug, lips pursed and stance swaying as if he were bored. "Let me tell you, it was hard for me to not kill her. She's almost as powerful as Lamia. And her knowledge on magic - oh, so pristine! She'll make a fine soldier for my father." Her silence prompted him to finally meet her eyes with a nonchalant gaze. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you know. I mean, it's not like you can do anything about it, right? In fact-" Velox snapped his fingers and one of the robotic husks marched to his side. "Now you won't make so much noise when you're prattling around the palace. Your brother says hi, by the way." Velox bent his right arm and brought it in as he bowed to her, then continued down the hall to his destination.

Once a good distance from Lunafreya, Velox dismissed the Magitek. It marched off in a stiff manor after saluting him. Velox rolled his eyes and groused, "Stupid robots," leaving his lips as he walked a few more feet to a large red door. He pushed it inward and followed, and immediately regretted not knocking. "Ugh! Please, put some clothes on!"

His entry startled the three naked women laying on the king-sized bed at the back of the room, with the just-as-naked man in the center, the lower half of his body covered by the plush red duvet. Wine
bottles and clothing littered the marble floor; Velox could smell the alcohol radiating from them. Promptus stared at his brother, clearly annoyed. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?" he almost yelled. One of the women, black hair and blue eyes, gasped in a high pitch and fled to the connected wash room, while the others scrambled to get some sort of covering over their bodies. "Now look what you did! Geez, were you always this stupid?"

"No!" his brother yelled back, leaning on the closed door and shielding his eyes with his forearm. He waited a few minutes before feeling it was safe to look and saw Promptus dressed from the waist down; he could deal with that, at the least. His wandering eyes caught a glimpse of the black-haired woman when he momentarily looked to the bathroom and saw her naked reflection, and his gaze snapped back to his brother. "You've only been home a day, and your first instinct is to gather some concubines?"

"Father said I should relax before the gala. And this is how I chose to do so."

"Tch."

"Your promiscuity seems to have tripled in your time away from us. Have the etiquette classes escaped your mind so soon?" Promptus didn't reply with word, only shrugging, and when one of the concubines strutted past him, he slapped her behind, eliciting a squeal from the woman. Velox rolled his eyes for the second time and rested his forehead against his hand. "...So how was it? Living amongst the Lucians all this time?"

Promptus, in the middle of buttoning his blouse, paused at the fourth from the bottom for a moment. "Way different than here, that's for sure," he began as he resumed dressing himself. "Lots of festivals, top-notch security - aside from my entry, of course - and I'd never seen the night sky so illuminated with stars. To be honest it was kind of nice."

"Believe it or not the Lucians are pretty laid back. I spent most nights going out on the town with the Prince and his handlers. An arcade one night, sneaking into a club the next; the Prince wasn't the lazy, drowsy stuck-up boy he was painted as in our initial reports." A memory flooded into his mind, the first night Promptus spent in the Lucian palace. Noctis had made sure his room was right beside his, as Ignis' and Gladiolus' were. The evenings that followed were filled with movies and games that stretched into the wee hours preluding dawn, even with the advisor-in-training doing his best to coerce them all to sleep. Noctis was reprimanded for missing important lessons but the King waved it off when he saw how happy his son was. Even as royalty, everything they did felt normal.

Velox could only imagine the fun his brother had during his lengthy mission, and if he were persuaded to be honest, he would've admitted his jealousy. "So while Father and I slaved away to further our conquest of the crystal, you were off partying and probably getting drunk. Hmph." It annoyed him. "Anyway, I came by to let you know the tailors and stylists are waiting for us in the main hall downstairs. They want to get our measurements and begin work on our attire for the gala. They refuse to begin without you present, saying something about needing all the details worked out so nothing will be questioned tomorrow." He'd put some thought into his own outfit for the event. He wanted to be flashy and glittering, knowing how much attention Promptus would have at the party. But almost all of the focus would be on the sorceress. She was getting her own parade, after all, though he and his brother were featured in the procession. With the war drawing to a close things began to calm, and he wanted as many eyes on him as he could get. Promptus didn't bother wearing any unnecessary accessories when he finished dressing and dismissed the concubines so he could take a proper leave.

Ravus wondered why he'd been assigned as the sorceress' escort. There were plenty of other worthy guards able to withstand a strike from her spells, fearing more of the damage he'd sustain should she lose her temper and electrocute him. He didn't care if the Magiteks were destroyed by her hand; he
just didn't want his prosthetic arm to attract the lightning. Yet when he mustered the confidence to voice his concern to the Chancellor, he always recalled what the man had told him on their way to capture Atra once and for all. His presence beside Lamia served as more of a tactic against him, making sure he and Lunafreya never crossed paths. But they couldn't completely prevent the two from walking by each other. It was impossible to predict every turn Luna's Magitek guard and Atra took in the halls; they were bound to run into each other at least once.

He led the sorceress to the seamstress' work station, a room filled with nothing but fabric, mirrors, and sewing machines. Their previous destination, the palace concert hall, covered the plan for the parade tomorrow afternoon. She'd put the fear of the gods into the event planners when she remained stone-faced as they walked her through each stage of the event. They took her silence as approval; having heard of what she nearly did to Caligo during her presentation, Sir Casia and his team liked the silence better than what could've transpired if she didn't like a single aspect of the parade. Her unreadable face stayed when she and Ravus entered the seamstress' quarters. Nine women and three men froze in place when she walked to the middle of the room, taking in the room's setup and deciding if it was worth her time or not. The head seamstress, Deedi, bowed to the two and cleared her throat loud enough to have the others pay attention and follow suit. "Marchionissia," she began, "it's the greatest honor to be the ones who will dress you for your ceremony."

Atra's eyes darted left and right, landing on each of the staff members, watching them shudder and hold their tongues. One looked ready to pass out. "Do you fear me?" the sorceress asked them. "You have no reason to... Unless I hate the dress."

"Oh, Atra," someone chuckled. Everyone's attention drifted to the double door entrance and noticed Ardyn waltz into the room with open arms. "Please refrain from taunting the palace staff. You've made five people faint so far; we can't keep replacing them on a moment's notice." They didn't know what to make of the Chancellor's arrival. He always popped out of nowhere without a moment's notice, something even the head seamstress couldn't get used to after two and a half decades in the palace.

"And what brings you here, Chancellor?" Ravus asked for all of them. "I assumed you'd be tied up with preparations."

Ardyn waved his hand with a chuckle. "The important parts have been taken care of. I left the rest to Loqi. As for my reason to intrude..." His light, graceful steps brought him to Atra's side. "I've come to offer some ideas for her looks. The great sorceress can't have just one beautiful dress; no, we need something extravagant for both the procession and the gala." His hand ventured to an inner coat pocket and fished two pieces of paper, each with a sketch of an outfit, and handed them to Deedi. "Of course, if you don't like them, we can always try something else."

Deedi studied each sketch closely. She turned around and sauntered to the window, held each paper to the light. "Hmm...these certainly are...different." She turned again and held each drawing in front of Atra, moving until her body fit perfectly in the sketch's silhouette. "No offense, Chancellor, but don't you think the first one is a bit...extreme?"

"Let me see." Atra approached Deedi with careful steps to not frighten her, and held her hand out palm-up. The seamstress passed the papers to the sorceress and gauged her expression when she saw the designs. The first was light and airy, demure with pale colors and veils all over. She raised an eyebrow. "And you expect me to be able to move in this...curtain?"

"That's your procession dress, dear," Ardyn corrected. "There's no need for you to move more than a wave of your hand to the crowds. You are Etro's agent; I believe this will highlight your prowess." He wandered to her side and shuffled the papers in her hands, laying focus on the second. "You may
like this one better." And he was proven correct when she lost control of her mana for a slight second, and it manifested into a golden glow around her frame.

"It's perfect."

"Splendid!" The Chancellor released Atra's hands and took his leave, tipping his hat to everyone before departing.

The sorceress handed the papers off to Deedi once more. "Well," she began, "let's take your measurements." She snapped her fingers and summoned one of her assistants over with a measuring tape. She shooed Ravus to the side when the tape wrapped around the girl's torso. "Please remove your coat, if you don't mind." Atra complied with the seamstress' request and shrugged the fabric off her shoulders. Another assistant took it when the coat fell past her elbows and gathered over her hands. She hung it on hooks beside Ravus, whose eyes followed the assistant out of boredom. He'd been forced to sit through the same thing with Luna when she was being fitted for her wedding dress; the only difference this time being the individual and event. The young girl laid her hands over Atra's spine and gently pressed in to make her stand up straight. She held her arms out to be measured, then kept them up when the tape slid around her breasts- Ravus looked away with the slightest grunt. He crossed his arms and slumped in his chair. It wasn't until a few minutes in deep thought that he heard his name being called. He sat up straight and met Deedi's gaze. "And what of your attire, High Commander?"

"Oh, well..." He hadn't contemplated dressing up for the event. But if he had to... "I have my royal garbs of Tenebrae."

"I'll send Stella to fetch them from your quarters. If you're attending such a grand event, you'll have to look perfect; I won't hear any disapproval from His Radiance or refusal from you." His lips drew into a flat line, perplexed and shocked all at once at her stance. And the emotions deepened when Deedi gestured for his left hand, meeting his eyes again when he froze. "High Commander... Though it may be uncomfortable for you, I have to modify your coat to accommodate for your..." She hesitated. "I won't touch a thread if you turn it down-"

Ravus shook his head and rose from the chair, "It's quite alright, Deedi. I understand the circumstances." He shifted to a nod, and with his own hesitance, placed his prosthetic hand in hers. He stayed loose, allowing the seamstress to turn his palm up, then down again, before working her way up to his shoulder. Ravus craned his neck away to give her space and swept his hair to the other side. The measuring tape was laid on the edge of his collar and stretched to his shoulder, then removed and wrapped around his left arm, measuring the hem of his uniform coat as reference for the modifications she'd make. She was done quickly, to his relief, and clapped her hands to summon the named assistant. She directed the girl to the High Commander's quarters and the exact garments to bring back. Stella gave a quick bow and hurried out, sparing a passing glance at Ravus. He'd turned his head briefly at the same moment and caught her gaze. His throat suddenly went dry, his heartbeat skipping a beat. Something about the assistant named Stella seemed oddly familiar, like a lost family member, and he tracked her path into the hallway as she vanished.

Chapter End Notes

And I'm back with this story! The hiatus was unplanned but helped a lot. Let's see how long it takes me to wrap up this massive story. My greatest appreciation to all those who've stuck with this since the first chapter was posted. I'd hug you all if I could.
Chapter Summary

*If it feels good, tastes good, it must be mine*

*Heroes always get remembered, but you know legends never die’*

~Emperor's New Clothes, Panic! At The Disco

Chapter Notes

Ah, THIS is the chapter I've been waiting to write. Everything's coming together now.

Prepare for a loooooong ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Magitek activity seemed to dwindle over the past few days, even more so since Noctis' capture. The only active parties were the garrisons, particularly the one imprisoning Gentiana, who was still in a frenzy and spraying down the Nifeli soldiers via Leviathan's wrath. They all knew, though, that said activity would ramp up one hundred fold any day now, so they needed a plan to get them back to the original plan, which was now way off course. With the King dead, Noctis and Luna captured, and the crystal finally within the Nifeli royal palace, there were few options left for what remained of Lucis' only hope. With Umbra guiding them by using his heightened sense of smell the six warriors ventured through the brush that remained of the Lucian grasslands, laying low behind boulders and trees to keep out of sight of potential patrolling soldiers. They had eyes above, too, in the form of Shiva's agents gliding through the clouds and searching the ground for her fallen sister. Back on the earth, Nebula stayed in prayer to other gods for strength and support to end the war and save their comrades, her eyes closed and left hand in Nyx's to lead her through the countryside. Ignis insisted on walking freely, no matter how much Gladiolus protested. "If I'm to be of use to you all," he argued, "then I need to learn how to navigate without sight." It was more of a pipe-dream than an actual goal, really; how could he move around if he couldn't see? His doubts began to worm their way back into his mind, until a smooth, cold hand caressed his jugular and a forehead pressed against his. He halted his walk.

"Doubt not your willpower," Nebula encouraged him. She motioned her head for the others to go ahead of her, Cor and Nyx hesitating with reluctance until her stare shooed them away. The oracle's hands slid to Ignis', her fingers curling against his palms. "You still have your other senses; turn them into your eyes." Carefully she unstrapped the velcro around his wrists and removed his gloves, placing them in his inner breast pocket where she knew he'd be aware of them, and held his hands again. "You can feel the sensation of my touch, can you not? Step as if you were reaching with your hands. Concentrate on the sounds around you, don't panic." She released his hands, her fingers
drawing down his to the tip, and took three steps back. "Come forward to me." She sensed his worry. "You still have legs, Ignis; use them." Nebula crept further and further away with long, drawn-out steps, deliberately pressing the balls of her shoes on twigs and pebbles to create sound. Ignis' eyebrows twitched with each tiny sound before him, he tuned out the chirping birds he could tell were far above in the trees, and cautiously, he raised his right foot and laid it a small distance ahead of his body. He took another step, and another, his hands balling into fists at his side to prevent him from reaching out. He trusted his own judgement and ushered his weight forward one step at a time, until a minute later, a hand bumped into his chest. "The ground ahead is flat. Do you think you can manage moving on your own for a little while?"

He nodded, still in disbelief at what he'd achieved. "I'll let you know if I require assistance." Nebula smiled and took his hands in hers again, lifted them to eye level, and laid them on her cheeks. He didn't understand what she was doing, even as she adjusted the positioning of his fingers, but caught on when his thumb traced the line of her lips.

"You can still see, Ignis. Your way is just special."

The moment behind them, the two returned to their group, who'd settled at the base of a hill blocking them from the street, and - from what Ignis could hear - heavy machinery clunking back and forth. An inner mechanism whined as the main gate of a garrison opened, allowing the artillery machine inside. Cor gestured for the two to tighten the space between them and come closer to conceal their presence as much as possible. "The Hydrean's vessel lies ahead. Her scent is unmistakable."

"And I can hear her," Nebula added, "feel her pain and distress." Her eyes fell closed again. "...She's bound by chains, moved to an underground cell of tungsten and platinum, a cuff around her neck..." She clawed at her own. "You can feel her too, Cor, can't you?" The marshal didn't reply and kept his eyes focused on the garrison, still enough of a response for her. Eyes opened again, a plan started to formulate in her head. She laid her hand atop Cor's, who readied to flinch away but stopped as the information from her mind flowed into his.

"No. It's too risky. Even with Shiva, you'll be left defenseless."

"As if I haven't faced this situation before. I can handle the patrolmen." They sensed eyes on them waiting to be let in on whatever plan was in place. Cor grunted, his hand pinching between his brows, his eyes momentarily flashing yellow. Nebula coiled her fingers around his palm to soothe him. "Tranquillitas, forti unus. Ego enim non inventur in contritione pervalida et non periculum accideret, non ita quod terra dimittere." She turned her attention to the others. "...We need a distraction so they can be freed. They don't know my face; I can hold them off while you sneak inside-"

Gladiolus wasn't having it. Providing distractions, holding the enemy off while he ran, only led to innocent lives severely injured or dead. "You can't do this alone- I won't allow it. Too many lives have already been put on the line."

"That is the way of the world, unfortunately," Umbra intervened. Nyx didn't need to repeat the facts. Someone always had to fight for the sake of others, and in the end it usually costed them their lives. He wished Crowe hadn't volunteered to stand watch at Atra's cell; she'd still be alive if she ran with them instead. He didn't need to witness his comrades fall in battle at the hands of the enemy. "Sacrifices are necessary from time to time, but all isn't lost when we protect ourselves and the world. We fight so the next generation won't have to, Shield of Lucis. We can only pray our battles are the last of them." Gladiolus still didn't like it. "I shall accompany Oracle Flumine and provide aid. We will reunite with the four of you inside." Umbra half-crouched on one knee and formed a symbol with two fingers. Smoke enveloped him and shrank down, and dissipated to show his dog form.
again. He barked once and began to trot around the hill without waiting for the others.

"I'll never get used to seeing that," Gladiolus commented as he stood, his eyes falling on Nebula. "Be careful."

She nodded and watched the men turn to leave their hiding spot. Ignis marched between the Shield and Nyx, ducking when he heard a low branch rattle too close for comfort. "You're getting better at this," Nyx commented, his praise dying to nearly no sound. Nebula was left standing beside a bush, staring at Cor, who'd stayed behind. Their gazes met and penetrated to the other's soul, as if testing each other's will, neither wavering.

"...She gave me that same stare when I discovered her true identity," he finally said, regret lingering in his voice. "She's your spitting image."

"Though she has my face, we're not the same person, Cor. I know things she could never understand, ideals too twisted to speak of..." Her gaze narrowed. "Does she know what you are?"

He shook his head. "I never divulged any deep details about myself. Our...relationship—" the word burned his tongue—"was a spontaneous occurrence, and considering all that happened between us, I'd rather it stay that way." But his relationship with the doctor-turned-sorceress was a matter to focus on at a later time. "If there's any hope of me fighting at full strength, we need to find a way to get rid of that shard."

Her stoic demeanor cracked. Nebula paced in front of him, one arm crossed her torso and supported the elbow of the other, holding her head. "I've looked into it for twenty years. Ione would have made it easier, but with her gone and the other Astrals scattered round this earth, there's almost no way to carry it out. Unless..." Her face turned upward, mouth agape as she contemplated if her plan was even possible. It made her plan for saving Leviathan and Gentiana look like a prick to the finger. The plan for the Astral shard, though? It could very well cost the Astrals their lives. She shot her arm in the air and beckoned for Shiva to listen. "Astrals congregabo eas Cauthess et sic frater eius custodia liberet. In Ione nomen, quod Ego Testor de terra vita ejus sit liber iste qui autem testis descendit de terra hae."

The marshal ran to the oracle and grabbed her airborne hand, reading her mind for himself. "Are you mad, Nebula? How the hell are we supposed to accomplish that? The key piece is a suicide mission in our current state." She kept her stare focused to the sky, and the longer he held her hand, the deeper he read into her thoughts, the more of an understanding he had of what the plan entailed. His brow furrowed. "How sure are you of this 'trump card' of yours?"

"Quite. I can sense lies and fears. This one's too brave for those. And if all goes well, you'll be set free." Her stance calmed and she retrieved her hand from his grasp. "Come. We can't keep them waiting any longer." Nebula marched past Cor, her staff appearing in her right hand, and crept to the edge of the greenery to crouch beside Umbra. The marshal left her with reluctance, wanting to say something to stop this convoluted plan of hers before it ended them all. He crouched between Gladiolus and Nyx, waiting for the oracle and ninja to act. Umbra, in his dog form, strutted across the street for surveillance, and barked twice for the stealth team to act. The men hurried over the asphalt and jumped into a large sewer pipe to hide.

Nebula moved forth, walking with grace and resilience to the garrison entrance. She made note of the two cameras plopped in the high corners on either side of the large metal door, their red lights blinking and lens focusing on the woman approaching. The gun barrels attached to them followed her every step and twisted, preparing to fire. They were destroyed in a flash of black that returned to her side. Electric sparks flew from the exposed wiring and Umbra barked twice, signaling that the
forces were coming out. And in seconds his premonition proved true when the main gate curled open and six human Nifeli soldiers crept out with their firearms drawn. "Oh, goodness," she began, "it appears your fort has sustained some damage."

"Who are you?" the leader shouted. "State your name and business!"

The oracle stepped closer, an insidious smile spreading on her face. "You mean my face doesn't ring a bell? Then perhaps this will." She swung her hand forward in an upward arc and flames erupted from her palm and fingers. Three fireballs floated above her head. That ignited a fear within the soldiers and they fired their weapons, watching as every bullet deflected off a transparent wall she summoned and struck each of them, one in the external carotid artery and another through the eye.

The leader, shot by the ricochet in his arm, whipped out a radio. "We have a situation at the southern gate. Unidentified female, red hair and wielding magic-" A large shadow spawned under her standing form and expanded forward. The soldiers scrambled to back away from the shadow only for one to have his leg sucked in and be thrown into oblivion. "C-C-C-Code black!" he screamed. "I repeat, CODE BLACK! This is NOT a drill! Lamia is destroying the front gate! I've got two men down and a third who the fuck knows where!" Then the fireballs flew at them, searing one's body and passing over the remaining two soldiers to melt the opening mechanism in place. Their voices were but shrieks of terror as more soldiers and Magiteks filed to the gate to fight the enemy.

"This is the East Tower! Lamia's moving in! Stand your ground!"

"But Lamia's supposed to be in Niflheim! That can't be her!"

"Who the fuck else could it be?" The lines died one by one, the soldiers pouring their focus into the fight against the supposed sorceress. A second lieutenant ducked seconds before steel flew over his head and into the East Tower's infrastructure. He dashed across the median of the garrison and skid into a left turn, leaping forward and charging with his shoulder up as the door to an office burst open.

Loqi, surrounded by several officers and guards, shot up out of his seat and slammed his hands on a tabletop. "What the hell is all this chaos? I want an explanation now!" he demanded.

The second lieutenant hit the table when he stopped to salute his commanding officer. "S-Sir! There's been an attack at the main gate! Reports say it's Lamia!"

"The sorceress? That's impossible. Atra Interitio is in the company of His Imperial Majesty, preparing for the parade as we speak."

"But sir, the assailant's appearance matches that of Lamia! She bears red locks and wields magic! And there's this...shadow she spreads right before an attack! I've never seen anything like it!" Loqi raised an eyebrow, still skeptical, but went against his better judgement and followed the soldier out of the office just as icy stalagmites speared up from the ground. The lieutenant shielded his captain and led him right to avoid the onslaught.

With Gladiolus as their eyes and Ignis their ears, the four men in the second team were able to find a way in thanks to the chaos Nebula spread. The tactician would signal if he heard something suspicious and the shield would double check, both confirming when the threat had passed. There were so many noises and sounds all around them; Ignis took some time to differentiate one from the other. They hid behind large covered machines along the edge of the garrison, hurrying to the next spot when they sensed movement nearby. Halfway in Ignis' head perked up at a soldier's hum, then a breath sucked in, surprised. He pointed in the direction he believed the sound was coming from and Gladio saw the lookout on top of a scaffolding, treading closer to their hiding spot until his goggles met their eyes. His body tensed. Gladiolus switched places with Ignis. "Shit, we've been spotted!"
"I'll take care of it!" Nyx chimed. "Go on ahead; I'll find you." The Glaive sprang up and drew his kukuri knife, threw it at the top of the scaffolding and warped next to the Nifeli soldier. He was too fast for the enemy and slit his throat before a word was exchanged. Nyx glanced down to his brother and the Crownsguard and motioned for them to run with his hand, then turned and sprinted up the infrastructure. With the high ground in the Glaive's hands, the other three continued on and leaped behind the next crate for cover.

"Where would they be keeping her?" Ignis asked, getting his lay of the land from Gladiolus. "Describe the garrison to me."

"Open center, crates and mobile units lined on the perimeter. One of their airships is docked by some small trailer, soldiers scrambling like mice. Umbra and Nebula dismantled one of the big rigs, so we should be fine if we have to cross. There's a hangar on the western wall but it's closed. Nothing's coming out of it."

"She's in there." Cor crawled nearer to the edge of the crate and pointed at the garage. "I feel her presence in that direction. Large structure, secure walls - it's the perfect place to trap an Archean and her Astral." His hand rested on his katana's hilt. "Scientia, cover me. Amicitia, prepare to charge forward when you hear my signal." The marshal stalked around the crate corner and snuck behind a terrified soldier, shuddering and barely holding on to his firearm, and put the boy in a chokehold. The guard struggled against him as Cor squeezed the air from his throat until the soldier fell unconscious. He dropped the enemy aside and sprinted into the battlefield. Ignis concentrated on Cor's aura, following his flow of magic, and used it as a guide along with each sound to pinpoint where to strike.

Gladiolus helped him aim. "Three targets on his flank, twelve o'clock. Magiteks." Ignis charged an electric current and fired it in the designated direction. The Magiteks fried upon impact and fell to pieces as Cor took care of the five in front. He leaned out of the way of another drone's arm shooting out to grab him. "Eight o'clock, single target. Trapping unit." Another bolt flew from their hiding spot and slammed into the robot's hand, traveled up its arm and surged into the inner workings. The unit sparked and twitched until Cor slashed at its torso and kicked the top half away. "Small squadron of ten! They're fanning out in front of the hangar! The tactician moved in front of his friend and shot flames from both palms, pulling it in a wave over the marshal before it crashed into the wall of Magiteks. Human and robotic soldiers circled around Cor, some firing bullets and others swinging to slice his limbs off, but were blown away in a shockwave when his katana spun with his momentum. With nothing blocking his way he continued to the hangar and sliced the metal gate open.

Cor narrowly avoided the coil of water that burst from the hangar. He hurried to the chained woman and struck it with his blade. The chains were rigid, only scratched when the blade hit them. "Dammit." They heard motors starting and engines whirring. Gentiana reacted to the sounds, her head darting right and left as her possessed eyes searched for the source. Gladiolus and Ignis entered moments later, nearly getting sprayed by the enraged water goddess. "Stand clear!" he ordered, and the shield yanked the tactician behind him just as Cor readied and fired another series of shockwaves against the chains. One snapped immediately. The two holding her limbs broke after a few strikes. Ignis joined the marshal and emitted small flames from his palms, using the Astrals' aura to map the layout of the hangar. His foot tapped a chain and he knelt beside it, searching with his hands until the metal began to heat against his skin. The rungs of the chain started to soften and with a single pull Gentiana was freed from her holds, the cuff on her neck the one remaining obstacle. But Leviathan found a sudden surge of strength and ripped the cuff off with Gentiana's bare hands. The Astral calmed as she stood, the green returning to her irises. She put a hand to her head as she assumed full control over herself.
"Cor," she whispered, her throat sore from Leviathan's raging screams, "Ignis, Gladiolus...what has happened?" She took in the scene and registered her location. "Where are Luna and Noctis?"

"Captured. Lady Lunafreya was taken into the empire's custody when the enemy subdued you." All eyes fell on Nebula, entering the hangar out of breath, her weight supported by Nyx. "The Prince's kidnapping was recent, and I suspect they'll try to use my daughter in the final stages of their plan. The captain of this garrison has fled; he'll send word to the army head. We must act fast." Nebula skipped to Gentiana and caressed her cheek, brushing her bangs away with her other hand. "But we also have a plan, and it involves the Astrals. Shiva's agents are gathering the others now. We have to reach the Astral Shard before Niflheim proceeds."

"And how the hell are we gonna manage that?" the Glaive questioned. "Last I checked, we don't have an airship!"

"We do." Umbra slithered into the area undetected. "There were two airships docked when I surveyed the garrison. Those who survived the assault have retreated."

"Which means there's only one question left." Gladiolus crossed his arms and shifted his weight to the side. "Anyone know how to pilot an airship?"

With only an hour and a half to spare Loqi made it back to the capitol. He'd intended to depart the garrison in a calmer manner but with the panic brought on by his soldiers and the fear of the sorceress somehow being in two places at once, he had to make sure Atra was still in the palace with his own eyes. The staff was already running amok throughout the city, and his early arrival threw the groundkeepers for a loop. "Captain Tulmett has returned!" one guard yelled, motioning for his men to join him in assisting with the docking process. When he departed the ship Loqi was slightly surprised to find the gates devoid of spectators; even with preparations for the parade in motion, there were always a few lingering citizens whose obsession with the royals and their guard overlooked imperial orders. It was comforting to not have to hear thousands of cheering civilians flocking to the gates and shoving their faces as far between the metal bars as the space allowed them, and with the quietude on the docking grounds, he could greet his brethren in peace. The guards hurried him into the palace nonetheless to change his attire and let him rest before the festivities began. What was he going to tell the emperor, he asked himself as a servant fitted his formal military uniform to his body, pinning any areas that could be taken in. He’d tried radioing the news but was unable to get a signal through - thanks to a particular goddess' ice bending and cracking into the airship's communications system, the blond knew. The attack would surely be learned of once the mechanics tended to the airship's maintenance, he was aware, and then there would be questions. They'd possibly pass over his authority and be handed straight to the generals to deal with; no one needed any disturbances today, of all days.

Loqi's hair was combed and sprayed into place by the stylist tending to him, the man leaning too close for comfort as he perfected the captain's appearance. An hour and a half left before the start of the parade. "Fill me in," he inquired, "what is there left to take care of before the procession? I assume the security is already in position?" The stylist knew the questions weren't meant for him, but for the Private Secretary of the Sovereign seated behind them. The Secretary's focus was on a tablet in her grasp, clicking and confirming various last minute details. She adjusted her glasses and crossed one leg over the other, paying the young officer no mind.

"All security procedures are done," she began, "including posting snipers on every roof above fifty-five feet and barriers set up to search all spectators. The techs have finalized the holograms for the floats of the Royal Highnesses and Lady Interitio. As requested the float you'll be sharing with General Interitio; the same applies to that of High Commander Fleuret. As for the prisoners, Lady
Lunafreya will stand alongside General Glauca, and Prince Noctis' is armed with the magic jammer; a collar has been installed as a precautionary measure. The Secretary paused as Loqi's head was covered when the stylist and his assistants pulled a red cape to his shoulders, securing it in place with golden pins and a thin chain lacing from side to side. "The order goes as listed: first, flag-bearers and specially programmed Magitek units to present arms and set off fireworks. Second is the third battalion marching, then the royal orchestra on the first float of the event. Next comes another three Magitek squadrons. Their bodies have been redesigned and programmed to show the first holographic effects to the crowd. Afterward go the dancers, then another human unit to perform acrobatics with their arms, then a group of performers who showcase 'the dangers of magic'. Their effects will be large but safe for all viewers and floats." She swiped to the next page of the list. "Then the rest of the floats follow, starting with Commander Ulldor, Glauca and Luna, a row of trumpeters, Chancellor Izunia and High Commander Fleuret. The Chancellor will display the ring of the Lucii for all to see, secured in a glass box. Prince Noctis' cage float will follow via a cart attached to the back of the Chancellor's. He will, of course, be under heavy guard." A second pause to catch her breath. "Then we have you and General Interitio. His Imperial Majesty will not attend in the flesh; a holographic communication system will display his body in full on the next float, surrounded by soldiers both human and Magitek. He's chosen to be presented before the Princes and Marchionissa. More flag-bearers precede Royal Highnesses Velox and Promptus, who share the second-to-last float, which will stop for a moment so His Imperial Majesty may give a small speech. The final float holds Lady Interitio. Chancellor Izunia wants hers to stay the longest so he may properly present her to the public and showcase her powers. The parade finishes with more dancers and trumpeters, and a last set of flag-bearers."

He knew the first event would be elaborate, but Ardyn's planning seemed a little extravagant to his taste. Then again, it was a joyous occasion: the crystal and Ring of Lucii in their grasp, Prince Noctis and Lady Lunafreya secured, the return of Prince Promptus, and of course the presentation of the feared sorceress. When he thought about it, Loqi hadn't exchanged a word with Atra since her reformation. He got all information on her progress from General Interitio until they were in the throne room, face-to-face for the first time in years. He was told to refer to her as either Marchionissa, Lady Interitio or Lady Lamia unless explicitly told otherwise; but he knew the chances of the latter happening were near zero. Loqi and Atra were on different sides for a long time, and as he rose in the military ranks, preferred the others not know of his relation to the then-mutant for fear of being ostracized. He couldn't even recall the last time he'd called her 'cousin'. He didn't even refer to Callisto as uncle, only General. But things were different now. Families were brought together. Having the Sorceress as a cousin would earn him more respect. "And afterward?" he continued. "What of the gala to follow?"

The Secretary went to another page on her tablet. "The gala will follow immediately after the parade has ended. By then guests and nobility alike will have been ushered inside to await your arrival. That's all the information I have on the party."

"Very well." The stylist finally finished, shooing his assistants away, and took a step back to admire his work. Loqi slowly turned to the mirror to see the final result, and as he studied the details and twisted his body to inspect every aspect, he was pleased with the results.

He and the others had little time to admire the entire outfit when the Secretary rose from her chair and gestured her hand to the door. "As much as I know you'd love to stare at your reflection longer, Captain, we do have a schedule to stick to. I'd rather not have to listen to another word from Sir Casia on anything going wrong." She nodded her head to him in a bow and glanced to the stylist. "Thank you for your services; you're dismissed."

The final minutes before launch ticked by fast, and before she knew it, Luna was whisked from her
room, makeup done just in the nick of time and led through the palace to her float. General Glauca was already in place, having regretfully chosen to not wear his armor for the procession. He didn't want any of the civilians to see his face, to gawk at the scar which contorted his cheek and spread to his brow. He grumbled as he stood in place, wanting to get the spectacle over with already so he could brood in solitude. Having the oracle's eyes land on his face further irked him and he sneered, refusing to meet her gaze, though he did get a glimpse of her from his peripheral vision. The innocence of her appearance had been traded in for a blood red dress, one-shouldered and wrapped tight around her waist, then flaring out into a ballgown skirt adorned with black lace detailing. Her hair was changed from her usual ponytail to an updo high in the middle of her head, a braid climbing up the back, held in place by a bronze tiara. Her lips were stained the same shade as her dress and her eyes adorned with black eyeshadow and liner, turning white when it reached the inner corners. The dress hid her ankle bracelet perfectly for the presentation, a detail Ardyn made sure was taken care of. She took her place beside Glauca and stared forward, ignoring the screech of the gate locked in place to keep them from falling. The platform rose with a steady whine until they were two and a half stories above the ground. Luna held onto the railing for dear life, her action earning a growl from the general to her right.

The parade began, the wheels of her float squeaking as they began to turn. When they left the palace the sun was low in the sky, turning it orange and red as the star followed in suit. The cheers of people started to chime and music played behind her. She'd never set foot in Niflheim outside of the royal palace, and to see the streets filled with people cheering left her aghast. Thousands, probably millions of people, lined both sides of the road. They waved flags and posters in support of the royal procession, a sight rare for them. Children gasped and their eyes lit up when the Magiteks sent fireworks flying into the air, created pictures with their holographic programming, and the dancers twirled and jumped down the street. Ribbon and confetti decorated everything, thrown into the open air by spectators in high rises. They all looked happy, acted like the Lucians and Accordians in celebration, like they were oblivious or excited about two nations being obliterated by their leader. How could they cheer for what could be the end of the world? Their eyes landed on her. They stared in awe, having never seen the Oracle so close before. The sounds around her drowned out when she heard laughter coming from behind. Spinning, she leaned against the back railing and leaned forward to see closer, and a faint, familiar choking voice called out to her. She leaned sideways to see behind the Chancellor's float, noting how proud he looked as he and Ravus showed off the ring, and saw the cage. And heard the scream and groan of agony. People threw trash at the cage. Noctis thrashed inside like a wild animal, exactly how he knew the Nifeli population saw him in his current state. He'd become a spectacle, a trophy for Ardyn to show off. Noctis' attention was drawn behind him to the next float. He held onto the bars and watched a hologram form the emperor's face, to which the public chanted his name and bowed before the image.

The face shrunk and a body formed beneath it, completing Iedolas' hologram. "My children," he began, "heaven is smiling down on the new generation. Though the skies have darkened, the path to the future is bright and within our grasp. Let tonight be a night of celebration for both Gralea and the world, for the war is nearing its end." Iedolas raised his hands as the crowd raised to their feet again, applauding and cheering louder than before. Their chants continued as the float began to move and a transparent curtain parted to reveal the two Nifeli princes seated on thrones. The excitement grew when eyes fell upon Prince Promptus. Many of the older citizens in attendance recognized his face almost immediately and were in awe, having remembered the funeral services for the second-born monarch nine years earlier. It was only hours before the parade when the truth behind him was revealed, and the Gralean citizens knew they were in the presence of not only a long-missed royal, but a war hero. Promptus and Velox smiled and waved to their onlookers, the elder knowing more eyes were on his brothers than him. His mage Lex was seated to the right of his throne on the upper float steps, leaning on her side and resting her head and hands on the throne's arm. She didn't utter a word and kept her eyes focused on their surroundings.
As the Princes' float continued on, the final float began its trek down the street. The cheers remained loud at the sight of the Chancellor on the last float, many wondering how he’d been on an earlier float or if they were seeing another hologram. Ardyn stood before a curtained box, nearly opaque, and tipped his fedora to the citizens. His hands raised as he stood tall again and the float came to a halt. "People of Niflheim!" his voice boomed, drawing in the attention of every spectator, "lend me your ears! Tonight is a night like no other." The crowd began to quiet down, captured by the sound of Ardyn's voice. "Our time of suffering has come to a close. Eos has blessed us with not one, but four precious gifts. The first was bestowed unto us by Lady Lunafreya Fleuret: the ring of the Lucii is in our hands!" A hologram showing an enlarged image of the ring spun next to him, then changed to one of the Lucian crystal. "The stone we so deeply sought from our enemy is now in our grasp. No longer shall we huddle in fear of the Starscourge plaguing our lands! The last of the Caelums is within our grasp, and with his power, we shall unlock the secrets of the crystal." Many booed and cursed Noctis' family name. "But fret not, my people, for a Prince of our own has returned in his stead. Our lost Prince Promptus has finally come home!" The crowd's cheering calmed when the Chancellor beckoned for their attention once more. "The final gift is one many of you will not expect. Our venture to obtain the Lucian crystal led us on another journey, to obtain an individual many of you know as Lamia." Everyone fell silent. Ardyn looked over his shoulder to the curtained box and motioned his fingers for Atra to come forward. Slowly, she drew the curtains apart and stepped into the open, allowing all of Gralea to lay their eyes on her. Her appearance had been transformed to mimic that of the goddess she represented, the complete opposite of the frightening witch everyone expected. The dress was a faint blue, loose over her body with wispy sleeves that revealed gold bracelets adorning her arms from wrist to elbow. They matched the wired choker of vines entwined around her neck, holding an elliptical sapphire in place. Veils of blue and yellow pastels covered her head and hung over her eyes, held in place by a crown of sun rays. Gold and dark blue framed her eyes beneath the veil. From afar, the citizens swore they were looking at Etro instead of a sorceress, and it wasn’t long before whispers of fear erupted among them. Ardyn quieted them with a single motion of his arms. "Lamia has been viewed as a sorceress, capable of bringing destruction and chaos onto our lands. But this is no reason to fear her. Lamia - no, Lady Atra Interitio, Marchionissa of Niflheim, is the one who freed the crystal from its chamber, allowing our Imperial Forces to bring it here." The whispers of fear switched to awe. "She is the first of our people to slay an Astral. She was even capable of scarring the indestructible General Glauca, gracing him with a new badge of honor." To know the sorceress had seen his face in person - a sight almost no one ever witnessed - broke the crowd into a ring of praise. "So do not fear her. Atra has done more in a single month than our forces could accomplish. Chant her name through the streets." Some of the bystanders began to say her name. "Let the world know who it was that brought the war closer to its end." The entire crowd erupted into a chant of Atra's name and title over and over again. Hearing her name sound through the streets made Atra's heart skip a beat. Her breathing quickened as Ardyn beckoned for her hand, and led her forward when she laid it in his. They stopped at the edge of the float and he stood behind her, lifting the veil so the citizens could see her face. Seeing the smiles on the thousands of faces below, joy swam through her. No praise she'd ever received could compare to the entire Nifeli capital clapping and cheering for her. Her heart fluttered. Something took over Atra, her arm lifting above her head, and she summoned an arc of lightning. The electricity swirled around her palm and danced across her skin, and she moved the current across the sky like a serpent. The crowd watch, mouths agape, until the current swam upward into the clouds, and their applause exploded all the way to the palace gates.

Chapter End Notes

I've honestly had this chapter planned since chapter 12 or 24 or so. Of course a lot of
things have changed or been added since then, but the general idea stayed the same.

It's the beginning of the end of the road, folks.
In times of celebration, there can still be jealousy and lust, especially when it comes to acquiring a precious power.

And for those seeking comfort, having a companion by your side doesn't seem like such a punishment anymore.
"Atra will be in shortly. Ravus is fetching her now. The Chancellor requested a change in her attire to allow her to move more freely across the floor." Her parade outfit had been extravagant, to say the least. Ardyn was determined to show her off as a replica of Etro, and judging by the public's reaction when they saw her on the float, it was working. The Marchionissa was now a revered figure in the Nifeli court, a complete turn-around of her original title. Loqi had no idea what to make of the change in her. When they were children, he was told to keep his distance from Atra; even though they were cousins by blood, his mother told him, associating with a mutant was the highest form of disrespect to one's self image, and she wasn't about to have hers ruined because her son wanted a playmate. Nearly twenty years later the graying woman stood beside her brother the general, a feathered fan flapping before her face while they laughed together and reminisced the memories of the old days when their children 'played together'. "Don't look so worried. You'll see her when she's done changing."

His mother noticed the blank stare on Loqi's face. "Oh, stop grimacing, dear. Enjoy yourself! Your cousin's a national hero; that's more than enough reason to celebrate her return with your uncle." This coming from the woman who wouldn't even spit in Atra's direction at one time.

When he didn't reply, Callisto laid a firm hand on the younger's shoulder. "Flora," he regarded his sister, "don't pester the boy now. Let him enjoy the festivities!" And then his arm curled around the Captain and led him away from the woman. "I'll take care of entertaining your mother tonight. You just enjoy yourself tonight, Loqi" Never before had Callisto referred to the captain by first name. Loqi stared at the general with wide, shocked eyes, which the elder took quick notice of. "We're in a different environment, Loqi; there's no battling or war right now. No need to worry about looking professional. Remember, you are an Interitio. You've earned a high caliber of respect among those in attendance tonight. Don't be afraid of having a good time, especially when Atra arrives. It's been a long time since you've spent time with your cousin, and my daughter and nephew deserve some fun after all the hard work we've put in."

He had to be imagining things. First his mother doting over Atra, then Callisto calling him 'nephew'... It had to be a hallucination. But there the general was, smiling down on him like they'd played the family card his entire life, patting him on the back for a job well done. "Of course, sir-" The general cleared his throat as if to correct his subordinate- "...Uncle." Callisto nodded, pat his back one last time, and left the boy to mingle on his own while he returned to entertain his sister and some other guests. Even with the proof right in front of him it was hard to believe this was real. From afar Loqi watched his uncle converse and laugh with a group of women, then saw the man point in his direction, and two of the women hurried over to the young captain. They each held an arm in their own and chortled away as they observed Loqi's nerves frazzle, finding his embarrassment adorable.

"Aww, he's blushing!"

"No need to be afraid, Captain, we'll take great care of you," the second winked. A nervous grin spread across Loqi's face. He drew in a deep breath to calm his nerves and escorted the women to the dance floor, where other groups and couples were in the middle of dancing to a sonata.

By the bar, Aranea was observing all the people throughout the room, starting with the royals on the far left. The Princes were beginning to look bored and the elder stood from his throne, eager to join the festivities. Prince Promptus followed after Velox moments later, and the two were immediately surrounded by all the eligible bachelorettes in attendance. Velox's pet was nowhere in sight. Aranea cocked an eyebrow up. She'd never seen him without Lex Praeceptum, whose origins and abilities had always remained a mystery to Niflheim. She was Velox's favorite possession: the only known court member with shapeshifting abilities that were utilized in the sorceress' retrieval; Lex had sat by his feet on their parade float, where was she now? The dragoon sipped her wine and shifted her gaze to everyone dancing. To think, save for the military members on the dance floor, all these guests
were none the wiser of the darker side of the Imperial Army. That, or they turned a blind eye to all
the chaos and experimentation which took place in the catacombs and on the battlefield. Their bodies
swayed in their partners' arms as if there were no war going on at all. The sight sickened her. She
rolled her eyes and polished off her wine and laid it on the bar beside her, waving her hand for
another. The snobby aristocrats annoyed her most, particularly with how they flaunted their every
success and possession through stories and their attire. Like Chancellor Izunia had once described, it
resembled the former First Family of Accordo. Even the celebrities were playing the part and pissing
her off.

And then, nestled along the wall near the entrance, stood the Oracle herself. To say she appeared
uncomfortable would be a gross understatement. Having grown up in this type of setting, she was
used to attending hundreds of galas and balls, but this was the first official Nifeli gathering she'd been
forced into. She couldn't tell what bothered the Princess more: the itchy, thick strap of her dress; the
tight braid against the back of her scalp; or perhaps it was the Chancellor lingering around her,
keeping the woman bound to his arm, and eventually dragged her to the dance floor. Aranea
wondered how and why Lunafreya put up with his shit, even as his prisoner. The dread spread
across her face was evidence enough to show her disdain.

"Second guessing yourself, Highwind?" Aranea didn't need to look to her left to know Caligo Ulldor
was next to her, clad in his ceremonial uniform, and his hair tidy for once. "Too bad you've given all
this up. We were thinking of promoting you."

"Apologies, Commander. My taste for the lavish lifestyle has soured." The dragoon sipped her
freshly filled wine glass. "Besides, I wouldn't want to repeat your mistake and one day embarrass
myself in front of my subordinates." Had he not been drinking from his own glass, Caligo would've
grit his teeth at her comeback. He'd failed not once, but twice at capturing the Nifeli runaway, only to
end up bowing to the kid after realizing just who he was. And now said Prince was surrounded by
women wanting more than just his attention. "Like I told the General, I'm not built for this sort of
position. I'm a hunter, not a soldier." She kept the rest of her reason to herself.

Having lost his desire for the drink he handed the half-filled glass to a butler passing between them.
"No matter. What's done is done. General Glaucia will certainly be elated that you're leaving." Like
she gave a shit, which he read on her face.

She caught his eye lingering on the younger of the two Princes. "You gonna brood over your
tarnished perfection all night?"

"What do you care, Highwind?"

Aranea shrugged. "I don't. But should Aldercapt see you whining instead of enjoying yourself, you'll
have to answer to him. And no one wants that." The dragoon hopped off the barstool and departed
with a lazy two-fingered wave, wandering across the hall to find something more entertaining than
the crybaby named Commander. His attitude made her glad she was leaving. Were it his decision,
she would've been gone a long time ago; at least now he wouldn't have to listen to Biggs and Wedge
argue over minute things in the barracks. The satisfaction of peace and quiet in the future shoved the
sullen thoughts from his mind and he decided to mingle a bit. Caligo left the bar in the opposite
direction Aranea walked, paying no mind to the laughter of the already-drunken aristocrats against
the wall, or the Duke and Duchess pretending to be on par with the celebrities for the sake of
melding connections. Much of the talk circled Niflheim: the growth of the economy, anticipating the
end of the Scourge, the return of the forgotten Prince, and as he expected, the Sorceress joining the
court. Her appearance was the highlight of the night, and many were wondering when she'd make
her grand debut. Even the emperor, he noticed from afar, was drumming his fingers on the throne
armrest in boredom. Not even His Radiance knew when she'd arrive?
The lights dimmed. The Princes, having mingled enough before disinterest settled in, were back on their thrones just as the room darkened. Whispers took over the silenced music, the guests wondering if it was finally happening. Caligo was summoned to the stairway, as were Captain Tummelt, soon-to-be retired Highwind, General Interitio, and the decorative soldiers to line either side of the bottom step and split the crowd. A spotlight shone to the top step, where sentries stood beside a passage that Ardyn sauntered from, halting at the edge. "Your Radiance," the Chancellor started, "Your Highnesses, esteemed guests. We have much to celebrate tonight. The war with Lucis has drawn to a close, and with it, four gifts were bestowed on us." Ardyn took an exaggerated bow. "Without further adieu, it is my great honor and pleasure to present our beloved Sorceress: Atra Ardere Interitio, Marchionissa of Niflheim."

He'd reformed her mind. He'd paraded her through Gralea, got the public to see her as a sort of goddess instead of a monster, made her feel powerful. The smile she gave the Nifeli citizens, and now the guests, showed the results of her mental transformation. Ardyn knew the deal was sealed when Atra retrieved the Ring of the Lucii from Lunafreya and gave it to the empire. It was at that moment she'd proved her worth to Iedolas. The room illuminated once more and Ardyn stepped aside to reveal Atra to the guests. They applauded her, having witnessed her powers during the parade, in awe of her appearance as she descended the stairs. The cobalt dress the palace staff had dressed her in was designed specifically by the Chancellor, who said it accentuated the true beauty she hid for so many years. The fabric clung to her just off the shoulders with long, form-fitting sleeves that ended in points atop her hands. The dress hugged her body down to her knees, where it flared out as it dragged on the marble steps. A split in the middle revealed her chest and abdomen in a tasteful manner, mesh covering her skin up to the dress lining that followed the shape of her breasts. Dragons matching the country's insignia framed the meeting of mesh and lace, their tails crossing over and joining at the start of the train in the back. Her lips were painted in a red wine that mimicked garnet, black shadows framing her eyes. A large braid made the majority of her hairstyle, done at an angle that wrapped around a large bun shaped like a rose, then draping over her shoulder. Her bangs were parted and pinned in place, no longer hiding her. And atop her head was the most eye-catching part of her attire: a replica of Ifrit's crown, cast in gold and encrusted with red jewels, leaving the guests mouth agape. The spectators watched her approached the emperor's throne and bend a knee at the edge of their elevation. "Your Radiance," she said before laying eyes on the two Princes seated on either side of him, "Highnesses."

As she rose from her bow and the silence ended, Atra was greeted by throngs of those in attendance. "Lady Interitio," she was called, or "Marchionissa," even "Lady Sorceress" by some. She found herself satisfied at the sound as it rolled off their tongues, and through the star-struck gazes on her, relished at the tiny bits of fear swimming through each of their veins. It was as she mingled and spoke with her fans that she spotted the younger Prince from the corner of her eye. In terms of physical appearance, Prompto/Promptus was exactly the same. Though his hairstyle had flattened and curled at the ends its part stayed the same. His attire was that of the Nifeli royals: white robes with embroidery running down the seam of the sleeves, a red band around his waist decorated with hints of gold that matched the thin band sitting on his head, the insignia of Niflheim sewn into the red lining of the cape hanging from his shoulders; an opposing change compared to his casual Crownsguard outfit. But the longer she stared, the more she could tell he wasn't the same goofball she'd met at her cabin door on that rainy night. His eyes had darkened, hardened. He was a changed man who'd come to realize his destiny. She didn't know the details of whatever mission led him to turn on those he considered his friends, and she didn't care. The stare broke when she was asked for a dance, and her attention turned to the man escorting her to the center of the dance floor.

Atra was on cloud nine with the praise and respect the people were sprinkling on her. She was asked about her powers, giving a demonstration of her abilities, told of her beauty over and over again, offered tours; most of all, the men she danced with wondered if she already had a companion for
more than just arm candy. The music, loud and lively via the orchestra, left her twirling round and round. Five dance partners through a hand tapped her exposed shoulder. Her dance partner immediately backed away and bowed to Prince Velox, who offered his own bow and a gloved hand to the sorceress. "May I have this dance, Marchionissa?" Atra didn't hesitate and placed her hand in his, and was pulled in with a sudden jerk to her arm.

"Your grip hasn't softened a touch," she commented. His free hand rested in the dip of her back and held her close.

"And neither has your temper, which I suddenly find quite amusing." Velox's step bounced to match the music's tempo. "So what made you change your mind? Did my words finally sink in?"

When she was released for a twirl, Atra spun inward again and bumped her hip against his body with a hair more force than necessary. "Not quite your words, but the influence of your regime nonetheless." The Prince caught on to the momentary glance she stole from Ardyn, who was occupied with some of the delegates and General Interitio. "I've been lied to long enough. It's time I took my life into my own hands." Her words ceased when Velox lowered her in a dip near the floor.

"You've become the talk of the town, Marchionissa. No one can keep their eyes off of you." His hand slid down her arm and her partially exposed leg, rounding the bottom of her heel before setting her upright again. "This suits you."

"The dress or the demeanor?" she asked, already having an idea of his answer. "I have to admit that you were right all along, Your Highness. When you asked me about people accepting my powers, I never received any praise for it. Not until I came to Gralea. I've never heard so many people cheering before." She relished in the applause that took over the citadel when she was presented to the public, even more when she remembered how loudly they'd chanted her name. A faint golden glow emitted from her body, which the nearby guests 'ahhhh'ed to, and her grin grew bigger. Velox moved in closer at the crescendo, his fingers interlacing with Atra's, and just as he was prepared to steal a kiss from the sorceress, a clearing of the throat halted his actions.

Chancellor Izunia tipped his hat as the next song began. "Do pardon my intrusion, Your Highness," the Chancellor began, "but I believe you've kept the guest of honor all to yourself this evening. I'm sure Lady Interitio would like a breather, no?" He turned his attention to the sorceress. "If it's of no inconvenience to you, my lady, might I ask for your company after the feast? In all my preparation for your celebratory return home, I forgot to give you a tour of the estate to refresh your memory."

Velox stepped away and gave the two room to speak, making no effort to hide his dissatisfaction for Ardyn's interruption. He'd never liked the Chancellor, who babied him all his life, though it was thanks to Ardyn that the sorceress had returned to Niflheim. In all retrospect he envied the man, who was always six steps ahead of him and managed to everything the Prince worked so hard to achieve without breaking a sweat. And now there he was, wooing the woman who was in his arms minutes before, his lips so close to meeting hers. From the corner of his eye he watched the Chancellor ask her for a dance and she fell into his arms almost immediately, matching him step for step and flowing gracefully when he spun her. Velox returned to his throne and idly propped his chin atop his hand, his good vibe gone.

The next song ended and Atra remained in Ardyn's grasp as a waltz followed. Something about him was charming, almost hypnotic, and made her want to stay there forever. Maybe it was due to him saving her soul from an eternity of damnation under the thumbs of countless men. He helped her find her true strength. For that she was in debt to the Chancellor, and was more than happy to spend the later hours of the night in his company. His voice drew her nearer in the same magnetizing fashion his eyes did, but the joy melted into a puddle of distress when he stepped away for the night to resume the duties to his nation. "I'll send Ravus to fetch you once you're ready," he stated. "Until
tonight, Lady Sorceress.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles, then spontaneously he stepped closer to her and laid another on the woman's cheek. Promptus happened to rejoin the festivities and witness the Chancellor stepped away and bid her adieu. Alone, the sorceress looked around the ballroom with the same awkward glance she had on the night of the gala in Altissia, and he was somehow amazed that one quirk of hers hadn't changed. The young Prince excused himself from the group of women fawning over him and made his way to Atra, whose back faced him as she tucked her arms inward and observed the people around her.

“You're still the same awkward girl.” His voice brought a small jump of shock out of the sorceress, who spun on her heel to face him and bow in a single motion.

“I'd say the same about you, Your Highness, if it were true. But you don't share the aura I felt from the puckish playboy in past times.” He offered his hand to her and she took it without hesitation. Promptus pulled Atra against his body and craned his neck so his lips grazed her ear, sending shivers down her spine. "Has the playboy come back to woo me?"

"Maybe.” He tipped her backwards, forcing her to hold him tight. "Would the Marchionissa be opposed to my wooing of her?"

Atra shook her head. "But I have to tell you that you have some competition to deal with."

"Competition? Atra, you underestimate my charm.” He pulled her in a swift turn and held her on him, paying no mind to the spectators around them. "I don't need to caress your leg or kiss your cheek to draw you in. I don't even have to talk." Atra stared into his eyes. It was still there: that same warmth she felt when they first met, clawing out from under the cold rigidness that had taken over. That night on the hill, when they sat on the grass and watched the sun set, when he inquired her origins and made her feel accepted, he gave the same stare. For a moment Atra thought her heart might stop, and Promptus was quick to notice a pink blush blending with the golden glow still surrounding her. Promptus smirked as Atra leaned toward him, lips pursed, her eyes wide and unsure for the first time since her mind was freed. And even with all the power she now had, there was still that tiny pit of loneliness in her heart which was once filled. Said organ began to beat faster. He felt it on his chest and brushed the back of his hand on her cheek. From his throne Velox watched the space between the two shrink, Atra's eyes fall shut, her head lean sideways, Promptus' hand nestle in her bun-

"I will be retiring for the night, Father,” he announced to the man sitting beside him, and left the hall with haste. Velox bared his teeth and clenched his fists. Of course his brother would outdo him AGAIN. Promptus had bested him in just about everything since childhood: firearms drills, evasion training, politics, and especially winning over the opposite sex. Velox was fed up with playing second best to the younger Prince. He hadn't been trusted with a nearly decade-long mission to lure the Lucian Prince to his downfall. Sure, he was tasked with bringing the sorceress back to Niflheim, but that plan failed and Ardyn was the one to claim credit. What was left for Velox? Absolutely nothing. The staff who saw him stomp by bowed and didn't say a word to him, knowing better than to fuel the fire ignited in him.

Aranea had managed to play the part of her former military role well through the night. Nobles and governors were sad to see her leave, they confessed over glasses of wine and brandy, She was valued for both her looks and skill, particularly by the governors that danced with the dragoon and couldn't help eying her form concealed beneath the gunmetal gray midi dress hugging her hips. She grew bored of the attention fast and thanked her partners for their company, then quickly ducked away from the crowd and settled in a corner beside the stairwell. So much attention on herself was draining, and she was relieved to see the guests get the message and leave her alone. She raised her wine glass to her lips and sucked in the red liquid, aimlessly looking around the hall, and stopped
when her gaze landed on the woman in red leaning on the wall to her left. Lunafreya Fleuret's stare was fixed on the other side of the room, wide and sad. Aranea followed her line of sight and saw Commander Fleuret in the middle of some conversation with one of the governors. She'd overheard that the siblings were kept apart upon the Oracle's capture but thought it all to be gossip; her mind changed the longer she studied Luna's expression, and soon the Oracle suddenly became aware of the eyes on her. Luna turned Aranea's way. Small talk was hard for her to initiate and keep up with, and she had no idea what to say to the dragoon, or if she should even say anything. Fear swam in her eyes. This woman was - for all General Interitio knew - the only person who knew that Crowe was actually alive. She wanted to ask so many questions, but the only one that left her lips was, "...You're the one who brought the crystal here."

That wasn't what the dragoon expected the Oracle to say. "...Yes," she replied, momentarily glancing to the floor where Prince Velox marched through the crowd, and returned her attention to Luna. She could see the disappointment when her eyes squinted and her head shook. Should she apologize for following orders? Aranea was already feeling guilty for agreeing to play a part in the Lucian-Nifeli war, for letting the military take advantage of her skills in return for shit pay, for putting her under the command of someone who was willing to sacrifice his own daughter in the name of his emperor-

"I don't know why," Luna interrupted her thoughts, "but...something inside of me wants to offer you a shoulder to lean on."

Aranea's eyebrows scrunched. "Why's that? You're the prisoner in this situation." Luna nodded. "Don't worry about my guilt, Princess. If anyone should feel bad, it's your brother. Ravus has been here the whole time, and from what I know he hasn't once sought to see you. Am I right?" She nodded again. Aranea rolled her eyes and shook her head, shifting her weight and sipping the rest of her wine. "What a jackass. They should've built him a new brain to go along with that arm of his." She handed off the empty glass and laid her hand on her hip. "If you ask me, you should just march right up to him and put him in his place." The Oracle parted her lips to argue her case, but the dragoon cut her off. "If you're worried about Rico Suave coming back to interrupt, I can handle him. But I don't think anyone will be watching you when there's a better show on the dance floor." Luna raised an eyebrow and followed Aranea's pointing finger to a couple at the center of the room, lost in each other's grasp and not caring at all that others were watching their kiss. Aranea gestured for Luna to follow her across the room, but when she stepped forward, a hand on her wrist halted her.

Luna couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Why are you helping me? You're a soldier of the Imperial Army. Anything you do to aid me could be seen as treason-" Her rant ended when Aranea laid a finger on the Princess' lips. She hushed Lunafreya and motioned toward the staircase, where a passage to the other side of the room allowed them to move without attracting attention to themselves. By the time they were back by the bar Ravus was walking away, and Luna gathered her skirt in her hands and ran after him. A hand on his shoulder got his attention and left him stunned when he saw his dear sister on the verge of spilling angry tears in front of him, accompanied by the soon-to-be retired Highwind.

"Luna..." Any words that formed in his mind were wiped away when Luna yanked him forward and squeezed her arms around his body. She buried her face in the lapel of his uniform to suppress any hitches in her breath or shrieks that resounded as she cried. Ravus began to crumble, Aranea saw, and decided to leave the two alone. She wandered back to the bar and ordered another drink to watch the show from a safe distance.

The siblings secluded themselves under the stairs. Ravus wiped Luna's tears from her eyes, her makeup smeared and rubbed off on his uniform, and let her beat her fists against his chest in frustration. "Ravus..." She didn't know what to blurt out first, and settled on, "You're so stupid! How could you let them-- I've had to learn of what you've done through-- I can't believe you!" Luna
hadn't had a meltdown in such a long time, always remaining stoic and keeping calm, but she needed the outlet after all she'd been through.

Checking their surroundings, Ravus settled his sister on a pillar and held her by her shoulders. "I cannot begin to express how sorry I am," he began, "but I must postpone this until later. If a guard so much as sees us together word will get to the Chancellor, and he'll make sure we're kept apart for good." He couldn't help shifting his gaze again to ensure they were alone, and hushed his voice further until it was barely a whisper. "Listen carefully, Luna. The war is about to take a turn for the worst. Niflheim may have the crystal now, but they won't be satisfied until the entire world is under their boot. I'll elaborate more later. Meet me in the library at midnight." He didn't say anymore and left her with a kiss on her forehead, holding her hand for as long as possible before he returned to the dance floor.

As if on cue the sorceress found Ravus by the stairwell. "High Commander," she said, "I'm ready to meet with the Chancellor. Would you escort me to him?" Atra lifted her hand and offered it to the heterochromatic man, who eyed the Nifeli Prince next to her, and he took it with a light grip from his human hand. Atra looked over her shoulder to Promptus and bat her eyelashes at him. "Send for me tomorrow evening. We can enjoy each other more in privacy." Ravus noticed the wine lipstick staining Promptus' lips and resumed his march out of the grand hall without mentioning anything of it to the Prince, not wanting to know any details or what would come afterward.

Chapter End Notes

My initial draft for this chapter (written a LIIIIIIIONG time ago) didn't include Aranea or Luna at all, but I felt like I was ignoring them. And Luna's been in desperate need for some girl time since chapter 24. I always wondered how she and Aranea would interact. I didn't anticipate the chapter being as long as it turned out, but it works! And just wait until Crowe is back! I'm sure you've all missed her.

One final thing: if all goes according to plan, there are 16 chapters left, and there will be 62 in total for the story. I may do one afterward as a reference sheet for the story's lore and how things work in this alternate universe.
Blood Rush

Chapter Summary

Whether in the heat of battle or of the moment, passion is a powerful thing.

Chapter Notes

One of the last sixteen chapters in the story. We're actually drawing closer to the end now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Why so silent, High Commander?" Hearing Atra refer to him by his current title - hearing her speak directly to him at all, let alone about his well-being - didn't sit well on his shoulders. He couldn't put his finger on why, but her tone combined with the way the sorceress looked at him twisted his gut in uncomfortable knots. Her rage seemed to have tone down once the public began to worship her; perhaps her ego was inflating fast. It wouldn't have been a surprise, considering who her father was. Her confidence was on a different level from what he saw before her revelation. She carried herself with determination rivaling that of the younger Prince, especially when it came to asserting herself with the men who vied for her attention. Whether she was enjoying all the attention or toying with their hearts was anyone's guess, or maybe it was a mixture of both. But when she insisted he offer her an arm, Ravus sensed she was trying to test him, especially with her eyes glued on him as he led her down the carpet-lined hall. "You haven't said a word since we left the gala. Is something wrong?"

"No, Marchionissa." He kept his reply short and simple, averting his gaze from her and keeping his full attention forward. Having her to his left wouldn't have been as much of a problem compared to Atra walking on his right, where he could feel her hand curled in the crook of his arm, fingers crawling up his bicep at a snail's pace. He could feel her eyes drilling into him and did his best to ignore it, until she halted her steps and pulled his arm to stop him. "Is there a problem, Lady Interitio?" Ravus still refused to look at her, his hunch seeming more true with each passing second. He only allowed himself to look as far up as her hands when the silence lingered, wondering what she had planned. "Why won't you look at me?" Her free hand beckoned his gaze upward with a single finger; even then, Ravus stopped at her shoulders and stared at the braid draped over the right side. A red gem held the braid tied together, the ends of the hair curling slightly and tickling right below her clavicle. "Ravus." Her tone changed. "Look at me." With reluctance and a huff Ravus heterochromatic eyes met Atra's. Her expression was unreadable: no furrowed brow, no frowning, not even a squint. Her head tilted sideways as she blinked slow, almost with confusion. "Have I done something to upset you?"

"N-no, I-"

Atra advanced on him. Were she the timid doctor he'd pulled from the airship that step wouldn't have effected him, but she was a completely different person now. She knew how dangerous she was and
used that to her advantage. Ravus stepped backwards and Atra followed until his back hit the wall on the opposite side of the hall. "Are you bothered by my presence?" She didn't allow him to reply. "I apologize if I'm intimidating you. I don't mean to. I was searching for you at the gala but some eager guests stole me before I could blink." He was shaking his head, prepared to correct her, but he froze when she raised her hand and turned it over to brush hair away from his eyes. The hand then drifted closer until her fingertips brushed against his cheek, and Ravus swallowed a lump that hadn't existed before when her fingers tiptoed down the side of his jaw, and rested them on the top clasp holding his uniform together. "I couldn't help noticing the way your stare lingered on the Prince when you retrieved me, Ravus. Was it the smirk he wore that distracted you? Or maybe my lipstick staining his lips drew you in, my dear fallen Prince?" She paused as tension built between them. "...Or do you wish it was you and not Prince Promptus that I locked lips with?" The lump in his throat was stuck, stealing all words and breath from the man, as chills danced down his spine. Her right hand still flicking the clasp on his uniform, Atra's left laid on her lips, wiping off a smear of the lipstick still on her, and pressed the same finger onto his, dipping into the small gap between the top and bottom for a split second while painting his flesh. "Nothing gets past me." Atra backed off and resumed her stroll down the carpeted hallway, halting after four steps to await her escort catching up.

Ravus met her after regaining his composure, glad to have her off of him. There were only two other women in his life who had the power to intimidate him as Atra had, and neither alone matched how fast his blood froze. Her eyes no longer lingered on him and remained forward. She seemed more determined than him to get to the Chancellor's suite, gods know why, but all he wanted was to hand off the sorceress and be done escorting her through the end of this war. For once he'd much rather patrol or hear Luna's wrath than be in Atra's presence for a second more. The knots in his gut returned as the lump in his throat sank to meet them in their silent walk. It was, unfortunately, a familiar feeling one other individual had the power to drop in him, and there he was about to hand Atra off to him. Good riddance in one book, but he could only pray they didn't combine into one gruesome being and tear his psyche apart thread by thread. They finally arrived to the large gold-gilded double doors of Ardyn's estate, which opened inward upon their ingress. Ravus kept up with Atra and entered the suite, not paying attention to her taking in every aspect of the main hall; he'd seen it one too many times already. Servants scattered about performing chores: washing windows, dusting accessories, folding laundry - minute things. One looked up from his work and beckoned for the two to follow him with a bow. Ravus was hoping he'd be dismissed at the door, not wanting to see or hear Ardyn prattle on. But his hopes were dashed when the Chancellor met them halfway through the sitting room and sent the butler off. "High Commander, Marchionissa, it's a pleasure to see you again. How did you enjoy the rest of the festivities?" He and Atra carried on with their greetings, which Ravus blocked out, until he heard his name being called. "You may go, Ravus. You're free to do as you please." Ravus gladly took his leave with a bow, averting his gaze when Atra bid him goodnight. Despite his unease with standing toe-to-toe with the sorceress, what truly shook him as he hurried away was the way she eyed the Chancellor. Lust had glazed over them, something he didn't expect from the frightening woman, who seemed all too captivated by his boss to care who noticed. He didn't like it, the perception reinforced when the knots returned to his gut.

With the third wheel gone, Ardyn laid his full focus on his guest. He gestured for her to move further into his quarters and began showing off all his collected items, the help offering them refreshments, and brought up a story or two from her childhood. "We had the honor of meeting for the first time when I was appointed Chancellor twenty years ago. There was a feast, albeit smaller than your celebration, but nonetheless grand in its own charm. And then as I make my way across the space I'm not only greeted by General Interitio and his loving wife, but one lovely young girl with the brightest gray eyes to compliment her copper hair." While he paced in front of her and told his tale his eyes watched the woman in question, taking note of every subtle reaction: the blush radiating from her cheeks, the lust-filled glaze over her eyes making them shine brighter and the pupils dilate, her breath quickening. It amused him. "And my, how that little girl has blossomed."
Atra craned her neck in an attempt to hide her face. "Chancellor, you're too much."

"Ah, but that is just a fraction of my words." Ardyn offered an open palm to the sorceress, who took it without question, and led her through his suite to the back, where massive glass doors opened to a balcony facing the mountains a distance away from Gralea. The sorceress' steps slowed as she went outside and marveled at the magnificent sight. "This is the Niflheim you were meant to see, Atra. The laboratories beneath us do this view no justice, and I'd much rather have you enjoy all there is."

The Chancellor sauntered next to her, watching her hands slide on the marble railing while in awe of the sight. Her eyes had closed when a breeze kicked up and played with the skirt of her dress, making it appear to float behind her. With her head tilted upward, the moon illuminated above and casting its light onto the balcony, her shadow extended far across the balcony to the glass doors."...Are you happy here?"

His question made her spin on heel to look at him. She raised an eyebrow and observed the Chancellor's pace slow until there was a thread of space between them. Just staring into his eyes brought the hypnotic sensation from their dance back through her veins, and it only heightened when he laid his hand over hers. Her heart fluttered. It was like being in Promptus' arms again, though the aura the Chancellor had was stronger, much more potent. "Chancellor..."

"Ardyn, my lady." The hand on hers drifted up her arm and rested on her shoulder, then crawled to her jaw, and her cheek. He felt her pulse quicken, heard her breath catch in her throat, saw her lick her lips. The hypnosis magnified when her body spun left to fully face him, almost leaning into his touch. The man towered over her, like Cor once had, but Ardyn's gaze was degrees warmer than that of her former lover. The warmth sucked her in, her gaze wandering from his eyes down to his lips, halfway parted. Prince Promptus didn't have to speak to woo her; Chancellor Izunia's silence put the Prince's influence to shame, and before any intrusive thought could worm its way into her mind her lips were grazing against his.

She was lost in his embrace. His warmth surged into her through the kiss and spread throughout her body. Had either party had their eyes open they would've seen how bright Atra's aural glow shone, though Ardyn was sure of that happening when he cupped her face between his hands. His influence couldn't compare to Cor lifting her, or Velox feeling up her leg, or Promptus' hand combing into her hair. Ardyn was all three combined, if not more, and all Atra wanted was to stay in his grasp and have him caress her from head to toe. The hands pressed on his lapel separated, one hooking around his neck and the other around his waist to steady herself when she stood on her toes. His stubble tickled her chin when she leaned sideways to taste more of him. Atra had no idea when they'd returned inside and landed on his mattress, knocking the decorative pillows and his fedora aside. The help was dismissed for the night, leaving the Chancellor and sorceress completely alone. One of his hands had slid to the back of her dress and yanked at the zipper. The sorceress tore her crown off and flung it across the room before feeling the zipper on her back be pulled all the way down.

So far, everything was going according to plan, though they didn't relax just yet. While they were lucky to have not one, but two people in their party with knowledge of flying an airship, they still had to get the craft off the ground and in the right direction. Cor understood the inner workings of the basic model, and needed a bit of tinkering to figure out how to operate that specific model of the vessel. Help came in the form of Nyx, who'd ambushed one of the many airships that flew over Insomnia when the barrier was breeched. But his knowledge came on a whim: he hadn't memorized which lever or button did what, nor did he know how to get through the Nifeli access codes to override everything once the schematics were figured out. He only picked up on the cockpit's layout while in the middle of a fight with the Nifs piloting the airship. Thanks to his fight-or-flight adrenaline rush he dealt with the Imperial soldiers and learned the basics of running the machine from the weakling of an engineer onboard. The brothers worked in tandem to get the airship flying,
the older wishing Ignis still had his sight so he could pilot. There were no Imperials to stop them or chase the Lucians down, allowing the group to figure out which direction was which and navigate their course at their own pace. Each person had a station to maintain, save Ignis, who was paired with Gladiolus in monitoring the radar. The tactician could hear the ping of the radar that ticked around the screen, and began to memorize the pattern of safety. Umbra was on top of the ship, in charge of scanning the skies above the ship for any threats. Cor piloted the ship and kept the dashboard in check, searching it for any hidden hazards that could compromise the mission, and Gentiana stood at his side. Nyx and Nebula were by the window, hands curled around the metal railing and stares focused on the world below. Even in the darkness they took note of the illuminated spots on the ground, as well as the portals of bubbling red that appeared for each light.

"Before we head for Solheim," the Oracle began, "there's something I need to take care of. The world is in danger, and it'll be a catastrophe that not even an Astral can conquer by himself." Her words weren't missed by said Astrals across the cockpit. "If my call has been answered, the others will have gathered at the Cauthess disc." Nebula's gaze shifted to the two immortals. "We're going to where you were born, and your brothers and sisters are meeting us there."

"Are you suggesting these are the key to keeping it stable?" The Oracle
"If every Astral presses their fragment to the Shard at the same time, its energy can be stabilized just enough where Titan can set it down. The Shard will recognize your unique genetic code from the fragment, as well as that of your god, but the partial human DNA within that code will absorb a small amount of the energy to calm it. No harm will fall upon the Astrals or the planet."

But she and the immortals knew one thing that could upset the plan's success. They were down by one, thanks to Ifrit killing Ione, Shiva's last Astral. The amount of time to pass between one's death and the next's birth was unknown. They were pulling straws with this idea. "How many others are out there?" Gentiana asked. Astrals rarely crossed paths with one another, having a duty to their own god and residence.

Nebula's eyes closed, then Gentiana's, followed by Cor. "If my numbers are correct, ten, including the both of you." She counted on her fingers and in her mind. There were those of Titan and Leviathan next to her. Bahamut's was a secretive creature who kept to herself, from what the Oracle knew. Ramuh's was younger than the first three. Then there was Siren, Odin, Phoenix, Alexander, Carbuncle, and Gilgamesh. Nebula found it ironic that Cor was Titan's Astral and not that of Gilgamesh; the latter suited him better. Ifrit refused to take on one and defected from the other gods, his whereabouts unknown until recently. She didn't know if ten would be enough, with one distracted by his own god and only able to perform at a percentage of his original aura. "It will have to do."

Tailing the end of her sentence, Ignis heard the faintest beep from the radar in front of him. It was one, then two, then seven all going off out of sync. "I believe we have company," he announced loud enough for the others to comprehend and rush to the windows. Two giant robotic walker units surrounded by five squads of Magitek soldiers marched below them. They seemed to ignore the lone airship flying over, their focus stuck on the road ahead. Nyx stomped out of the cockpit to the bridge, then up a long ladder to meet Umbra on the hood. He stuck his knife into the airship to stabilize himself and joined Umbra on the back edge, laying flat against the metal as the wind whipped at them.

The two watched the enemy march past them. Umbra tracked their movement and stared forward, his eyes diving farther out and spotting the very garrison they left. "They must think we're still there," the ninja concluded. "Better for us. Utilizing the enemy's ship helps us move undetected."

"Yeah, well let's hope it stays that way," Nyx added, still absorbing all the information Nebula divulged. The Glaive looked over his shoulder, eyes closing to a slit when the wind hit particularly hard, and saw a jagged diagonal shape in the distance. "Is that it?" Umbra gave a single nod, already darting for the front of the vessel. "Geez, how the hell do you do that? Even I can't run against cyclone-force winds without warping." The ninja didn't reply. Nyx sucked his teeth and began his descent back inside. Halfway down, a second shape in the distance neared the Shard and hovered beside the tallest spire. The shape of it was all too familiar. "Shit," he cursed, "they've found us!"

She didn't know if he was going to abide by his word and meet her there, but she wasn't willing to take any chances considering her current situation. Ravus' words still rang in her head as midnight approached. What had he meant, exactly? She wished he'd been able to tell her at that moment. Luna had turned in shortly after her brother's departure, not feeling up to anymore socializing, and was elated that the Chancellor wasn't up her ass over it. On her way out she heard her name being called and glanced behind her to the target. Prince Promptus had taken the liberty to escort her to her suite, a disturbance to the Oracle who desperately wanted to get away from him after his betrayal. Oh, how she wished Aranea hadn't left so suddenly after their conversation. "My apologies, dear Princess,"
Promptus offered to her when they were alone in the halls, save the Magitek drones standing at attention on the walls every seven feet. "While my deceit was a hard blow, I did what I had to do for the good of the people. A matter I'm sure you'd understand as Oracle." His words stung like Coerul whiskers. "Whether Oracle, or Prince, or even Astral, we have duties we must uphold. Rules are set for us the moment we begin representing our title, rules that either permit or restrain what we do, in the public eye and even in the privacy of our own homes." He turned beside her and walked backwards, arms open in a quizzical manner. "We're even expected to be stoic in times of peril as to not scare the citizens. Sad, really. I enjoyed throwing the laws to the wind during my mission in Lucis. It allowed me the opportunity to try thing I'd never get to in the guise of Prince of Niflheim." He chuckled to himself and spun forward again as they rounded the corner to her room. "I've been told you've developed a rebellious streak as of late. Stabbing politicians, throwing fits in public."

"And for good reason," she retorted with a hard stomp on the floor. "Noctis is in a cell like some wild animal, Nebula's fallen into the hands of the Chancellor, the ring...the crystal..." She couldn't go on without her emotions getting the better of her. At least escape lay in wait as they reached the end of the hall and faced the door to her room. Promptus stopped before the doorway as Luna pushed it open and entered her suite. The Prince gave a light bow and spun around to depart to his quarters for the night. "Prompto." Neither could believe she still referred to the Prince and sorceress by their pseudonyms, but he obliged and halted his steps. Luna leaned out halfway, her hand laid on the wooden door's intricately carved details. "...Did you ever really care for us? For Noctis?"

Promptus didn't turn to meet her eyes. A heavy sigh left him and he put a hand to his hip. "Lunafreya... Why would I grow fond of Lucians if they were just going to die in the end? It's pointless to form bonds when you have a sword to their throat." And then he looked over his shoulder to her. His brows were drawn in, lips curled downward at the corners. "Put it this way: my compassion for you and your comrades was nothing more than a childish dream your dear Prince had stuck in his head. And had he tossed the rose-colored glasses away he would've seen the reality of it all. Nifeli and Lucians are enemies, and it will stay that way." His point made, Promptus began to walk away, no longer acknowledging the Oracle, whose hand trembled on the door.

After that her desire to escape intensified more than ever. If freedom and banishing the world of darkness were her goals, she'd throw away every etiquette class, every covenant, every pilgrimage, and the restraints of her persona in a heartbeat. So as midnight drew nearer Luna took the spare time to mentally map the route she'd take, noting the possibility of patrolling Magiteks getting in her way, or even having to sneak past a maid or servant to keep her presence nonexistent. It started when she shed that awful red dress from her body and kicked it to a corner. Her hair was the next thing to come down, relieving hours of tension and pulling on every point of her scalp. She saved some of the pins incase she would come across a lock, and before she stepped out of her quarters, the Oracle took a leap of faith and shoved one of the bobby pins into the keyhole of her ankle bracelet until it bent out of shape. It annoyed her to have to deal with the restraint for another night but she set the thought aside for the moment. Luna cracked the door open and stuck her head out, scanning the depths of the hall and the door to the Chancellor's room. He'd become too quiet that night but used it to her advantage and crept out of her suite. Three minutes to midnight she made it to the
library entrance. Luna set foot through the doorway, and immediately ducked behind a book shelf when voices echoed down the hall. Again she was safe, but her gaze lingered longer on the passing man, recognizing him as Captain Tummelt. He spoke with a taller man almost in a pleading manner. She didn't watch any longer and hurried deeper into the library, and hopped to a halt when she saw Ravus standing in the center of the room, waiting for her.

Her lips parted to continue from where she'd left off, to get answers. But as before his hand was cupped over her mouth before she could get a word out. "Sssh." His prosthetic hand took her by the arm and yanked her from the center reading area. They ducked past caddies filled to the brim with books, and Ravus wouldn't stop until they were in a secluded corner by the history section. Luna was finished with his bizarre antics. She snatched her arm out from his hand and balled her hands into fists, and any thought she had of backing him into the very corner he chose when the elder Fleuret boxed her in between his arms. His head tilted downward, meeting her fixed stare, seeing the benevolent, graceful woman dubbed Oracle fall apart on the inside. "Luna...I-

"Enough lies, Ravus!" Her outburst border-lined whispers and yelling. She beat her fists against his chest, eyes shut tight, displeasure nearing animosity. And with her boiling emotions, the courteous words that once delivered a gentle guiding force dissipated into bursts of fury. It started small. "You bastard! I can't stand the sight of you after all this destruction! You've stolen so many innocent live, Ravus - YOUR people!" Then with her heart racing, thoughts popping without notice, face hot with anger, the Oracle lost her charm and filter. "F-Fucking hell, Ravus! What would Mother say if she were still here? If she HADN'T jumped in front of you and taken those bullets in your place! To save YOUR sorry ass that joined the fucking empire that destroyed Tenebrae! You idiot!" Her reserve from the ballroom was long gone as her batting fists slowed and Luna sank to the floor, breath heaving, all energy extinct. "You fucking idiot..." Her rage translated into the heavy tears flowing down her face. She began to settle down when her brother knelt beside her, holding his sister tight in an embrace. Ravus' words took a back seat to soothe his exasperated sister, rocking her back and forth, forwards and backwards, and refused to stop until her ire reduced to a few sniffles into the fabric of his robe.

Her head ached. Her chest hurt. Her eyes were raw from so many tears, so many years of listening to the suffering of others, taking in their pain, saving innocent victims from the Scourge which plagued them, of grand entrances and speeches, keeping a neutral face in times of peril, allowing the enemy to imprison her and hold rifles to her temple... So many years of being forced to hold in everything and more, and do nothing but grin and bear it. And Ravus did nothing to help her, to listen to HER woes for five minutes. It wasn't until she'd reunited with Noctis and his retinue, met Nebula/Atra, be treated like any other commoner... For a few days, Lady Lunafreya Nox Fleuret, Princess of Tenebrae and Oracle to the people, could just be Luna. She was free to walk around the Altesian promenade with only Gentiana and Atra in tow, could gab with Atra and Crowe about the men and embarrass the former, play dress-up with someone other than herself for once. It was refreshing to just be Luna, notorious shopaholic and friend of a mage and doctor - sorceress - whatever Atra was now. And at that moment, it was rejuvenating to be nothing more than a little sister being comforted by her big brother.

Ravus only set her free when she was calm. She parted from him and let him wipe the salt and hairs smeared on her face, and felt the same hand caress her cheek. "If I could apologize a million times and have the gods punish me, it still wouldn't be enough to express the regret on my shoulders. I was devastated to learn of your possible death in Insomnia, and twice that when you were captured by the Chancellor. Had Niflheim not been breathing down my neck since they invaded Tenebrae I would've slaughtered the lot of them..." He turned away for a moment, his gaze darting to his left, and Luna's followed when his hand dropped. "I couldn't let them hurt you, Luna. Even with your status as Oracle they were prepared to do more than imprison you. I convinced the Chancellor and Emperor to let you live rather than kill you. I... I couldn't lose you, too." He held his emotions well
but Luna saw through the facade. She laid her hands on top of his and wrapped her fingers under them. Ravus pulled her in again, one hand petting her hair as the other held her close. "I hate myself for putting you through all this chaos, but I had to ensure your safety. In exchange for your safety under their thumb I became their rat..." The reason he met with her returned to his thoughts. Ravus stood and helped Luna up, releasing her hands and taking one step away from her, shifting his attention to one of the book shelves. "They've plotted something much worse than claiming the crystal and its sole controller. Now that the sun no longer rises the daemons are multiplying more than we can keep track of. Before the fall of Altissia, Verstael was assigned as my charge. I already saw him often due to my foolishness with the Ring, but the Chancellor placed me on full-time guard with the idea that I wouldn't run off to find you." His heterochromatic gaze drew into slits as he halted at a certain book on the sixth shelf up. *History of Tenebrae*, the spine read in silver print against the black cover. "...During one of his usual conferences with Emperor Aldercapt, I overheard a hushed comment he whispered to the Emperor. 'We've entered the next phase of their procedure,' he told Iedolas, 'With the end of the Lamia Project approaching and your spy relaying intel back to us, we'll be in need of a newer army to fight alongside my Magitek soldiers. I've already devised a new program that coincides with the Lamia Project.'

"'Imagine this'. "Ravus' metal fingers curled against the spine, tearing the fabric and silver lettering from the cardboard beneath. "'We use the success of Lamia's development in building this new squadron: implement control of both magic and mind unto these soldiers; use the Lucians' power against them. Take them by surprise as we did in Insomnia...only this time, they'll be fighting their own men.'" The claws dragged down and ripped into the shelf and further down, destroying text and wood until his hand could reach no more. Ravus spun on heel and faced his sister, his stare of mauve and azure meeting that of sylleblossoms. "Luna... Niflheim is using magic wielders of Insomnia, both alive and dead, as their new army. The deceased will be reanimated with the use of daemon manipulation, and the minds of the living will only answer to the Chancellor. They plan to take out Solheim within the week, and after that... Who knows... General Glauca was stationed in Insomnia to collect candidates."

Luna lifted her hands and knitted her fingers together, the only way to keep herself from shuddering. "That's madness!" Her head shook. She paced forward, not knowing how to process all the information, and stopped when she was next to Ravus. "...And what of Noctis?"

"Something worse. Much worse..."

Chapter End Notes

Luna's taken enough shit, both canon and in this story. She deserved better than an untimely death...and for once, I wanted to imagine what she'd be like angry.
Negotiations (The Smut Chapter)

Chapter Summary

Here we are again
I feel the chemicals kickin' in
It's getting heavy
And I wanna run and hide
I wanna run and hide
I do it every time
You're killin' me now
And I won't be denied by you
The animal inside of you

Chase Holfelder ~ Animal

Chapter Notes

A LOOOOONG while ago after I wrote chapter 15, someone asked if I'd ever share exactly what happened between Cor and Atra/Nebula. Well... MERRY CHRISTMAS! This is only the third smut piece I've ever written to completion (and I normally never do) so I hope it came out alright.

The actual story will continue after this, so this doesn't count as one of the last 15 chapters. So enjoy your smut, because the last chapters just might make you cry~

Following Chapter 14...

“Goodnight, Mr. Leonis.” Her words were firm, her tone spitting a hint of venom that she rarely used. Nebula ripped her gaze from him and started for the bedroom door, walking around the opposite side of the table to avoid him. Cor couldn't believe her. She, an intelligent medical professional – a refugee of Niflheim – was willing to risk facing death a second time rather than move to Solheim. And for what reasoning? Her refusal to explain herself got on his nerves. He was used to Nyx snapping at him without formality; this woman he'd met only so long ago went from serene to aggravating in a single conversation. Growing annoyed with her adamant tongue, Cor seized her wrist from across the table and yanked her before him. One way or another he was going to straighten her out. A yelp escaped her mouth when she was jerked sideways and she stumbled to find her footing again. Nebula bared her teeth, ready to curse his name the second he released her. Their chests collided in her stumble, his arms instinctively catching her, and she tilted her head up to chew him out. “What the hell's yo-” The doctor suddenly found herself lost for words. Her tense brows relaxed and her lips fell back into a line. It took her more than a moment to register the lack of
space between them, and longer to notice how he'd calmed so fast. She found herself unable to tear
her gaze from him with the hard chill dancing down her spine. Warmth repelled the chill as it swam
over her wrist from his hand, still wrapped around the appendage, and it was becoming annoyingly
difficult to shake the sensations off.

In his silence, Cor was experiencing a similar effect from her presence. A cold sweat had formed on
the back of his neck and drew down, accompanied by the sudden chill in the air, and his fingers
twitched against her wrist. It was uncomfortable, enough where he wanted to shake it from his
hands, bringing his to slide down from her wrist to meet hers. She remained frozen even with his
sudden movement and said nothing, still mesmerized by the gaze they couldn't break. Something
about the steely color in her eyes left Cor magnetized, unable to pull his sight from her. He followed
the line of brown dots down the side of her face, curving from her forehead to her chin, and was
drawn upward again by her lips. He noticed indents in her bottom lip, made every time she bit down
to calm her nerves, and she did it again as her mind raced. Being so close to him was unsettling, and
at the same time, she didn't want to move away from him. Nebula tugged at the hem of her sleeve
and chewed her lower lip yet again, grinding her teeth into the skin.

“Why do you keep doing that?” he asked, his voice lowered to a near whisper. Neither noticed his
other hand hesitating as it hovered over her other one, still unsure of whatever was going on in his
head.

“I...” she breathed, doing her best to pull words from her jumbled thoughts as the man loomed over
her. His stare sucked the air from her lungs. “…It calms me when...when I'm nervous.”

His foot drew closer inward. “You should stop before you make yourself bleed.” She took the
sentence in both sincerity and as an order, one she found herself wanting to defy, just to see what
he'd do about it.

“And what if I say no?” she suddenly blurted out. A voice in her head yelled for her to stop and back
away from him before things went too far to forget. It was quickly silenced by another that screamed
for her to test him, to stand her ground and show the man she wasn't some delicate flower in need of
protection. Beneath the bravery, the second voice held no fear in its curiosity to see where their
actions led. Her left hand bypassed his and crawled up to his chest, halting at his collar bone. “Will
there be consequences if I don't?” Her tone was demanding, to his surprise. She wanted him to stop
her. Her pulse quickened, the spark between them igniting further as he leaned his face closer to hers.
His hand moved upward and rested itself on the doctor's cheek. His thumb drew circles in her skin as
she leaned into his touch, keeping her eyes locked on his. “Would you try and stop me?” He slowly
tilted her chin upward and moved in when she didn't protest, parting his lips.

His mouth hovered over hers momentarily as he watched her reaction. “I wouldn't have to 'try' to
accomplish that.”

“Then show me...” She wasn't backing down. “Prove to me... that... you...” Her words were lost
when he invaded the space between them, eyes falling shut out of her control, and their lips touched.

The spark between them burst, letting out all the tension that had built up. Any voice of reason that
pleaded for either party to cease their actions was quieted when Nebula parted her lips and drew in
Cor's breath through the kiss. He tasted like stew and wine, the flavors combining with his sweet
saliva. She pushed up on her toes and used him to balance herself, her free hand grasping his
shoulder. After a long moment their mouths parted, and they looked each other in the eye, waiting
for any signs of reluctance. A heavy blush had fallen over the doctor's face. She hadn't kissed
someone in years, and nearly forgot the feeling of it; then again, it could've been the wine. She
wasn't much of a drinker, so it only took a glass or two to flush her cheeks and ease her mind. She
licked her lower lip, still tasting the wine from his mouth, which Cor couldn't help watching. Every action from her was surprising, almost intentional. But as their lips met again, doubt began to swirl in the back of his mind. He seldom found himself in an intimate position with another person, and when it came to Nebula, they'd only just met. One night stands weren't his thing. If he planned on doing anything affectionate with another there had to be more than physical attraction at play. The relationship between himself and Nebula wasn't meant to go that far. They were supposed to remain contractual, meant for her to serve Lucis under his watchful eye, not turn their work relationship into something practiced by the carefree. And then there was the age difference. He was sure he had almost as many years over her as Ignis or Gladiolus, though she didn't seem bothered by that. But when she argued with him about her safety and protecting herself— as if she already belonged to him—he felt genuine concern for the woman's well-being, as if he'd known her for years instead of just a few days. Whatever spark had emerged between them was strong, and erased all distaste he had for casual intimacy, only driving his desire to taste her a second time. Cor leaned in and kissed her again, his hand roaming from her cheek to her waist and becoming firm in its grip on her.

His hand on her waist confirmed any thoughts she had on the situation not ending with just a kiss. She hoped he didn't sense the sudden doubt swirling in her thoughts. Nebula usually stuck to conversations and business contracts to form her connections with people, but the way the Marshal eyed her did something she couldn't explain. Being touched in a way she hadn't experienced in a long time was strange, almost foreign, but the more his hands roamed her form the more she found herself enjoying it. One of them trailed up, and when it neared the back of her neck, Nebula groaned and pulled away from him, averting her gaze. “Cor, wait... Don't...”

His senses returned when he sucked in a breath. “I-I'm sorry.” He took a step away from her. “I don't know what came over me.”

“Yes, that, too,” she replied, both of them taken aback that her response hadn't been immediately directed toward their briefly shared action, “but I was actually talking about your...hand.” Her own reached for her neck and she rubbed at it. “It's...”

“Have I made you uncomfortable?”

“No, no, that's not it. I just...” Nebula sighed and took his hand in hers. “We're supposed to be negotiating a contract here. I don't think it'd be wise for us to become intimate and risk a conflict of interest.”

Cor rested his hand on his hip, another sigh sounding in the air, this time from himself. “No, you're right. I don't know how we ended up like that.” And then he saw her bite on her lower lip again. “You're doing it again.”

“Doing what?” Nebula quickly realized what he was referring to. “Oh. Sorry.” She ceased her actions and half-sat on the wooden table, nearly knocking over her wine glass as she shifted her weight. She caught the glass before it could tip over and spill, and brought it to eye level, swirling the red liquid inside. “Will you keep insisting that I move to Solheim once the contract is drawn up?”

The marshal cleared his throat. “Yes. You'd be much safer there. Cid told me about the previous encounters you've had with the Nifeli soldiers. They're ready to kill you if you don't submit to their will.”

“No different than what they already do, Mr. Leonis, and a simple relocation wouldn't change a thing.” The way his surname rolled off her tongue mixed with the remains of the fading spark, igniting a new burning sensation in his chest. He watched Nebula take a large gulp of her wine, staring at the ceiling as she did so. “I understand your need for an outsourced supplier, and I'm more than happy to help. But if it comes down to leaving my patients and practice behind just to end up
another refugee in someone else's care, then I have to refuse your offer.”

“Would your answer change if I offered you space in Insomnia?” Her blood froze on the last word of his question, which he quickly took note of. “Your heritage won't be an issue-

“That's an even worse idea,” she chuckled while finishing off her wine, then set her glass down and reached for Cor's.

“Then what do you propose, Miss Ardere?” She caught on to his tone, which stopped her from polishing off the second flute, and laid her full attention on him. “All you've done tonight is refuse my offers of safety for you. If you have a better idea, then please, share it with me.”

She took his question as a challenge. Nebula scoffed and set the glass down on the table back in its original place. “My idea, Mr. Leonis-” she emphasized hard on his name again as she stood up and glared at him- “is that I stay put, far away from Insomnian and Solhemnian borders, so that more danger isn't brought to the great crystal keeper and its biggest ally.” She shook her head and laughed once at his ridiculous expression. “But I'll humor you. Let's say for a moment that I agree to leave here tonight and go with you to Solheim. That lays all the targets out in a neat little line for the emperor to knock over, one by one, just like dominoes. He'd expect a move like that.” Nebula poked at his chest, once for each of her last words, her cheeks flushing further from the wine. “Do you want to make the possibility for a search-and-destroy mission even easier for Niflheim? I'll only be another sitting duck in Insomnia; at least out here, there are a million places to hide. The more scattered the targets, the more time we have.” She pursed her lips and blew raspberries. “Honestly, I'm a bit surprised you never considered that.” She brushed a piece of lint from his lapel. “Then again, you seem to enjoy flirting with danger.”

“And how did you come to that conclusion?” Cor's hand drifted up her arm again and rested at the base of her neck, threatening to lay across her hairline, which she protested with a grunt and leaned her head out of the way. The way she flipped personality types – using the type B for the gentle care of her patients, and the type A for asserting herself to people like him – added on to the sensation firing up around his lungs, stealing his breath as it swirled down his gut.

Nebula responded to his touch with one of her own, wrapping her forearm around his waist and bringing him closer. “Because you kissed a Nifeli. A refugee, yes, but someone from the empire all the same. Technically speaking, I'm your enemy.” Her head tilted further, exposing more of her neck, a move she knew would make him lean in closer. “I bet you're a risk taker on the battlefield.” His lips drew nearer again, but as he kept his movements slow, an impatience grew within the doctor that made her seize the man's face and complete the kiss before she realized what she was doing. The kiss was harder than the first as he applied more pressure and held her in place, preventing her from slipping away a second time. They both knew they were throwing caution to the wind, and at that point, any concerns either party had for keeping their business relationship just that were thwarted. His free hand pressed on her lower back as the other crept further behind her neck. Nebula felt the movements of his fingers and pulled herself away as much as he allowed. “Please...don't freak out when you feel it...”

“Feel what?” When the question left him his hand was already crossing her hairline, and he answered it himself. Where the top of a person's spine normally started, he felt a round, flat lump poking out from the back of her neck. His eyebrows scrunch in confusion, and before he could ask what it was, she had her reply prepped, noting her sudden sheepish turn.

“All Nifeli citizens have a tracker put under their skin when they start primary school. It lets the government know where they are at all times. They're embedded in the muscle and can cause paralysis if removed. I disabled it when I escaped, so don't be concerned if you feel some scarring
He found her amusing. There they were, about to do Etro knows what with a war looming over their heads, and she was embarrassed about a piece of her past she still had. Her bashful aversion of her gaze was almost comical. “You amaze me more and more.” She didn’t have time to react to his comment as he pulled into another hard kiss. His hand rested on her neck, on the tracker, momentarily jerking from the metal disc under her skin, and she relaxed when it became clear that he didn’t care about any of the concerns she had. Her mind cleared itself of any further doubt that lingered and she became putty in his arms, moving her lips in sync with his. She was caught off guard when his hands let go of her, only to scoop under her behind and lift her off the floor. Nebula was placed on top of the table and Cor stood between her hanging legs, neither of them paying any mind to the flatware shaking when her weight was laid down. Cor's wine glass was knocked over when Nebula laid an arm behind her body for leverage; she made a mental note of to clean later. He nudged her head aside with his nose and started a trail from her mouth down the side of her neck, earning sudden and quick huffs from her throat. She held onto the back of his head as he moved down to her clavicle, unzipping her bolero at the same time andshrugging it to the side to expose her collar bone.

Nebula couldn’t remember the last time someone had touched her in such a way. It felt like ages since she was caressed and kissed, and even longer since things had ever been taken any further. Any nerves that danced out of fear or anxiety relaxed into Cor’s touch, their dance shifting to one of rising passion. He let go of her for a second to shake off his blazer, arousal starting to take over his mind, and she helped him push it off his arms. He tugged at the sleeves of her bolero until her arms were free and it was thrown to a side of the eat-in kitchen Nebula couldn't recall if she tried to. Her left leg coiled around his right, hooking behind his knee, and she leaned farther back until the edge of the pot in the center hit her head. Nebula hissed and cupped a hand around the throbbing area and waved off Cor's worry. “I'm alright,” she gasped. She sat upright once the throbbing passed and ran her hands along the line of his shoulders. “Maybe that's the sign we needed to move somewhere more comfortable.” She hopped off the table and offered her hand to him, which he graciously grasped, and allowed the doctor to lead him to her bedroom. It was much smaller than the treatment room at the back of the house, but much more decorated than the latter. Her bed and frame lay to the right against the center of the wall, made up with simple bedding, parallel to the vanity on the opposite wall. An armoire lay at the furthest end of the room next to the sole window. “I'll be right back. I want to put the leftovers away.”

“That can wait,” Cor said, and he picked her up by the waist, leading her to the bed with kisses all over her face and neck. The backs of her knees hit the mattress and she fell backwards, watching the man hover over her. As he leaned down to claim her yet again, her legs wrapped around his waist and jerked his body sideways, his back on the mattress and Nebula climbing on top of him before he could catch the breath he didn’t realize he was holding. She beckoned for him to sit up and bat her eyes when he sat up. She shook off her boots and pulled the bottom of his shirt over his head without hesitation. He let go of her to let the clothing be removed, and the moment his arms were free he pulled her into another kiss. His fingers unhooked her bra under her shirt and pushed the straps aside to caress her back. She shuddered when they grazed her skin, the chill zapping her spine from her shoulders down the middle of her back, and she suddenly felt cold. Goosebumps popped up all over her skin and Cor took notice of them as he leaned closer in. “I see someone's a little cold,” he whispered in her ear before running his tongue down to her shoulder, where his lips cupped around the area between his teeth.

Her breath hitched in her throat when he worked on the patch on her shoulder. The chill spread from his mouth and spread through her arm. “Maybe,” she managed to answer while his hands moved under her shirt. “I tend to get cold easily.”
“I should fix that.” He didn't give her a chance to question him before he hooked his thumbs over her shirt and slid it up her torso, his lips following after it with a trail of kisses from her stomach, past her breast, all the way up to her neck when he lifted it over her head. His skin was hot, much to her relief, and quickly fought against the cold that threatened to freeze her. She sucked in a breath and craned her neck to the side when he bit down on her skin, rolling it between his teeth and sucking until it became a reddened circle, and he followed with a second immediately after at the base of her throat. “You're looking much warmer now.”

She shook off the bra barely clinging to her when she had a moment of space and let it fall to the floor. His hands were exploring every inch of the skin across her back, tracing along the dips of her spine down to her waist, and she twitched under his touch. “You're very persistent- ngh!” His sudden dive into the valley of her breast stole the oxygen in her lungs. Her fingers curled in on his shoulders and secured him in place. He lapped at her flesh and grazed his teeth against her until her sighs morphed into faint moans. Her grip on him tightened, not wanting the sensations he left across her chest to stop, and when his lips drifted to a breast she clawed at him, biting her lip to suppress the sounds threatening to escape her.

“And you're very defiant,” Cor answered when he momentarily released her to switch sides. He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as she pressed against him, the warmth of her body bringing the sensations he would normally never allow himself to feel to the surface. His teeth sank shallow into the tender flesh above her clavicle as the woman buried her face in his hair, eyes squeezed shut and hands roaming lower. He drew another path leading back to her lips and didn't hesitate to thrust his tongue in her mouth, braiding itself with hers to taste as much of her as possible. His hands were calloused, heightening the sensitivity of each touch and drag of his fingers along her waist that led to the small of her back. One wandered back up, catching her off guard when he traced around the lump by her hairline, and he finally heard the sound he was waiting for. Their heads tilted for a deeper reach and he kissed her again and again, not leaving any inch of the region untended. When they parted for a brief break the flush on her cheeks seemed to enhance the slow blinks she gave and her lips, plump and glossed from their shared passion. Nebula continued to rake his back despite their separation and his brows drew in. “Do you enjoy picking at my resolve?”

“Would that be a problem?” she whispered in his ear. Her body was no longer cold, having siphoned his body heat for her own, and her fingers dragged around his torso to the front before pushing against his pecs to force his back against the mattress with a thud. “Besides, you're the one who likes flirting with danger. So what exactly is it that draws you in? Is it a long buried desire to 'play doctor’?”

The marshal was beginning to like her constant challenging, and the same seemed with the doctor when he attempted to sit up, only to be forced down again, and held in place by her hands on his biceps. This was a part of her he'd yet to see. A grunt escaped him and he seized her hips into his grasp, the firm press of his fingers deliberate as retaliation for her previous action. She flinched for just a second as her nerves began to overheat. Cor took note of every subtle curve that made up Nebula's body from her arms down to her thighs. “I can't say. I've never played before.” The doctor hovered over him, her lips a thread away from his, amusement taking over her features while she watched him try to reach her and fight against the hold on him he wanted to keep. She smirked wide and drew in a slow breath, then blew her scent into his face, watching him take in every part of the scent. When she sucked in another Cor used his hold on her hips to distract the doctor. He hardened his stare into her eyes and rolled forward faster than she could react, upright once more. A hand fistled itself into her hair. “But I'd prefer another game.” Their lips connected once more, his teeth biting her lower lip before she could do the same to him, trapping her so he could taste every bit of her. Her flavor was addictive; every kiss made him want two more.

She cocked an eyebrow up and lapped at his upper lip until he let her go. “The Lucian marshal,
wanting to play a game with me? I'm flattered.” The hands still curled around his biceps let go and
dove to the button of his pants, a finger circling the silver shape. “I'll need some help learning how to
play. Can I ask for a lesson?” Nebula unclasped the button and fiddled with the zipper just under it,
watching the anticipation build in his eyes.

Oh, he hated how she toyed with him. And at the same time, he absolutely loved the way Nebula
tried to make him feel inferior, the determination radiating with her blush. Pressed against her so tight
he felt her heartbeat quicken with each test of the other's resolve. The beat echoed through his body
and rippled downward, spreading between his thighs, an aftershock running across his pride. “Only
if you say please.” His whole body shuddered as her fingers tore the zipper down and pushed the
flaps aside. Her fingertips walked along the perimeter of the garment and the hem of the one below.
It was another challenge.

“Oh, Marshal,” Nebula replied as she snapped the waistband of his underwear, “we both know I'm
not one to beg. Though your attempt was cute.”

“I wasn't asking.” Cor's serious tone returned, his demand echoing through her body. Paired with his
sudden speed in flipping the two of them over, him now hovering over her, he left Nebula breathless
just long enough to unzip her pants and peel them from her legs in one motion. The clothing joined
her bra and shirt on the floor, and her shiver returned. His lips ghosted over hers, hands restraining
the ones attempting to caress his neck and back, and he waited for her to say the word. She refused,
as he expected. Cor shifted his hold on the doctor's hands and shrugged his pants down to his knees,
kicking his legs free one at a time, his pace agonizingly slow as he awaited her response. “Just one
little word, Miss Ardere, and the torture will end.” She playfully stuck her tongue out to taunt him,
but his speed outmatched hers a second time when his lips pulled it into his mouth, fully trapping her
under him. His kiss was forceful, pushing her into the mattress while his free hand traced a line from
her throat, between her breasts, and swirled around her navel once before it hooked beneath her
underwear and rid her of her final barrier. The doctor fought against moans she couldn't suppress the
longer he took to reach her waistline. “So,” he continued when he allowed her a moment to breathe,
“you prefer to do this the hard way?”

Nebula giggled. “Says the man currently aroused above me.” One of her hands squirmed free and
she toyed with the hem of his underwear, staying just on the border of his arousal. Cor grit his teeth
and shut his eyes, muttering a curse under his breath, wanting nothing more than to feel every inch of
the medic below him. “I believe this is checkmate, Mister Leonis.” The way his name rolled off her
tongue, and how the muscle swiped across her lips to beckon to him, chipped at his reserve, and
before he could stop himself, Cor grasped Nebula's wrist and pulled down as she tore his last barrier
away.

His tongue breached the fringe of her lips, whispering, “You forgot the counter,” before his lips
traveled down Nebula's body, his hands rounding her thighs as he pulled her closer and lapped at her
skin. Nebula arched into his touch, craving more of it with each passing second that he seemed to
drag out, wanting to hear every sound that came out of her. Cor got his wish when the woman
beneath him began to squirm and mewl. She began to fall apart under him, slowly though unfurling
all the same, and the marshal dug deeper until she cried out and pulled at his hair. Her eyes were
squeezed shut, doing what they could to hide the type A personality crumbling simply by the man's
tongue currently exploring her inside. She choked every breath sucked in and blown out with every
lap and each pattern drawn on her thighs by his hands. When she appeared at the edge he tore his
mouth away and observed the doctor's eyes peel open as she collected herself, then dove back in
when she least expected it. And then she gasped his name, her head rolling side to side as the sparks
from her abdomen surged throughout her body. With a final lick he ascended back to her lips,
crawling over her and meeting her half-lidded daze. Her blush had deepened significantly, and every
kiss he laid on her lips and jaw burst with hot sparks that danced and exploded. Cor found himself
approaching the same peak with each touch from her, and was ready for more as he pressed his forehead against hers and drew in one long breath, and slid into her.

Nails immediately burrowed into his shoulder blades. Nebula's mouth hung open, all thoughts lost to the sensations quaking through her. The heat from before paled in comparison to the fire Cor ignited, and he couldn't hide the shared feeling. He balanced above her, arms on either side of her head, eyes locked on each other, both content with simply studying the other before the marshal began to move. They drew in a simultaneous breath as he pulled out, and when he thrust back in the doctor sighed, her voice rising in pitch. The steady motion continued, Nebula's grasp on Cor growing firm as her hands shifted to his biceps. One stayed only for a second and laid on his cheek, mesmerized by every feature as she held onto him for dear life. He wanted to hear her sing again, to hear her finally crack and beg for him to give her what she craved. She pulled him in for another kiss, finding it the only way she could possibly suppress the moans he was drawing out of her, but her actions were unsuccessful. She succumbed to his will and released every cry and sound he desired, fueling his arousal further. Nebula couldn't contain herself any longer and finally shouted his name as she scored her name into his back. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, whimpering against his grunts, and felt herself lose all control when Cor gripped her thighs and changed the angle. Every grind was drawn out, sliding nearly all the way out before rolling back into her, matching the pace of every bite and welt he left on her neck. She was almost at the edge, he could feel it, as was he. He pulled her into his arms, dragging out each thrust, wanting to hit the edge only when she fully let go and gave into him. Nebula huffed, her heart racing, nails deep in his back, tugging his hair and doing whatever else she could as an outlet for the ecstasy surging through every nerve in her being.

Finally, as Cor found himself near the end, the woman under him let go and arched into him, and he followed moments later with several hard, long rolls in and out of the doctor. "Cor..." she panted, sweat and heat and pressure hitting her all at once. Nebula whimpered and bit into his shoulder, eyes shut tight when she reached her climax and quivered around him. She whined and gasped his name over and over, and in the midst of a deep growl of her name when he buried his face next to her throat, finding his own release, the marshal heard what he'd been waiting for. "...Please... please, Cor, please--" Her words were lost in the bliss clouding her mind and leaving her breathless under him, both drenched in sweat. Nebula shivered in his arms as her whines died down, still feeling the twitches of climax rattling inside her and around him. The marshal was panting when their eyes finally connected again, shaking sweat away from his eyes and moving a shuddering hand to wipe away the hair stuck to her face. The collection of lines she'd carved into his back burned with pleasure. He lowered his head next to hers, leaning his forehead on the sheets and catching his breath. When his breathing stabilized he locked eyes with the medic again, captivated by the glow radiating off of her and her lips, swollen by his doing. No longer panting, the two leaned into one another and exchanged a kiss, much more gentle and soft compared to their previous escapade. The back of her still-quivering hand brushed against Cor's cheek, thumb tracing over the lines framing his eyes. His name was the only word she could utter or think of.

He couldn't help the smirk that spread across his face as he leaned into her touch. "Lesson learned?" the marshal asked in a low voice, already feeling exhausted from their excursion. Nebula could only nod and lick her lips before reconnecting with his again, both hands cupping his face and rubbing circles along his jawline. With reluctance Cor separated from her, sharing the hypersensitivity that hit them both from the loss of contact. He settled beside the doctor and coaxed her into his arms. The warmth they shared was replaced with a chill swimming over them, and Nebula shifted to cover herself and the marshal from the cold air. She nestled her head above his heart and felt his arm wrap around her. Silence took over the air as she traced circles in his pec.

"Next time," she said with a yawn, "you'll be the one begging." He chuckled at the thought, more so at how her snarky nature was still there so soon after he had her pleading to him. Nebula mumbled something else that he couldn't make out, and when he glanced down to ask what she said, he saw
the doctor falling asleep. Even with her energy spent she wanted to put him in his place, but that would have to wait until she had enough to pin him down again. For the time being she closed her eyes and drifted to sleep listening to Cor's heartbeat, and felt him place a tired kiss on her forehead.
Endlessness

Chapter Summary

When all hope seems lost, and there's a choice to be made, sometimes you have to give up everything to set things right again.

They'd been absolutely careful when they took off. Even with the cloak of Niflheim protecting them from getting attacked, the Glaive and ninja had made sure both the inner and outer portions of the airship were Magitek-free, and they'd been successful in their endeavor. So to see a Nifeli airship hovering beside the Astral Shard, knowing the group had taken every precaution, was giving Nyx flashbacks of the Kingsglaive's fight to get King Regis out of the citadel. The building had been surrounded, at about the same level the red airship floated, and he'd warped into the vessel and took out every last Nif and dreadnought to clear a path for his retinue. "How?" He shook his head in disbelief and rubbed his eyes, and when the airship didn't vanish his attention zoned in on Nebula, who hadn't said a word since the Glaive's announcement. "There's no way they could've known about our plan! NO way!" Her expression remained neutral during his rant. Nyx waited for the woman to provide an answer, only to receive a silent stare. "Don't tell me you still want to go in there!"

"We must," she corrected him, closing her eyes and turning her head upward. She drew in a deep breath and raised her hands palm up: the sign the others knew as Shiva's anticipated arrival. "As I said earlier, we're out of options. Our destination remains the same. One Nifeli ship crossing our path won't change the objective." The Oracle finished her call and walked to the front window in slow steps and glanced into the distance. Her eyes narrow, stare and silence lingering as she laid her hands on the control panel and studied the airship in question. The quiet left all but the Astrals on high alert, not knowing what was going on or what their next move would be. The immortals standing on both sides of Nebula knew some of the details, Cor more than Gentiana, but the former still had no idea who or what this 'trump card' was. Worry started to build in the marshal until he noticed the corner of Nebula's mouth turned upward. "...The trump card has been put into play. You've no need to worry." The Glaive and Crownsguard had no idea what she was talking about. "As we have taken a Nifeli craft, a creature once shrouded in darkness has seen the light and joined our cause. She's transported all who were needed for the plan to go through."

Ignis' lips parted, about to inquire any further, but shut when he sensed a change in the air around him. The faintest of touches to the floor followed a misty noise swirling in one small area, and he knew Umbra had rejoined them. The ninja knelt in front of the others. "The ship has docked at the edge of the Disc. The hatch will not open until our arrival."

"And how long will that be?" the tactician asked, already on edge. Damn his sightlessness; if could see, he'd be able to lay his emerald eyes on the situation and come up with a failsafe, just in case one was needed.

"Approximately fifteen minutes," Umbra replied. "The Imperial forces we spotted earlier seem none the wiser to the ship's position; we should have no interruptions upon landing." Ignis wanted to pry the ninja for more information, but the latter had vanished in a black fog and returned to his post on top of the ship. He could sense the strain not knowing all the information getting to the others, except for Nebula, whose aura showed acceptance. Gladiolus, too, saw how the woman seemed satisfied.
with the report. Her eyes closed again. She offered a hand to both Gentiana and Cor, wanting to review the full details of the plan with them first, and she lowered her head in prayer. Ignis heard something chip at the window and laid his hand on the surface, feeling the sudden chill that spread through the glass. The Glacian was with them, sending the Oracle and Astrals new information.

Having kept her eyes open, Gentiana noticed the confusion on the others' faces. Nebula wasn't going to divulge the details, she could tell; that responsibility fell on her shoulders. "Eleven forms await us at the edge of the Disc. Eight brethren of the Shard, escorted by three humans..." Her brows drew in as she reviewed what she'd been told. "...Wait. I do not understand."

Cor grit his teeth. "Are you absolutely sure about this, Nebula? We've tangoed with the enemy once; look how that turned out. I'd like to avoid a second genocide."

The others didn't have to hear her name to know the marshal was referring to Atra. Unfortunately for them all, the last sight they had of her before fleeing Accordo was of the woman in chains, locked in a cell and awaiting a death sentence. And why the Oracle was talking about her - or who they assumed was Atra - being relevant to their impending operation was anyone's guess. "Despite the end result," Gladiolus cut in, "having Neb-..." He hesitated, remembering the pseudonym belonged to the woman in front of him. "...Having Atra with us for that short time proved more helpful than a hindrance. She saved Noctis' life twice, then that of the King. She'd fought alongside us until she went berserk at the gala." The guardian crossed his arms. "But why are you talking about her? I thought the Imperials captured her."

All eyes fell on the Oracle, who'd released the Astrals' hands and marched back to the map at the center table. "My daughter isn't our trump card, I assure you. She still resides on Nifeli soil, as far as I know." No one could help watching her facial features tense as she talked about Atra, especially Ignis, who heard the confidence in her voice disintegrate to one of defeat. None in the cockpit could imagine the pain she was feeling after learning of Atra's whereabouts, but Cor made sure he hid his concern and focused on the impending task. The light in the sky was swallowed by darkness during their flight, the timing of it even more worrisome. If things were to continue at that rate, it'd only be a few weeks before the world was enveloped in shadows and overrun with daemons. "The trick up my sleeve is probably the only Nifeli any of us could trust right now. As much as I'd prefer someone from Lucis or Solheim, that isn't possible." Nebula backed away from the map, her hand dragging off as she made her way to the cockpit entrance. "Prepare yourselves. We dock in five minutes." She left the room before anyone could add their input.

Nyx was the first one to rejoin the Oracle at the bridge. He watched her inspect the staff in her hand for a moment before acknowledging his presence. "Will I be filled in on the identity of this 'trick'?

"You can ask her when we meet." She wouldn't budge. Nyx didn't pry any further as the others fell in line, Cor staying behind to pilot and park the airship. The engines' whirring reached a high pitch as the sound lowered and the ship calmed to a gentle stationary float by the Disc.

Gladiolus stayed by Ignis' side when they disembarked and set foot on the Disc of Cauthess. He guided his friend past the remains of an outer gate and through the first inner gate, then a second. "Guess they're not very social," he commented, watching Umbra sprint ahead of them and vanish again. The shield glanced over his shoulder to Cor. "Did you know anything about him? That the dog randomly popping up wherever we went is actually a high-class shapeshifting Glaive?"

Cor averted his gaze with a grunt. "As with the case of the black-haired woman, I didn't want unnecessary information to burrow its way out and become a problem. His class of Glaive far surpasses Drautos' command." He figured he should tell them; at that point, so many secrets had been revealed, and adding another wasn't going to effect their safety any better or worse than it..."
already was. "Umbra is a member of a special clan of soldiers, named Praetendi Taedas. As the Crownsguard is the primary line of defense for the royal family, and the Kingsglaive are the army, the Praetendi Taedas are a select few soldiers used exclusively to gather intel on any activities that could be a potential threat to the royals. Each member has a unique shapeshifting ability to disguise themselves when the need comes, and with the tensions between Niflheim and Lucis ready to explode, Umbra was assigned to watch over the four of you." Cor nearly hesitated on the word 'four', remembering one of them didn't belong from the start. If Umbra had known Prompto was a Nifeli spy, Noctis would still be with them. "I myself have only seen him a few times in person, usually in the cover of a dog."

Ignis, too, wanted to question the ninja, to find out if he knew all along of Prompto's and Atra's origins, and the destruction of the Crown City. But the ninja's aura was gone, snuffed out almost as suddenly as an overwhelming heat sizzled in the air and under his feet. Lava geysers were close by, spewing molten rock at the edge of the walkway. His attention returned forward. The tactician had practiced what Nebula taught him in the forest, and started to get a sense of the lay of the land with his other senses. They'd walked uphill, then curved downward as the heat raised in temperature, but the one thing he couldn't stray from was the woman he knew was just ahead of him. Her shoes clacked against the rock, scraping every now and then to avoid certain areas. Through the sole blind eye he could open, Ignis began seeing ghostly forms move everywhere he turned his head; though they were barely shapes he could identify against a black void they were there to guide him. Ignis flicked his eye to his right, where Gladiolus was next to him, and saw a similar figment. If that was the beginning of seeing aura, he mentally concluded, then he would be able to differentiate everything within time, and the realization boosted his confidence.

Nebula's footsteps halted. She held a hand up for the others to stop. "This is where we meet." They waited patiently until three figures approached the group, and as the leader came closer, the Oracle exhaled with relief. "You are a true blessing," she told the woman now standing two meters ahead of her. She rested her hand over her heart and bowed to her confidant. "I thank you a thousand times for helping us. The world would be plunged into darkness without your assistance." Gladiolus and Nyx barely noticed the cloaked figure standing between them until he stepped forward and stood beside Nebula. "If there's anything I can do to show our gratitude, don't hesitate to ask, Aranea."

"Aranea?" Her name rang a bell as the Crownsguard and Glaive studied the woman standing before them. Her armor and signature lance proved she was none other than the legendary Dragoon of Niflheim, and the two lackeys she arrived with hopped to flank her. Nyx was on edge, a bad feeling swirled in his gut the moment he saw the red airship in the distance. It was one thing having Atra beside them when she was but a humble doctor; Nebula was talking about Aranea Highwind. "Nebula, are you sure about her?"

"One hundred percent," Gentiana replied in her steed. She sauntered to the front line and held Nyx's shoulder with a reassuring squeeze. "Nebula relayed every detail to myself and Cor. We were under the protection of the Glacian through the moment we arrived; there was no need to heighten your concerns."

"Are you certain?" Ignis asked. He'd heard of Commodore Highwind while memorizing all of the Empire's political and battle collection. She had a formidable record of fatalities in battle, and was an even better huntress when night fell. He also remembered what she looked like, as well as the sound of her voice. The tactician waved his hand ahead of him, using the vague vibrating shapes he managed to sense to lead him beside Nebula with slow steps. Gladio was perturbed when Ignis let go of his arm and wandered off. He kept a close eye on his brother-in-arms and trailed a god space behind, just in case anything happened, and content settled in his features when Ignis made it to the Oracle's side. He turned in the direction he believed Aranea to be. "What are your intentions, Commodore Highwind?"
The dragoon handed her lance off to Wedge, who scurried away to put it back in the ship. "Just Highwind. I resigned from the Imperial Army a long time ago."

"And you're assisting us, because...?"

She huffed, hating that she had to explain herself to the Lucians - again. "Because I like screwing with the Empire. They've been nothing but a thorn in my side for a while now." The tension in the air began to dissipate in the heat of the lava flow and Aranea approached closer, her attention on Nebula. The elder met her gaze, the blue finding no malice in the green staring back. The huntress shifted her weight when she stopped in front of the Oracle, a hand on her hip. "It was a real bitch to do, but I found all eight of them. Literally had to travel the world for each one." A smirk crawled onto her lips. "I'd normally charge four times what I do for a daemon disposal, since you asked me to seek out so many targets, but consider this a favor from one woman to another. Rather have you owe me than all of us become Mindflayer food."

Nyx intervened with a step forward in challenge, his eyes flickering between Nebula and the former Commodore. "Do you really expect us to trust you? After everything your army's done?"

"I never set foot on the battlefield. My only jobs were transport and daemon hunting."

"Bull. Shit." He still wasn't on board with this - not with receiving help from an Imperial army rat. Gladiolus seemed to share some of his unease, but Cor and Gentiana were blank slates, and Umbra had vanished to Etro knows where again. "Nebula, I'm really thinking we should beat it while we can." She didn't reply. He half-expected that with annoyance.

The huntress ignored the Glaive's banter and studied the rest of the group. "I see we have some Crownguard in tow." Her eyes lingered when they landed on Gentiana and Cor. "And you two... I'm assuming you're the Astrals I've heard of. Gotta say, I was expecting to see ten godly figures instead of regular people with all the lore behind your origins."

Gentiana offered a small smile. "Many tales have surfaced about us, but none got close enough to confirm a rumor." She exchanged glances with Cor, a silent conversation passing between the two, and pushed on. "May we meet them?"

"Hmm." Aranea raised her eyebrows and gestured her head for the lot to follow her and Biggs back to her airship. The drop door provided a ramp for the nine people inside to safely walk down from the vessel and onto the rough ground. Both parties halted, leaving some space between them as they sized one another up. The eight Astrals varied in their features and skin tones and body types. Wedge stepped aside as Aranea marched to the middle ground with Nebula close behind, and the Oracle continued on when the dragoon halted. Nebula met each of their gazes, studying the eight figures she'd rarely seen or never met, and gave a sad smile. Wordlessly, Cor and Gentiana joined the Oracle to finally meet the other eight Astrals. The others watched the scene from afar. If Ignis could find any words to describe the shapes and colors of the Astrals’ aura he'd spend months to find the perfect definition. The Astrals circled around Nebula and each laid a hand on the woman, and all their eyes closed simultaneously.

Europa, Astral of Bahamut. A woman who mostly kept to herself. Lapis, Astral of Ramuh. He was the youngest out of the ten of them; to know he'd willingly joined their cause brought joy to the Oracle. Materia, Astral of Siren, known in much of Virent and Lucis for her enchanting voice. Sentis, Astral of Carbuncle. His art represented his identity more than his face. Ardor, Astral of Gilgamesh. Nebula had never met her before. Neither had she met Neptune, Astral of Alexander; Zinc, Astral of Odin; or Quartz, Astral of Phoenix. Titan, Leviathan, Bahamut, Ramuh, Siren, Carbuncle, Gilgamesh, Alexander, Odin, and Phoenix. All ten of the known Astrals were together. Nebula opened her mind and shared the plan with them all, relaying every tiny detail of what they
were to do. Some of them voiced major concern of the Shard touching the ground, while the majority saw nothing else that could be done. They had to help their brother, and avenge their sister.

"Are you sure resting the Shard is okay?" Aranea couldn't help asking. "As an Oracle you know that thing can eat through everything it touches."

"It's our last chance," Nebula replied. "It has to work." Her eyes scanned the faces of those around her, memorizing every feature and every crease in their skin. "Let us set up next to the Shard." The Oracle motioned for the Astrals to follow her, then laid her attention on the rest of the group. "For your safety, I ask that you remain here. Standing too close to the Shard may corrupt your forms; your bodies are not made to withstand its energy."

With reluctance Nyx stayed behind and watched Nebula and the Astrals make their descent down the Disc. He hated being out of the loop of information, and didn't care whether it was from the King or representatives of the Archeans. He was a Glaive, and Glaiwes were warriors, not airship guards. As the others followed Aranea toward her vessel, she glanced over her shoulder and saw the Glaive warp out of view, and shook her head. "What a hardass," she commented. Gladiolus and Ignis noticed their comrade's disappearance, the former seeing the translucent blue wisps still vanishing from the air Nyx once occupied. "Let's hope that nerve keeps him from getting fried by the Shard."

Nyx found a perch near the Shard and shielded his face from the heat. Even so high above the lava it burned his coat with fiery licks; he wondered how Nebula would fare against the boiling air. He spotted the woman, staff in hand as she marched down the narrow path. There were some things he was willing to believe: the existence of Archeans and Astrals, the Starscourge and its effects on the planet, even the tiny chance that their world would plunge into an eternal darkness not even the sun could burn off. But when it came down to just waiting for the next attack, pacing the ground in boredom, he couldn't sit still. Maybe it was his stubborn mind, maybe it was the strong will of his heart. Either way he had to do something to make sure nothing got screwed up, and if that meant risking his life to find a good vantage point to keep an eye on the Oracle... He was already accustomed to laying his life on the line. Surveillance was no different at the Shard than it was at the safe house, or at the Citadel. They all came with similar risks he knew of long before. Nyx pulled up his hood and covered the lower half of his face with the attached veil, alleviating some of the heat's effects on him. He crouched and rested on one knee, his forearm draping over it while he watched the Astrals circle around the Shard. A faint chill swept over them, a sign of Shiva's presence to assist in the ritual if needed. His eyes narrowed as he observed the scene. They were tiny against the illuminating meteor fragment burning in its crater...though when he leaned closer to study the wisps of raw energy flowing off the Shard, he took note of some long, darkened areas of the mass, as if it'd been laid on a stand...

The dark spots moved. He flinched in a jump backwards and drew one of his kukuris in a defensive stance, feeling the earth rumble beneath him. Lava geysers spewed higher as the shaking increased, and that's when his eyes met the two golden circles staring back at him from the shadows. "Is that-" Cracks split into the cliff. Nyx leaped off his perch seconds before it crumbled and fell into the molten moat separating the ring he sat on from the inner where the Astrals stood, seemingly unfazed by the shaking. An otherworldly growl accompanied the tremors as the golden circles seemed to blink, and bronze lines spread from the gold in all directions, mapping what looked to be features of a face. One of the shadows pulled free from the Shard and extended to the inner ring, hovering above the figure Nyx assumed was Nebula. Her arms were above her head, staff in the right, her body motionless at the sight of the mass that looked ready to crush her. The bronze lines defined the shadow's shape and formed a rocky hand. "Shit!" She was moments from being flattened by the hand, and when he readied himself to launch forward, he finally heard the voice of Titan.

"Cur non venisti, mortalium?"
At the inner ring, none were aware of the Glaive watching over them. All eleven pairs of eyes stayed on the earthy Archean in the crater, cradling the Astral Shard on his back and away from the ground. Nebula bowed her head to Titan, grasping the staff with both hands. "Omnipotens premens Titana protector terrae, et non liberabit vos ad carcerem tuum. Multum enim satis diu cum Shard Infernian est tibi, et sicut aethereus tenebrescat sive Astral Trium tibi patienter expectat huius orbes erunt." The Oracle turned to her left and gestured a hand to the approaching Cor, his stare unwavering and directly into that of the Terrarian. "Fratribus et sororibus eius et onus illius ab umero tuo sed sublevabis cum eo, ut habent Glacian et dormiat cum tua verbera, et I. De lapide pretioso ornata viribus vestris non Quantum ad commodare."

Titan turned his head and drew nearer to the edge of the inner ring, Cor the only thing in his sight. "Et quomodo tu habet potestatem in fluviosque innar meteoron? Omnis terra transibunt debet tangere." Without a word Cor dug in his blazer pocket and pulled out his Shard remnant, the iridescent stone twirling from the string it hung on. The Archean's stare bore into the marshal. "Immortales vocant tu es? Regnum tuum: Cecidit, cor adhuc verberationem et adhuc stare. Eos oblivio demergere reliquum vultis?"

Nebula switched her gaze from the god to Cor, awaiting his reply. The marshal had spent over a century awaiting the day he'd finally bond with his Archean instead of watching the god carry the fate of the world on his shoulders from afar. He took a careful step forward. "Ut marescallus ego sum rex ab eo tenetur custodire. Astral Trium sicut et ego tenetur custodire hanc terram. Periculum est ne perdat nefande omnia cognoscimus." Nyx's eyes widened. He'd never once heard the marshal speak a single word of the Archean tongue in all the time he'd known the man. Hearing the difference in his voice - hearing Titan's voice meld with his - froze the Glaive in place. "Unus est: Maledictus adhuc vivit? Et quid de traitorus Infernian?"

"Ifrit secus se paratos coram omni comburere," Nebula replied. "Ut ipsum quidem aliud facere non possumus patitur proles."

The Terrarian's gaze was drawn upward when snow began to fall around him. He didn't have to guess it was Shiva when she appeared by Nebula's side and next to Cor. The Glacian floated between them and flew off the edge of the inner disc, laying a hand on top of his. "Quod si aliquando cognovi Ifrit abiit, frater. Est anima eius ab adtrectatum re Veneria nefande, suus 'serum auxilium perditis eo. Desiderium suum dilatare nunc devorabit omnia ad verbera. Hic modo in custodia tua corripiunt victoria."

The Archean's eyes returned to Cor, whose expression remained unchanged, then shifted to the Oracle, and the Astral to her right. Gentiana stood her ground and presented her Shard remnant. "Etiam draconis constituunt stabile habentes, maledictionis pugnat contra unum. Itaque non ab aliis." Titan lowered his gaze, then his eyes closed. "Unus erit tantum conatus est. Et tulit de manu mea ut in terram Shard fugerit omnis perii." Nebula gave a single nod and turned her attention to Cor. "It is on your shoulders now," she said to him, and gestured her hand for the marshal to approach the edge. Cor walked forward, his toes dangling off the side of the ring, and lifted the shard remnant in his grasp. The oracle took a step backwards and into the space he previously occupied. She raised her hands again and stared at the darkened sky. She drew in a long, deep breath. "Filii deorum, et praesidia Eois ore exibit gladius acutus vocationem. Pellatur ab exitio servare omnia meteoron et tutum." Nebula banged the staff into the rock face and the Astrals followed suit with their fragments, Cor laying his on Titan's hand. "Tame the meteoron, et posuit te liberum: Domine Terrarian, et Eos videre cum multo
exhausted, the immortals channeled their energy and infused it into the fragments under their hands, making the rock glow turquoise. A golden aura swam out from Titan's hand and enveloped Cor from head to toe. The ground shook again, knocking Nyx off balance. He dug his kukuri into the cliffside and caught himself before he could plummet into the lava. "Et sicut filii deorum testor, dimittete carcerem tuum, Domine Terrarian. Shard dimisit in manibus nostris virtus trahant praeter animos mortalium damnatione."

Her once gentle voice boomed and echoed across the Disc as the tremors increased in magnitude. Frost began to slip between the Shard and Titan as the Terrarian shared his power with his Astral. Cor struggled to remain standing and sank to a knee, the weight of Titan's true power pressing down hard. "Stand your ground!" she encouraged the Astrals. Titan's energy mixed with that of Shiva and the Astrals as a gap between him and the Shard formed, the meteor shakily hovering in the air. Cor grit his teeth as the golden energy seeped into his pores. His eyes flashed between blue and yellow, switching too fast to keep up with. The earthquakes grew stronger, cracks forming under where each Astral stood, some slipping into them as they struggled to fight against the Shard's raw energy. Lava flew high into the air. When enough space was between Titan and the Shard, the god began to slip out from under it. "Now!" The Astrals shot up, each taken over by a spectral form of their god leaking through their pores, and summoned their power to keep the Shard afloat. Hands raised to steady the magic, sweat dripped, and Nebula sent some of her own into the marshal before her. The assistance allowed Cor to fight the gravity the Shard pushed against as his god freed himself from underneath. Titan's body took on the golden glow of his energy and dispersed into countless tiny lights streaking around the crater before joining and ramming into Cor's chest. The Shard wavered, the Astrals struggling to carefully set it down. Nebula turned her focus onto their fragments and levitated them all. The objects swirled around the meteor and illuminated the same color before plunging themselves into the massive Shard. Shockwaves flew out from every direction. The Astrals and Nebula shielded themselves while still fighting to calm the Shard's wrath, feeling its burn even without touching it. The energy scorched their palms but they never pulled back. Each fragment re-emerged from the meteor, attached by an ethereal string, and held it as it was slowly lowered onto a barrier Nebula began to craft with the help of Shiva.

Everyone held their breath when the Shard made its descent to the ground. It moved slowly and shuddered in the Astrals' magical hold on it. The tremors began to calm. Nyx, having been tossed backwards and onto the far side of the outer ring's edge, crawled back to the inner edge and watched the scene with awe. The ground shook one last time with a gentle rumble when the Shard was finally laid down, the shaking no more. The Astrals' fragments unraveled from their ethereal strings and returned to their owners, each bearing a vibrant glow and pulsing with a portion of the Shard's raw energy. Nebula panted, feeling the effects of extensive concentration hit her hard. She wiped sweat away from her brow and observed their work, noting the success of her risky plan. The barrier, infused with the magic of each Archean, sang a gentle tune as it suspended the meteor mere inches above the rocky surface. As she stood up and nodded her thanks to Shiva, the Oracle's attention was drawn to the man standing in front of her, flexing his hands as if testing his muscles and nerves. From his perch Nyx couldn't hear the words that followed, but he swore he saw a golden glint flash in Cor's eyes. The group returned to the outer ring after they had a moment to rest and regain their strength. A couple of the Astrals helped carry Nebula back to the airships, an arm slung around each of their necks. She was completely drained, though she refused to admit it, even as Nyx rejoined them on their way back. Eyes closed, the Oracle shook her head with a smirk on her face. "Your curiosity could have been your end, Nyx."

The Glaive sighed. "I figured you knew I was watching nearby," he replied. "But I came out unscathed-" His breath caught when a pain surged through the scraps in his chin, earned when he was blown off of her perch. "Well, mostly." He scratched the back of his neck and grinned,
confident yet nervous, knowing what his fate could've been had things gone wrong and he couldn't stop himself from falling into the lava. His attention shifted when Cor followed behind her, watching his brethren assist her in her walk. Cor certainly appeared the same; even that golden glint in his eyes the Glaive had seen earlier was gone, leaving a pair of cerulean irises in their place. He looked the same, yet the moment their eyes made contact with one another, the younger brother sensed a shift in the elder's energy. Whatever he saw happening did something to the man's soul, something no words in his head could possibly explain. The men said nothing to one another and continued forward, bringing up the end of their group.

It was nearing the time dawn would normally approach, but everyone present knew there may be no sun that day or ever again if all failed. At least with the first step done there was still a shred of hope lingering in the air, cooling the crushing heat of the Disc. The hatch to Aranea's airship was open when they returned to the edge. Wedge and Biggs stood by the hatch ramp on either side of the dragoon as the Astrals approached, Umbra resting in a kneel half behind Wedge. "Glad to see nobody's melted," the former Commodore said to them with crossed arms. Her smirk wiped Nyx's away and he avoided her gaze, knowing she was just waiting to rub this in his face. She pointed her thumb behind her to the aircraft. "Your boys went to take a little nap. I'll give them another hour or so, but after that I've gotta be off. I've got an appointment I can't miss."

"Very well." Nebula bowed her head to Aranea. "Thank you again for all you've done for us."

"S'nothin'. Just had to make a delivery." Her eyes narrowed when she saw the exhaustion on the Oracle's face. "Why don't you follow their lead and rest a bit? You look ready to pass out."

Before Nebula could say anything, Nyx was standing between her and Aranea. "I've got her. No need for anymore help from you.″ Aranea rolled her eyes at him, more than fed up with his baby attitude. She didn't respond to him and turned back to her airship to wake Ignis and Gladiolus, leaving her right-hand men to make sure everyone else was comfortable and fed some rations to help them regain any lost strength. The Glaive took Nebula's forearm in his hands and relieved the two Astrals who'd practically carried her back to the ships, and led her back to theirs.

The final piece of the operation was in Ardyn's hands. That was made clear from the beginning of Lucis' downfall, and he intended to see his three-millennia plan through to the end. Ifrit was a mere bishop on the chess board, able to eliminate many foes but still somewhat limited in his reach. Iedolas was the king: his perfect puppet who only moved when he - the queen - wanted, and his final piece would soon be in play; he just needed a little push. The simulation room alone wouldn't do for what the Chancellor had in mind. What he required had much more to it than a simple trickery of sight, and if it worked well enough on Atra to trap her in an erotic delusion, he was sure to get through to Noctis. The political and military sects were busy going over the details of the Solhemnian invasion, which would commence the following day the second it was dark. Like Insomnia, the airships would be in place by nightfall to launch their attack in Gurgues. Magiteks would be deployed at every major city exit, with Malboros let loose as a secondary wall. Ifrit would make his entrance with a literal explosion and begin to burn everything. Solheim was known for a unique type of magic similar to that of an Oracle, allowing them to eradicate smaller daemons; and with the possibility of an entire nation of warriors wielding that magic, they'd have to be eradicated. That's where the second wave came in. Five Cerberus hellhounds would be unleashed in Gurgues' streets, and leading them would be the sorceress Lamia. And when the time was right, sick Noctis on them. The Lucian royal would be his trump card in devastating Solheim, and Virent across its borders right after. None of the other nations stood a chance with the King of Light under his thumb.

But first, he had to make the Lucian monarch a little more compliant.
With a single wave Magiteks unlocked the Prince's cell. Half aware and still dazed from sleep, Noctis had no time to react when the drones kicked him into the adjacent wall. The breath knocked out of him, he was unable to resist when his arms were restrained and he was forced to stand. His knees shook, weak from all the running and overwhelmed from the dreams. He'd begun to remember the events that transpired in his unconscious mind but couldn't tell if they were just dreams or if they'd really happened. The only factor that held true was Ardyn, looming over the Prince as he had in each of their encounters, bearing the same aura that made his skin crawl. The feeling resurfaced when they stared into each other's eyes and the Chancellor smiled at his prisoner. "Have a nice rest, Your Highness?" Noctis snorted at the Chancellor's feigned concern and refused to reply. Ardyn nodded at his silence and bowed his head as he spun around, his back to Noctis, and paced away. "I wish you'd change your mind and comply; it'd end your suffering so much faster. But if you'd rather play hard to get, I guess I have no choice but to play along. After all, that's what Atra tried...and now she's one of us." The Prince had seen Atra for a split second, right before the start of the parade. He'd tried calling out to her, pleading for her help, but the former doctor only stared and listened to the babble pouring from his mouth. That's when it dawned on him that she wasn't Dr. Nebula Ardere anymore. Whatever Ardyn had done to her morphed the woman's mind into something sinister. The light was gone from her eyes, and the power he was able to sense radiating from Atra was off the charts. She'd become Lamia in body and spirit.

"How?" Atra's will to take down Niflheim and save Lucis was strong, one of the strongest he'd seen from an outsider. Her resolve had been on par with that of a Kingsglaive. "What did you do to her?"

The Chancellor chuckled. "I haven't done a thing to her. I simply guided her out of the darkness and showed her the truth of this world. And when her mind was reformed, she expressed her gratitude to me... And let me tell you, she was very grateful for my saving her." The devious grin that spread across the man's face made Noctis nauseous. "Who would've thought she could be so passionate with more than just her mind?" The rage in Noctis built and he charged forward, fighting the Magiteks' hold on him, until a third came up behind him and struck the back of his head. The Prince fell face-down when the drones released him and coughed, feeling his head throb. "No need to be jealous, my liege. You wouldn't want to upset your Princess, now, would you? I may be cruel, but even I wouldn't want to upset the love of my life." All Noctis could do was sneer at the Chancellor, who grinned at the Prince's stubborn resolve, and the elder began to walk down the hall. The Magiteks dragged Noctis behind him, paying no mind to the Prince's futile efforts to set himself free from their iron grip.

Noctis growled and grunted, fighting the drones to free his arms. "Where are you taking me?"

"Patience, young King," Ardyn warned, keeping his focus ahead of him. "All the answers will come in due time." They reached the corner of the hallway, and as they rounded the corner, those walking were stopped by the sight of a white dog.

"Pryna!" Relief washed over Noctis at the sight of Luna's dog. The canine had been in his dreams since his sudden departure from Altissia, dreams he'd only just remembered. Ardyn's mouth warped into a frown at the sight of her gray eyes staring into his. He didn't know why at that moment, but seeing the Oracle's mutt glaring at him, standing in his way and looking ready to pounce, irked him. A grunt left the Chancellor's throat and he waved his hand down, signaling for the robotic husks to fire at her. "NO!" Noctis seized the opportunity and ripped free from their hold. He twisted his wrists and turned the Magiteks over, tearing their arms from their bodies, and tossed them aside like trash. Ardyn spun around and watched the Prince escape his drones, only to feel teeth sink into the flesh of his throat and yank him to the floor. Pryna growled and snarled, baring her teeth as she shook her head back and forth, separating his flesh further. She released the Chancellor's throat for a brief second before turning her attention to Noctis. The dog leaped to the young monarch's ankle and bit into the bracelet locked around him. The metal was destroyed in an instant, leaving Noctis in awe.
and unable to fathom how a dog's jaw had the strength to destroy steal, but his curiosity vanished when a mass of dreadnoughts appeared from around the corner of the hallway. Pryna barked for him to follow and ran in the opposite direction.

Noctis went after the canine without hesitation. The Megiteks began shooting and he ducked left and right to avoid the gunfire. He didn't know where he was running. Unlike the dream when he escaped the cell the first time, his surroundings didn't transform like he'd warped into another dimension. The halls remained halls, even as they lit up and began to look less like a laboratory. At some point he was running up flights of stairs, following Pryna without thinking, sensing the dog knew some way out. "How did you even get here?" Noctis asked the dog, not expecting an answer back. Seven flights later they dashed around another set of corners, and the Lucian found himself in halls crafted from bright beige and white marble, his clothes somehow torn from his escape. Sunlight poured in from the large windows on the left side, leaving him to wonder how many days he'd been trapped underground. Compared to Insomnia and the Citadel the halls of Gralea's Imperial Palace was an aging monument, looking ready to crumble at the drop of a pin. And the pillar nearest him began to crack when the floor shook once, twice, and the shaking continued, vibrating the entire hallway. Low stomping sounds echoed into wailing growls, a snarl much louder than Pryna's, and the dog took on an offensive stance, her tail puffed and hairs on the back of her neck standing up. Noctis sensed whatever danger was approaching and summoned his sword, just as a Behemoth rounded the corner and sniffed the air, detecting their presence. The monster uttered an unearthly growl and lowered its head as it focused on the targets before it. Pryna stood her ground against the creature, and when it started to charge at them, Noctis warped between them and swung the sword at the beast. The Behemoth snapped at him and he evaded its bite, ducking just under its jaw and striking its chin. The Behemoth pulled back. Noctis switched hands and took a step back as the beast readied another attack. He swiped at the monster, stepping backwards a second time to avoid its claws, which tore through the front of his shirt and left it in tatters. It pulled its paw up and swiped down to crush the Prince, only to miss its target as he rolled out of the way and slashed at its throat. The beast's blood sprayed onto the wall next to it. It backed away momentarily and clawed at the tile floor. Noctis noticed and turned away, and threw his sword toward the farthest window to warp away. The blade stuck into the wall halfway down the hall and flaming flecks flew off his skin as he vanished, but his body never left the spot and the warp was disrupted. He couldn't register what had happened until he was thrown into the opposite wall by the Behemoth's paw swiping at him. He crashed onto the floor, dazed, blood dripping from a gash on his forehead when he shook off the shock of being hit. What went wrong, he wondered. Pryna barked, pulling his mind from his trance, allowing him to avoid getting stepped on by the threat still roaring next to him. Noctis rolled to his feet and launched forward, following the dog once again, until he realized Pryna was running straight toward a mirror. "Pryna, stop!" he ordered, but the dog ignored him and jumped straight into the glass, instantly vanishing. "The hell?" The Behemoth was right behind him. Noctis saw no other choice and leaped forward, right into the mirror, and was shocked to feel a ripped surround him instead of an impact against glass.

Noctis rolled out when he passed through the passage, still not understanding what had happened, and found himself outside in the dark. Flood lights illuminated the compound he stood in, surrounded by Magiteks and every kind of Nifeli war equipment imaginable. Pryna was nowhere to be found. "Pryna!" Noctis called out, and a second later he was surrounded by Magiteks, all pointing their firearms at him. The Prince summoned his lance and twirled it in his grasp, deepened his stance, and pointed the bladed tip at the soldiers. They began to close in on him. As he prepared to launch something tingled through his hands. The lance fell apart into dust and dissipated in the air. He stared at his hands in dismay and willed the weapon to reappear, but nothing happened. His eyes widened at the same moment he heard the soldiers cock their guns. Noctis flipped backwards and evaded the first round of artillery. He ran and hid, thoughts jumbling as his mind raced, trying to think of a plan to escape. Midway through his thoughts a drone spotted him and aimed at his head, only for the husk
to get knocked down when he kicked its face in. He grabbed its gun and shot through the drone's breastplate to destroy its motherboard. Noctis marched on when he was confident the Magitek was dead and continued his assault on the compound, shooting out the flood lights and any other soldiers he encountered. A walker unit awakened when he found Pryna and took off after them. He slid under its legs before it could crush him and shot the underside. Behind it he hopped backwards and continued firing, only stopping when a barrage of bullets flew from the machine and struck his shoulder. Noctis dropped the gun and ignored what little remained of his shirt, pushing his focus onto figuring out how to bring the walker down. Pryna leaped over a crate, narrowly avoiding being stepped on by the walker and providing a good distraction for Noctis to swing a found chain around one of the machine's arms. The chain wrapped around four times, and he attached the other end to a wheel on the side of a communication tower. He slammed the side of his fist on a button that pulled on the chain and reeled it in, forcing the walker against the tower until its metal structure began to crumble. Noctis jumped from the tower before it crashed on top of the walker, immobilizing it. Panting, the Lucian stared at the walker until he was sure it wouldn't move, and when his gaze left the hunk of metal, he spotted Pryna again. The dog was laying on the ground in the middle of the compound, completely motionless. Noctis' heart dropped. "PRYNA!!" The Prince ran to the dog's side and knelt beside her, hands hovering over her body as they shook. Thunder rumbled in the sky. "PRYNA!!"

Everything around him began to burn. Noctis pulled his eyes from Pryna for one second, enough for him to register the change in the environment. Gone were the towers and machines making up the Nifeli compound; instead there were crumbling trees, jagged rocks, and Cerberus surrounding them as far as the eye could see. They snarled and stared, fire erupting from every mouth, and when he stood up Noctis found Luna's trident in his grasp. He couldn't understand what was happening anymore. Was it another dream? With the extreme heat emanating from each mouth of the hellhounds, it couldn't be. But how else could he have acquired Luna's trident?

"Noctis!" His head whipped in the direction of the voice calling his name. Luna stood a couple of yards away, Ardyn behind her with his arm around her neck to keep her in place. The Chancellor grinned at the Prince and didn't utter a word, and only moved when Noctis charged at him, the trident's prongs pointed his way. Luna said nothing else when Ardyn's forearm pressed on her throat, and that's when Noctis snapped. He ran and jumped in the air, propelling the trident toward Ardyn's head, and his eyes widened when both of them vanished. Luna was gone but Ardyn reappeared on the other side of the enclosed field, beckoning to him with open arms as if challenging the Prince. He finally saw his chance after Ardyn evaded him for the ninth time and he swiped the man's feet out from under him. Ardyn fell hard onto his back, scrambling backwards as Noctis loomed over him, seemingly powerless under the threat of the trident pointing to his heart, until the prongs plunged into his chest. Ardyn froze, his breath stolen, and his body fell limp under the Prince. Noctis panted, relief washing over him faster than he could handle, and he let the trident drop to the ground. He wiped sweat from his forehead, and when he could see again, his entire world crashed to a halt.

The tan skin and burgundy hair of the Nifeli Chancellor were gone, replaced by a blonde ponytail and creamy skin covered by white stained red, and Noctis' eyes widened. Lunafreya lay motionless where Ardyn had seconds before, limbs splayed and head slumped to the side. "...L...Luna..." Noctis dropped to his knees, body trembling at the sight of his beloved laying before him. "LUNA!!"

Something in the air shifted. Turning to his right, Noctis no longer saw Pryna laying dead on the ground, but a skinny, malnourished dog coated in charcoal dust trotting away to a figure standing beside a crumbling tree. a hand reached out and pet its head, paying no mind to the animal snarling or the beady orange eyes glaring at Noctis. He couldn't tell who it was petting the dog's head, but the voice was all too familiar to him. "It seems the naive Prince has found his way back to me. It's
about time, young Caelum. Have you finally realized the error of your ways?" Noctis' gaze drew upward and stared at the figure, only seeing two glowing orange spheres staring back, tears threatening to run down his cheeks. "As I told you once before, it is by your hand that chaos shall run free. You did not believe the evidence laid out before you the first time; alas, I'm forced to show you what future awaits if you do not heed my warning. Like your father, love has prevented you from seeing the truth."

"Luna..." Noctis repeated, before turning his attention to the figure standing in the shadows. "What have you done to her?"

"It's not what I've done to the Oracle," the voice continued, its form stepping out of the shadows, "but what will happen if you stand by and do nothing." The Prince's jaw dropped when he saw the identity of the one speaking. The figure, the one that once had Atra's face shortly before melting into a murky purple blob, now wore that of the Prince, though his eyes reflected the same ominous aura as the hellhound standing beside him. "Your heart has been weakened by love, young Caelum. The power that once swam through your veins has dried up and left you nothing more than an empty shell struggling to battle even the simplest enemies. Why else would you allow your enemies to conquer you so easily?" Noctis opened his mouth to protest but was stopped by a flame erupting between him and the figure. "Do not deny the truth. Love is what led to Regis' demise, and soon it will be your downfall. The first Caelums were never so weak; I wonder what has softened them after all these years. The proof is right in front of you." The figure's hand gestured to Luna's body. "Not only have you failed to save your love and your country, but you've so easily fallen into the grasp of the Accursed One."

"Accursed...One?"

The figure nodded in silence. "Ardyn Izunia, Chancellor of Niflheim, bringing of the Starscourge and destroyer of light. The Caelum line was tasked with bringing an end to the Accursed One thousands of years ago, yet they've always failed, choosing the desires of their own hearts over all else. Look what such selfish desires have brought on to the once noble line. Your duty to protect the world has been shoved aside; as a result, you've allowed this world to fall into chaos." The figure watched Noctis crumble, tears streaming down his face, teeth gritting, hands trembling as guilt washed over him. "But despite the future to come, should your will prove strong enough, there is a way for you to fix everything."

All Noctis could think of in his moment of despair was the blonde woman currently dead in his arms, her head cradled against his chest. "I'll...I'll do anything."

The figure stood tall in front of the Prince. "Is it your desire for your beloved to live to see another day? To purge this world of the Accursed One and all evil that follows in his steps?" Without a thought Noctis nodded frantically, wanting more than anything to ensure Luna survived whatever danger would come. "Do you seek the power to crush your enemies and ensure the safety of those you care for?"

"I'll do anything!" he repeated, his voice raising an octave, his grip on Luna's body tightening.

"Very well." Noctis was offered a hand by the figure. "Take my hand, and you shall be able to protect everything you hold dear. The power you seek shall be yours. Become the king you were born to be." Without hesitation Noctis took his reflection's hand. He immediately lost his grip on Luna's body as a burning sensation swam down his arm and into his body. His veins and skin
took on a dark purple hue as the sensation traveled through him. Noctis grit his teeth and curled into a ball as he felt power surge through every nerve. The figure bearing his reflection melted into a murky purple puddle, and he suddenly realized what was happening. Noctis held his head in both hands and convulsed, trying desperately to fight against the invasive force despite knowing it was too late to expel the dark energy from his body. A scream erupted from his throat as he threw his head back, eyes clenched tight and blood boiling. His brain pulsed from the invasive force, and within minutes Chaos took over his mind, his will sucked away and dispelled.

In the real world, Noctis’ eyes opened. They were no longer the blue inherited from his mother, but a mix of amber and fire that burned hotter than the new power flowing through his veins. A maniacal laugh roared out of Ardyn as he watched the transformation complete, and his perfect soldier, standing in silence and awaiting an order, was born.

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