We Bought A Chocobo Zoo

by lil_tonberry

Summary

Gladiolus Amicitia is the single father of little Iris and Talcott and the recent widower of Niflheim's Aranea Highwind. Deciding to start afresh, he buys a new house. However, there are few listings he likes and the one he thinks he could call home happens to have a zoo attached to it.

Prompto Argentum is the young head keeper of the Three Valleys Wildlife Park and is one of the loyal few who remained since the zoo's closure. His hope of seeing the zoo reopened is revitalised when, at a chance meeting, he is introduced to the potential new owner: a handsome single father of two sweet (albeit overbearing) children.
House Hunting

Chapter Summary

Gladio is house-hunting with his two kids, Iris and Talcott, and a creepy, shady realtor by the name of Ardyn. In the process of bringing two stray chocobos back to their stables, Prompto meets Gladio.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“So what do you think?” The red-violet haired realtor makes a sweeping gesture at the empty space of the living room with his fedora. “Good neighbourhood, close to schools for the kids, connections to the central part of the city, great price for a newly renovated and furnished three-bedroom house; I think this could be the perfect one for you, Mr Amicitia.”

It had been the fourteenth property that Gladiolus Amicitia had looked at. By all accounts, this house, as prompted by the realtor, was perfect. And yet, it feels wrong. It feels like a house and not a home, not even a house with the potential of being a home. Still, if his children like it well enough, Gladio would grin and bear it, and he has had plenty of practice of grinning and bearing it.

Instead of replying to his realtor, Gladio looks towards his children, both of whom were wandering around the living room, taking in its unfamiliarity. “What do you think, kids? Do you think Mr Izunia is right? Is this the one for us?”

“Please, call me Ardyn,” he insists, his voice like Altissian silk. Gladio pretends not to hear him. His eight year old, Iris, hops off the chaise lounge with a scowl on her face. That alone is indication enough for Gladio to not accept this house, but to humour Ardyn a little, he waits for Iris to state her opinion. “It doesn’t feel right,” she says, squeezing her moogle plushie close to her chest with both arms. “None of this stuff,” she kicks the couch with her foot, causing Ardyn to cringe, “is ours. It’s like living in someone else’s house.” Ardyn frowns.

His youngest, Talcott, tugs on Gladio’s pant leg. He crouches down, meeting his son on a more even level. Gladio ruffles his hair. “And what about you, bud? What do you think?”

Instead of kicking the furniture like his sister, Talcott opts for a more creative way to express his feelings. He raises the cactuar action figure and points it towards the general direction of the room. Then he begins to move the arms rapidly and create shooting sounds with his mouth, as if to mimic the succulent creature’s thousand needle attack. Gladio chuckles and ruffles his hair again before standing up. “That’s a no then?”

“Why else would my cactuar be attacking it?” Talcott points out. Huh, fair enough.

“I’m sorry, Mr Izunia-“

“Ardyn,” he cuts in again, his amber eyes gleaming.

“…Right, Ardyn, uhh, I’m sorry, but we can’t take this house. If my kids aren’t going to be happy living here well…” Gladio trails off, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. Admittedly, he did
feel a degree of guilt for dragging the poor realtor all over Insomnia, in the exhaustive heat, to fourteen different properties, only to reject each one for reasons varying from: ‘too expensive’ to ‘I don’t like the wallpaper’. In truth, Gladio isn't ready to let go of the past that his home represented. He's worried that he might forget her if he did.

“No need for explanations, though I must confess, we only have one last property on the list if you’re still interested.” Gladio shrugs casually, not too fussed about it. “It’s a little out of the way, however, just nine and a quarter miles outside of the city borders in Leide.”

“Let’s do it.” Because really, what’s one more property for Gladio to reject?

Thankfully, Ardyn drives a company car while Gladio and the kids tail him in their own car. They pass the city gates, cross over the bridge, and eventually meet with the wilderness of Leide with its few green patches of life. Gladio didn’t like what he was seeing so far, nor did he like the idea of having long journeys to work and school. Iris whacks her moogle against the back of Gladio’s car seat to get his attention. The man would have jumped, had it not been for years of practice and the rear view mirror. “Are we going to Lestallum, papa?” She asks, recognising the route.

At the mention of the city, Talcott gasps happily, wiggling in his car seat. “To see the fireworks?” How Gladio wishes that were the case.

“Sorry, bud, maybe next time, alright?” He says, looking at his son through the rear view mirror. Talcott’s shoulders sink in disappointment and he falls silent with his attention on his cactuar and gigantuar action figures. Gladio sighs as he turns into a dirt road, making the journey bumpy as he followed the realtor’s car. Short-posted wire fences run along the sides of the dirt road, leading towards a large farmhouse that came into view. Iris gasps lightly, pressing her hands against the car window before turning to her younger brother.

“How Gladio wishes that were the case.

“Iris, sit back in your seat,” Gladio warns, earning him a soured pout but nevertheless, she listens.

“Chocobos, huh? I guess there’s a farm nearby,” he says, mostly to himself.

It’s not long until they come towards the approach of a large farmhouse. With a double garage joined at its side, the farmhouse itself was a very, very pale cream, with stone steps creating a path through the front garden and towards the porch. It has a very… cozy atmosphere to it, despite its large size. Gladio could see a porch swing and his thoughts drift to potential hazy evenings when he could sit down with a good book after he’s tucked the kids into bed.

“Don’t run off too far! Stay where I can see you!” He calls out to his kids, though Iris and Talcott already make a run for who gets a turn on the porch swing first. “Kids, huh?” He says to the realtor. Ardyn chuckles and stands uncomfortably close to Gladio as they walk through the garden.

“I wouldn’t know, I have none of my own,” admits Ardyn. He takes his fedora off and uses it to fan himself in the hopes of keeping himself cool in the Leiden heat. “Moving on, this property has been on the market for several years and as a consequence, the owner is rather desperate to sell it and so has lowered his original offer from two and a half million gil to 850,000.” So far it sounds pretty good.
Ardyn takes Gladio through a tour of the farmhouse and the more he sees it, the more Gladio is tempted. With its three bedrooms – the master bedroom having its own ensuite –, private study room, two sitting rooms, a large pantry and utility room, joint kitchen and diner, a basement, a double garage, and plenty of land around the property, all for a price much lower than he had expected, he knew that there had to be a catch. “Give it up, Mr Izunia,” Gladio says after the tour, folding his arms as they stand on the porch. “What’s the catch to this place? Nothing this good goes for less than a million.”

As Ardyn opens his mouth to answer, the unmistakable *kweh!* of a chocobo is heard, followed by fits of giggles and childish laughter. Most chocobos were docile and friendly, but on the one chance it wasn’t, Gladio races towards the source of the sound. “Iris! Talcott! Are you… okay…” his voice falls away and his steps slow as he comes into the scene. Two chocobos were sat on the ground, allowing themselves to be stroked by the children while a stranger stood a little off to the side, smiling fondly at them. So perhaps the chocobos are friendly, but that doesn’t mean that the stranger is. Gladio narrows his eyes down at him in intimidation. “Who’re you?”

The man seems surprised at the sudden gruff tone. “Me? I, uh-“ He rubs the back of his neck, chuckling awkwardly.

He has chocobo blond hair, with the front swept up, and has violet-blue eyes that Gladio would have considered beautiful if not for the circumstances. He is much shorter and thinner than Gladio was – though that’s the case for most people – but the sleeveless flannel shirt and jacket he wears revealed tight, slender arm muscles. And freckles. The young man has light freckles speckled on his face and arms, looking like stardust. Gladio admits to himself that he’s cute.

Seemingly gaining some confidence back, he extends his hand towards Gladio. “I’m Prompto,” he introduces, a bright smile on his face. Gladio accepts his hand and gives it a firm shake. “Prompto Argentum. I’m the head zookeeper here at Three Valleys Wildlife Park.” He stops shaking and Prompto wonders if he had said something wrong.

“Zookeeper?” Gladio repeats quizzically.

“Uhh… yeah? I work here? Dude, are you oka-”

“Papa, look! He likes me!” Iris squeals as one of the chocobos nuzzles his head against the girl’s hand. Meanwhile, Talcott is snuggled up to the other chocobo, tucking himself under his wings.

Prompto’s eyes widen slightly at the little girl addressing Gladio as ‘papa’. He did not expect someone as young as Gladio to have children but it was not unheard of. “Mr Dude, then…” he mumbles, his cheeks flushing a light red.

“Well there you are.” The two men’s heads turn to find the realtor approaching them casually, his fedora back atop his head. Ardyn smiles at Prompto who looks away uncomfortably before turning his attention to Gladio. “I see you’ve met Mr Argentum.”

“About that,” Gladio says, folding his large, muscled arms across his chest, “why’s he saying that he’s a zookeeper here?” Prompto was tempted to correct him, to say that he was the *head* zookeeper, but he figured that it wouldn’t have mattered to the man either way.

“Well it was the answer to your question,” Ardyn begins to explain, “the other reason the price has tragically fallen is because it’s part of a zoo. Well,” he chuckles snidely, causing Prompto to narrow his eyes at him, “was part of a zoo.”

“So can’t I just buy the house and not the zoo?”
A mischievous smile curls at Ardyn’s lips. “Sadly not.” There is nothing sad about his demeanour. “If you want to buy the house, you must take the zoo with it. However,” his smile widens, “once you have bought the property, the zoo is legally yours, meaning you may sell the animals and creatures that reside here, along with dismissing the loyal few employees who remain.” He cast a nasty look towards Prompto, whose hands curl into fists. Ardyn turns back to Gladio who seems pensive about the situation. “I hear the Galviano Arena in Altissia is always looking for more creatures to take in.”

For Prompto, that is the last straw. Unable to hold himself back, he exclaims, “You can’t!” Everyone, even the children, looks to the man. Gladio looks surprised while Ardyn silently glares at him.

Prompto clears his throat before continuing. “Using creatures for entertainment by making them fight each other is not morally right, it’s completely barbaric. We may as well be living in Old Solheim.” He turns to Gladio, and even places a tentative hand on his forearm. “Please,” he begs with meekness, “if you’re to buy this place and... sell the zoo,” the words are thick syrup in his mouth, “then please, do not sell the creatures to the Galviano Arena. Release them to the wild, sell them to other conversation zoos but please,” he says again for the third time, “anything but the Arena.”

Being touched by the man’s passionate words, Gladio unfolds his arms and places a hand on his shoulder. “Alright,” he says gently. “If it comes to it, I won’t send them to the Arena. I swear it.” Prompto relaxes at his touch and a small smile quirks up at the side of his lips in gratitude.

He looks back to Ardyn and he knows he’s overstayed. “Right, uh, I gotta take these chocobos back to their enclosure.” At this, the children pout and moan about how they want to stay with them longer. It was endearing for Gladio to see. Once Prompto grabs their reins, he tips his head towards Gladio. “Uh, good luck, I suppose? I, uh,” he rubs the back of his neck with his free hand nervously before dropping it to his side, “I hope to see you around. Bye kids,” Prompto ruffles Iris and Talcott’s head in turn before walking away with two chocobos in tow.

Prompto makes it thirty feet before he turns around again, cupping his hand around his mouth as he calls out, “I didn’t get your name!” Gladio chuckles as he cups his hands around his own mouth, calling back, “Gladio! Gladio Amicitia!”

“I’ll remember it!” With an apologetic nod towards Ardyn and a fond smile at Gladio and his kids, Prompto turns back and walks the chocobos back to their enclosure.

The moment he’s gone, Ardyn begins to apologise. “I’m so sorry about that man, Mr Amicitia,” He walks the family back to the front of the farmhouse to where the cars are parked. “He’s from Niflheim and you know what they’re like,” he says, as if it’s explanation enough.

Gladio scoffs in offence and folds his arms again, re-establishing his dominance. “My late wife’s from Niflheim. Is there a problem?”

Ardyn’s amber eyes widen and he begins to excuse himself. “Oh no, of course not, I merely said that as.”

Gladio lifts his hand up to stop him from speaking further. “Don’t bother.” He picks Talcott up, positioning him against the side of his hip before taking hold of Iris’ hand. “Come on kids, let’s go home.”

They walk back to the car, not before Ardyn calls out, “What about the property?”
With his back still facing him, Gladio replies over his shoulder, “I’ll think it over,” then straps the children into the backseats of the car. He drives away, leaving a harsh cloud of dust in his path as he gets further and further away into the distance.

“So are we buying the house, papa?” Iris asks, leaning forward in her seat, stretching her seatbelt.

“Iris,” Gladio says with a warning tone in his voice, “sit back in your seat.” The girl huffs and sits back, crossing her arms with a sour scowl on her face. “Why’re you asking? Do you like it?”

“Uh huh,” she answers. Then she tilts her head to the side in confusion. “Don’t you like it? Tally and I love it: lots of outside space to play, big bedrooms and lots of animals!” She squeals excitedly, a grin replacing her previous scowl.

Talcott nods so enthusiastically that Gladio worries he’ll make himself dizzy and sick. “Mr Prompto was telling us how they also have cactuars and even,” Talcott pauses dramatically, “gigantuars!” And like that, he bursts into a fit of giggles that the young father has no hope of calming down until the boy falls asleep.

“Yes?” Gladio says as he turns on to the main road back to Insomnia. “And what else did Mr Prompto tell you?” As soon as he asks, he regrets bringing it up, for the children go on to a whole burst of different creatures that the wildlife park had, ranging from coeurls to cockatrices to spiracorns. There’s even a behemoth, thankfully, not a behemoth tyrant as those creatures lacked any hope of being tamed but a real life behemoth would be a sight to behold.

Iris and Talcott seem to have fallen in love with the park more than the house itself, and after what they had told their father, Gladio admits to himself that it was the most promising listing they saw yet. Yet the drawbacks outweigh the interests. It’s almost ten miles outside of the city. And though Gladio has free fuel as one of the privileges of his job, having to commute almost every day already sounds exhausting, not to mention dropping the kids off at school five days a week. During the school breaks, he doubts he would find many babysitters who would be willing to travel to Leide. And Gladio would be living in a zoo. Not only figuratively but quite literally too. How would he be able to maintain it whilst upholding his job as a member of the President’s Secret Service? He already knows his salary wouldn’t be enough to sustain the animals, let alone the people employed to care for the animals.

Of course, he could always sell the zoo and remain with the house. But seeing how Prompto passionately spoke up in defence of his creatures stirred warm feelings in Gladio’s heart that he couldn’t possibly sell it and live with a clean conscience. Also, he knows it would break Iris and Talcott’s hearts if he told them that he would sell the creatures on. Not that he would have to tell them, but they inherited their cleverness from their mother and would find out one way or another.

By the time Gladio parks in the driveway of their home, Iris and Talcott are fast asleep. After carrying them individually to their beds and tucking them in, he sits in the living room, his eyes gazing over each feature of the room in the dim light of the lamp. Aranea never wanted to get a house, but Gladiolus managed to persuade her when they found out she was pregnant with Iris. Gods how he missed – misses – her. A whirlwind romance ends with a tornado of a death.

He takes out his phone and starts typing a text message to Noctis Caelum, the President of Lucis’ son and a close personal friend. ‘Hey Noct, you up for a coffee tomorrow?’

Almost immediately, a reply comes through. ‘Sure.’ Then another message bubble pops up. ‘If you’re paying.’ He adds on. Gladio rolls his eyes as his thumbs press against the screen to type a reply.
‘You’re the President’s son. You’re richer than I am.’

‘Doesn’t mean I have access to the national treasury. If I did, I wouldn’t be working as a teacher.’

‘Point taken. So you up for it?’

‘Sure, why not? It'll give me something to do and Cor will get off my back for having lie ins on Sundays.’

‘I’ll pick you up at 11 after I drop the kids off at Loqi’s.’

‘Sounds good, see you then. Night Gladio.’

‘Night Noct.’

Perhaps Noctis was getting more than just a coffee. But Gladio needed someone to talk to, someone who could make sense out of the whole thing and offer a third party perspective. Though Noctis wasn’t his ideal choice, he was his only choice.

-----

When Prompto brings the chocobos back to the stables, he sees Ignis Scientia refilling the troughs with extra gysahl greens to keep the birds sated at night. Before the park had been shut down, Ignis was the head chef at its restaurant, and now instead of feeding people, he feeds the animals and creatures in the park, putting his expertise to good use. “I see you've found our stray chocobos, Prompto,” he says, wiping his hands on his overalls.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Silence. “Ouch.”

“There was that case five years ago when you were first employed—”

“I thought we moved on from that,” Prompto whines as he leads the chocobos back into their enclosures. He gently removes the reins from their heads and hangs it upon a hook by the gate. Prompto strokes them lovingly, making sure not to ruffle any of their feathers in a way that would agitate them. "Guess what else I found besides the chocobos?"

Ignis did not skip a beat. "A sense of humour?"

Prompto shoots him a sharp, narrowed look. "Ha, ha, very funny," he replies sarcastically.

"Anyways, dude, you know that really creepy realtor guy that's been trying to sell this place for years? Redish violetish kinda hair? Always wears a fedora?" Ignis nods as he tips the last bucket of gysahl greens into the final trough. "Well, I think he might have a buyer. A young father about your age, if not a little older. He's got two real sweet kids. And I think he's seriously considering it." The older man almost drops the metal bucket from surprise but manages to control his grip on it.

"Are you certain?" He asks, an edge of demand to his voice. "This is not the first time you've said this, Prompto."

"No, no, I swear on the Six that he's really considering buying this place."

Ignis sighs and uses his free hand to rub the side of his forehead, as if trying to alleviate a throbbing headache. "It would be wise if we were to have a staff meeting morning tomorrow to discuss this further as this involves people outside of ourselves." Prompto nods in agreement. He finally leaves the chocobos to rest, closing the gate behind him. After double-checking the different paddocks and enclosures, Prompto walks Ignis to his car which was parked in the staff car park. It's a beautiful car
with a glossy black colour and a sleek body, more fitting to a city than the countryside; then again, Ignis did come from the capital city before he worked at Three Valleys Wildlife Park.

"You drive safe, alright? Roads are dangerous at night," says Prompto, his arms leaning against the hood of the car as he bent down towards the open window of the driver's side. "I mean it, Iggy. I need you in the morning."

Ignis smiles at the sentiment and then scoffs. "Only to cook you breakfast."

Prompto gasps, staggering back a couple of steps with his hand to the left side of his chest. "How could you accuse me of using you like that? Of course not only to cook my breakfast! But also lunch and dinner too."

The older man rolls his green eyes behind his glasses. "Goodnight, Prompto. I'll see you in the morning."

The car pulls away as Prompto waves at its retreating figure. There are many thoughts circulating his mind, but the main one that strikes him the most is his meeting of Gladio Amicitia. He repeats the name several times in his head. It sounds familiar to him. He has definitely heard the surname before, Prompto just isn't sure when he has heard it or whom he has heard it from. He's also uncertain that should Gladio purchase the listing and sell the zoo, that he would keep to his word and not send the creatures to the Arena. In truth, Prompto has no surety that there would be any future for his zoo, but he hopes, oh Six, did he hope.

Chapter End Notes

So not only is this my first ever FFXV fanfic, but it's also my first ever fanfic on AO3 so I hope y'all enjoy! It starts off slow just to build the foundations of the story but hey, at least Prompto and Gladio met already so not a bad start I hope?
Coffee with the President's Son

Chapter Summary

Gladio drops the kids off at Loqi's and receives an long-awaited apology. Noctis drinks coffee, not because he likes it, but because he thinks it's edgy. A diner breakfast ends on a downer.

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the wait. I had planned to get this chapter out yesterday but time kinda ran away from me. And I wanted to publish this chapter knowing that I'm satisfied with it, rather than rushing it and giving you guys a lower quality chapter. So tah dah! Hopefully y'all enjoy this chapter. I realise how slow this is progressing but things start to finally pick up in the next chapter.

Oh and there's mentions of sexual harassment but nothing explicit.

“You two be good to your Uncle Loqi, alright?” Gladio tells Iris and Talcott once he parks the car. Then he turns around to face his children in the backseats, resting his hand on the passenger seat. “I mean it. No throwing any cactuars,” he casts a look to Talcott who is suddenly very interested in the seatbelt, avoiding eye contact, “or moogles in the house.” Iris doesn’t even meet her father’s gaze, and looks out the window instead. “Iris? What’s up, sweetheart?”

“Iris didn’t want to leave him alone. After losing her mother, Iris is afraid of losing her father too and so compensates by demanding to be at his side whenever it was possible. Gladio smiles sadly and reaches out to his daughter, taking hold of her small hand. “Hey, I won’t be gone long. I promise.” He could tell by the look on Iris’ face that she didn’t believe him. “If you’re lucky, I might just buy some Crow’s Nest takeaway when I come to pick you up…” he trails off. Talcott looks up with his eyes wide at the mention of the fast food restaurant.

“You’ll get the Kenny Crow Kid’s Meal?” He asks, unable to stop the bright grin spreading on his face.

Gladio purses his lips in thought. “Maybe, I might. It all depends on your behaviour.”

While Talcott mutters to himself about remaining well-behaved for Uncle Loqi, Iris narrows her eyes at her father, her arms folding across her chest. “You’re bribing us,” she accuses. Gladio blinks. How did she know what the word ‘bribe’ meant? Seeing the confusion on his face, Iris continues, holding her head high with pride. “Mr Caelum taught me that word.”
Gladio makes a mental note to ask Noctis about it later.

“Is it working?” He asks.

“What is?”

“The so-called ‘bribing’,” Gladio replies, using his fingers for air quotations.

Iris stares down him down for several long minutes before she turns away and mumbles, “Maybe.”

It’s enough for Gladio. The three of them step out of the car and walk into the apartment complex. After passing thirty floors to the penthouse via the elevator, they stand in front of the apartment door, ringing the doorbell once and waiting.

Moments pass, and the door finally opens, revealing a young man wearing black slim-fitting jeans with a light grey sweater. Loqi leans against the doorframe, folding his arms across his chest with a small smile on his lips. “Well, well, what do we have here?” He crouches down to the children’s level and the smile widens. “My favourite niece and nephew, come on, give your uncle a hug.”

Talcott almost pushes Loqi over with his hug, causing the both of them to laugh. Iris is a little hesitant, choosing instead to hug the moose plushie that she brings everywhere. Loqi looks up to Gladio in concern and he simply nods in understanding. The younger man stands to his feet and opens the door wider. “Alright, you two go on in. You know where the snacks are and the TV remote’s on the coffee table.” Talcott has no hesitations and runs inside the apartment without qualms. Iris, on the other hand, clings on to Gladio’s leg, refusing to let go.

Gladio sighs. He pats her head gently before crouching down, removing her hands and holding them. “Hey,” he says softly, “I’ll be back as soon as I can. But papa’s gotta get some stuff sorted out. So I need you to be a big girl and look after your brother for me, okay? Do you think you can do that for me, sweetheart?”

“I… I think so, papa,” she answers quietly, her moose muffling her words slightly. Then Iris throws her arms around Gladio’s neck, pulling him into a tight hug before turning around and walking into the apartment. Loqi waits until he hears cartoons playing on the TV before he closes the door behind him, allowing some privacy for himself and Gladio.

“She seems to be getting better,” he says insightfully as he leans against the door with his hands in his pockets. “Four months ago, she was kicking and screaming if you ever left her sight or if you left her alone.” Gladio breathes deeply, thinking back to the raw months when Iris would wake up crying for her mother and when she would panic whenever Gladio left the room without telling her where he would go. Iris has come far since then. “She’s a strong kid, you know. Takes after her mother,” Gladio chuckles at that, “and her father,” he adds.

“Was that a compliment, Loqi?”

“A veiled one, yes.” Loqi was – is – Aranea’s younger brother. Being Niflheim’s Ambassador to Lucis allows him to afford luxuries such as a penthouse apartment in central Insomnia. He and Gladio don’t get along as well as either one would like to, but they both share their love of Aranea. The very least they could do to honour her memory is to better their relationship with each other.

“Thanks again for taking the kids,” Gladio says. “They don’t act like it, but they love coming here. Being at home makes them sad because it reminds them of her.”

Loqi shrugs. “It’s the least I can do.” A moment of silence passes and Gladio wonders if he should take his leave. Then Loqi clears his throat, an indication he wants to continue on. “Listen, Gladio, I,
er-“ he clears his throat one more time. “I wanted to say I’m sorry. For everything. I know when you and ‘Nea first married, I was somewhat unsupportive.”

Gladio raises an eyebrow and just manages to stifle his scoff. “Somewhat?”

The blond narrows his eyes at him. “Fine. I was completely and utterly unsupportive of your marriage. I didn’t understand why she would marry a Lucian, let alone a Lucian who worked personally with the President. And then the kids came along and I buried myself deeper in my work to put more distance between us; to give myself an excuse to not visit for Christmas or for their birthdays.” Gladio’s heart clenches at the memory of Aranea breaking the dining table when Loqi called to cancel his plans to meet with the family for Iris’ fourth birthday. Loqi’s gaze fall to the floor, unable to look at Gladio in the eyes. “I… hurt my sister in what I did. And worse, I hurt her family by doing what I did. As much as I want to, I can’t turn back time and change things. All I can do now is be the uncle that my nephew and niece deserve, and be the brother-in-law I should have been to you from the very beginning.”

Gladio remains silent, unsure of what to say. Loqi looks up and for the first time, instead of youthful arrogance, Gladio sees sincerity and genuine penitence in the younger man’s face. Sometimes it’s easy to forget that the same night that Gladiolus and the children lost a wife and a mother, Loqi had also lost a sister. He reaches out and pulls him into a hug, despite Loqi’s aversion towards hugs. “It’s alright. I… I forgive you.” The words lift a load from both shoulders.

Loqi pulls away first, chuckling awkwardly as he runs his hand through his blond hair. “I should uh, get back to the kids. They’ve probably eaten half of the snack cupboard.”

“Talcott didn’t finish his chocobo cereal this morning so he’s probably eaten through the whole lot of it.”

“I’m not surprised. He gets his appetite from you.” Loqi turns around and twists the door handle, opening the door and stepping inside. He turns back and gives Gladio a single wave. “See you in a few hours, yeah? Stay safe.”

“With Iris and Talcott around, I should be the one saying that to you,” jokes Gladio with a grin. “See you in a few.” Then he leaves.

-----

It’s another half an hour before he picks Noctis up from his apartment, and another ten minutes before they arrive at the café. It’s in a quieter part of the city, away from the hustle and bustle of the centre and away from potential paparazzi who want to catch the President’s son in a compromising act. They sit in a small booth near the back and a perky waiter comes to collect their order. Gladio orders himself a large mocha with an anak and cheese panini, while Noctis orders a branded black coffee called ‘Ebony’ and a few Tenebraen pastries. Not that Noctis likes coffee. He only drinks it for the aesthetic appeal and for the desperately needed caffeine boost. Of course, Gladio pays for their meal.

As they wait for their meal, Noctis cuts to the chase. “So what’s up? House-hunting go well?” He asks, leaning back against the plush comfort of the booth.

Gladio shrugs. “Yeah and no. We went through fourteen different listings, Noct. Fourteen. It doesn’t help that the realtor was a creep.” He could feel his skin crawl at the very thought of the red-violet haired man. “Ardyn was nice but he was too nice, y’know? Like-“

“Whoa whoa wait a minute,” Noctis cuts in, suddenly leaning forward and waving his hands to stop
Gladio from speaking. “Ardyn? As in ‘Ardyn Izunia’? Redish violetish hair? Always wears that stupid fedora?”

“Yes…” Gladio answers slowly. “How in Eos do you know-“

“That’s the guy who sold me my apartment; great realtor but a real creep. I even got a restraining order on him.”

“Noct, isn’t that a bit extreme?”

“No when the man in question tries to force himself on you during an apartment viewing.” Noctis sounds oddly casual. He even smiles at the waiter when he comes to deliver their food and drinks. Gladio couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Several thoughts race through his mind: when did this happen? Where was he at the time of the incident? How come he was only hearing of this now? Noctis notices the tension Gladio holds in his posture and lowers the Tenebraen pastry back onto the dish. “Hey don’t worry about it, Gladio. He didn’t get far if that’s what you’re worried about. I know I look like a weed but those self defence lessons you gave me helped a lot.”

It isn’t the fact that Ardyn didn’t get far (though that does ease Gladio’s heart), but it’s the fact that it’s the first time he hears of this. Not only is he employed into the Secret Service of the President, but he’s also a close, childhood friend of his son. He thinks of Noctis as a little brother and the very thought of someone hurting him angers Gladio. “How come I’m only hearing of this now?” He asks carefully.

Noctis shrugs. It baffles Gladio how casual he is being with the situation. Or perhaps he’s overreacting? No, no. Noctis is definitely too casual about it. “You were in Tenebrae with my dad for a conference at the time. I told Cor about it and he was able to sort me out a restraining order pretty quickly without the press finding out about it. It was all done and dusted within the day.”

“Why are you so… normal about it?”

Noctis considers it for a moment as he takes a sip of his Ebony coffee. When he places the coffee back down, he says, “Not thinking or talking about it helps. Pretending that it never happened almost makes it seem as if it never did.” Gladio supposes he could understand. “Anyway, we’re here because of you. So enough about me, what’s up with you?” Gladio decides not to press the matter with Noct and follows his lead in the conversation.

“Uh yeah as I was saying…” he trails off, “I think I found the perfect house. Like seriously, you’d like it a lot. Large but cosy farmhouse, lots of open space and there’s even a small lake about five minutes walk from the house.”

“I feel like a ‘but’ is coming along.”

“But it’s in Leide. Almost ten miles outside of the city. Commuting will be a bitch and then there’s the case of the kids and school…” Gladio sighs heavily before taking a bite into his panini.

“You get free fuel anyway and on days you’re working late, I can take the kids back to mine and you pick them up when you’ve finished your shift,” Noctis suggests, his lips bearing a light dust of sugar from the pastries. Not only was Noctis the son of President Regis Caelum, but he was also Talcott’s kindergarten teacher at Palamecia Elementary School, a school specialising in children whose parents have careers within the military or government. He takes another bite of his pastry and moans in satisfaction. It isn’t quite like how he remembers it, but it’s close enough.

“I thought about that, but there’s something else.”
“There always is.”

“It comes with a zoo.”

Silence.

“Noct?” Gladio waves a hand in front of the raven-haired man whose pastry hangs suspended in mid-air with his mouth wide open.

Noctis places the half eaten pastry on the dish. “Did you say zoo?”

“Uh huh. It’s been shut down for several years and the only way to buy the house is to also buy the zoo. I mean, I could always sell the zoo but that means sending the animals away and letting go of the few employees who still work there.” Gladio sighs. “I mean, I was going to sell it. Then this guy Prompto made this really moving plea about not sending the animals to the Arena in Altissia and I can’t just sell it with a clean conscience, y’know?”

Noctis perks up at the mention of a name. “Did you say Prompto?”

“Yes…” Gladio answers slowly. “Don’t tell me you know the guy.”

“If by Prompto, you mean Prompto Argentum, then yeah. We went to high school together and he was the only real friend I had when my dad was first elected. Didn’t treat me like the President’s son, y’know?” Noctis chuckles. “We kinda drifted apart after university though. Occasionally we catch up but with dear old dad being President and all, kinda difficult to arrange anything without the paps finding out.” Noctis shrugs, and Gladio can tell from the quiet tone of his voice that he’s saddened by that fact. “He went on to major in animal sciences, specialising in ornithology, and with a minor in photography.” He drinks more of his Ebony, his face souring every time he took a sip.

“Well now I really can’t sell the zoo,” Gladio mumbles.

“How come?”

“Because you know the guy who works there.”

“I think you’re thinking about this all wrong. You’re overcomplicating things.”

“To you, everything’s complicated.”

“Well yeah, but I’m a kindergarten teacher, it’s my job to make complicated things seem simple. And from what I can see, you’re thinking about facts and figures.” Noctis takes another bite of his second pastry, savouring the sweet Ulwaat berry flavour in his mouth before swallowing in satisfaction. “Should I sell the zoo? If not, how can I afford to maintain it? How long will it take to commute every day? How can I afford a babysitter? Blah blah blah,” he says mockingly, putting on his best Gladiolus impression. “All these boring adult things like finances and economics.”

“Those two are the same things, Noct. And I hate to break it to ya but you’re twenty four years old, and that means you’re an adult.”

Noctis rolls his eyes and waves the man away dismissively. “Just because you’re growing old doesn’t mean you have to act like you’re a grown up. And you’re missing the point. The way I see it, you only have to ask yourself three questions.”

“And what questions are those?”
The younger man takes another bitter sip of his coffee, and then lowers the drink back down on the table. “Do you like it? Do the kids like it? And can you see yourself raising your family there and calling it home?”

Perhaps Noctis has more wisdom than Gladio gives credit for.

-----

Prompto wakes up to the sound of incessant, continuous door knocking. He groans and rubs his eyes with the heel of his palm before flipping the duvet over, exposing himself to the chill of the morning air. He shivers and he almost pulls the covers back over when he hears Ravus’ voice on the other side of the door. “Get out of bed, Prompto, or I’ll eat your breakfast. You have three minutes.” That’s enough to send Prompto stumbling out of bed, falling on his knees. He hears footsteps receding, and he assumes that Ravus had walked away.

He struggles to his feet and makes his way over to his armchair where an alarmingly large pile of clothes reside. Whenever Ignis comes in and comments on it, Prompto always says that it’s part of the ‘not dirty enough for the laundry, not clean enough for the closet’ pile. After putting on his Three Valleys Wildlife Park polo shirt – only a day old –, he grabs his utility belt and straps it on as he leaves his cabin, making his way towards the zoo’s diner. Unlike the rest of the six remaining employees who work at the zoo, Prompto lives in a small cabin on site, allowing him to keep maintenance on the zoo as they couldn’t afford security anymore.

The diner bell rings as Prompto steps inside, his boots squeaking against the laminate hardwood floor from the morning dew. His colleagues sit at the large table in the back of the diner, eating breakfast that Ignis had cooked. He takes a seat next to the chef himself.

“Well good morning, sleepyhead!” It’s Cindy, the zoo’s part-time mechanic, who greets him. Her perky greeting is enough caffeine to wake Prompto up in the morning. Ravus, sitting opposite her, rolls his eyes and focuses his attention on his bacon, as if hoping the sound of his chewing will drown out Cindy’s Leiden accent. He is one of those people who don’t have a good relationship with mornings. Though, it’s difficult for Prompto to say exactly whom Ravus has a good relationship with, aside from his sister. The only reason he stays at Three Valleys is because of her.

“Morning, Cindy. Drive up here wasn’t too bad?” He asks, pouring himself a cup of orange juice.

“Naw, I mean, paw-paw complained the entire ride up here but it’s not like he was the one driving anyways.” She shoots a playful glare to her grandfather, Cid, who waves her off before stealing Prompto’s cup of juice. He’s too intimidated by the old man to take it back from him.

“When yer my age, you get the warrant to complain about whatever you want until the chocobos come home,” Cid tells her before he downs the orange juice in one.

Cindy rolls her eyes. “Whatever you say, paw-paw,” she says, before returning to her breakfast. Prompto nudges Ignis at his side. “How come you didn’t wake me up earlier? I could’ve helped you with breakfast.”

“And risk burning the bacon like last time? I’d rather you not.” Ravus speaks up, though his eyes remain fixated on his breakfast, not needing to look up to see Prompto’s jaw dropping.

“I hate to agree with Ravus but yes, it’s best if you leave the culinary parts to me, though the sentiment is appreciated,” Ignis says. He takes a sip of his beloved Ebony coffee, murmuring in contentment as the rich liquid flows down his throat. The much needed caffeine is already beginning
to kick in.

“That happened one time!” Prompto squeaks, his cheeks tinting a light red.

“I believe it was five times,” Gentiana, the zoo’s secretary and bookkeeper, corrects. A sly smile pulls at her lush lips. “Not that I’m keeping count,” she adds, before bringing her cup of tea to her lips.

“Not you too, Gentiana!” Prompto whines. He hears the restroom door open and he turns around to find Lunafreya coming out and taking her seat next to him. “Luna!” He tugs on the sleeve of her shirt like a child to his mother. “They’re being mean to me and it’s not even nine in the morning!”

“Oh stop it, all of you,” Lunafreya scolds. There’s a very serious look on her face and everyone is silent. “I expect better from all of you. Nine in the morning? You’re all beginning to slack,” she tuts and a grin breaks out on everyone’s faces and Prompto whines again.

After ten minutes of brief socialising and eating breakfast, Ignis clears his throat, grabbing the attention of his six colleagues. “I believe Prompto has some news to share with us that may or may not have an impact on our lives. Please do remember that nothing is for certain and the information shared here is not to leave this diner.”

“Oh stop being so serious and dramatic and let the guy speak,” Cindy says, then she turns to face Prompto.

Six pairs of eyes fix upon him and the blond man feels warm under his collar. He’s not exactly the best with people and it’s why he usually lets Ignis do all the talking for him. “Uhh yeah, well, the basics of it, is that there seems to be a potential buyer for this place.” The mood around the table shifts after that. Ravus tenses his shoulders and clenches his jaw, while Lunafreya and Gentiana remain passive in their expressions. Cid raises his eyebrows and Cindy blinks, her mouth forming a small ‘o’ in surprise.

“Are you certain?” Luna asks evenly.

“Because the last time you got our hopes up, the deal fell through.” Cid points out, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the chair.

“It’s different this time. Not only has Verstael lowered his offer by over half, but I actually met the guy. He…” Prompto thinks back to his meeting with Gladio. He wonders if the man noticed how he blushed and stuttered around him. “He seems like a genuinely good guy. Big guy, bigger heart type of guy, y’know?”

Ravus groans and rolls his eyes. He pinches the bridge of his nose and breathes in deeply. “Great. Our hopes of this park surviving ride on your sudden infatuation with our potential boss.” Prompto blinks. Is it that obvious?

“Ravus, enough,” his sister chides. A silence falls upon the table, the seven of them looking between themselves or not looking at each other at all.

Then Gentiana speaks up, her voice delicate and crystalline. “You want us to be prepared, should he buy this property and not keep the zoo, don’t you?” Prompto manages a small nod. He would manage on his own well enough; he has enough savings to last him several months while he looks for another job. He isn’t sure how well the others would fare. Ignis would be fine. He’s resourceful and with his talents and skillset, Prompto is sure that he’ll find another place of employment soon enough. Cid and Cindy have their family-owned garage back in Hammerhead that they could work
full-time at. As for Gentiana, Lunafreya, and Ravus, he isn’t sure what they could possibly do.

Ignis clears his throat, attempting to cut the tense silence. “Now that’s sorted and… partially discussed, I say we get on with our usual business.” Everyone starts to get up at their own pace and before they leave, they stack their dirty dishes on a tray, before Ignis carries it into the kitchen. The blond head zookeeper is left at the table, staring at his calloused hands. Ignis pops his head out of the kitchen door for a moment. "And Prompto? It’s your day to clean the coeurl enclosure,” he informs him, before disappearing back behind the door.

Prompto sighs. He runs a hand through his hair as he heads out for another day of work.
He Bought a Zoo?

Chapter Summary

Gladio buys a zoo while the kids are at school. Clarus pays a visit to his son. Prompto gives Gladio a tour and introduces the zoo staff. Talcott falls asleep during Noctis' bedtime story.

Chapter Notes

Really really sorry about how late this chapter is! I've been really busy recently and focusing on coursework deadlines and I've also recently started a new part-time job so I'm trying to reorganise my life. But yeah, the chapter is finally out! And it's double the amount of words as the previous chapter so I hope I made up for it?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Cavaughan sun bears down mercilessly upon the city of Insomnia. Even the air conditioning in the Rabanastre Real Estate Office isn’t enough to keep the heat out. The words on the contract begin to merge together and Gladio gently slaps his own cheek to keep himself awake. Ardyn perches on the edge of his desk, a wicked smile on his face as he watches his client read through the paperwork. Gladio wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “Can I get you anything? Perhaps some iced water to cool you down?” Ardyn suggests with a purr.

After what finding out about what the man had done to Noctis, it takes every part of Gladio not to curl his fist and punch his smile down his throat. “Some space would be good,” he grumbles, shifting the paper in his hands.

“Well someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Cheer up, Gladio, you’ll be the owner of Three Valleys Wildlife Park and Conservation.” Ardyn says, but moves nonetheless, taking his seat behind his desk.

“The name’s Mr Amicitia to you. We’re not friends.”

Ardyn lets out a low whistle, and a light chuckle follows after it. “I stand corrected. Someone fell out of the wrong side of the bed.”

The man is dancing on Gladio’s last nerve. He’s silently thanking the Astrals that he’s on the last page of the paperwork. Taking a pen in hand, Gladiolus Amicitia signs his name at the bottom of the contract before setting it down on the table, pushing it towards the realtor. Ardyn takes the paperwork and skims through it briefly, checking that each signature is in the right place and all the necessary information is present. Several painfully long moments pass; Ardyn clears his throat and opens his drawer, taking out a set of keys, pushing them across the table towards Gladio.

“Congratulations, Mr Amicitia. You are now the proud owner of Three Valleys Wildlife Park and Conservation and all the buildings which come with it.” Gladio is quick to snatch up the keys and tuck them into his pocket. He stands up and looks down at Ardyn, his amber eyes darkening. The
man grins sleazily at him. “I see someone is very eager.”

“To get away from you? Yes, you would be correct.” The words are spat out and it only makes Ardyn’s grin grow.

“My, my, what have I done to warrant such treatment?” He asks innocently. Gladio clenches his fists and resists another urge to smack the grin of the man’s face.

With a deep breath, he relaxes his hand. “Are we done here?” Gladio asks gruffly, his eyes looking anywhere but Ardyn. The very sight of him fuels his anger. He could hear the chair scrape against the floor and in his peripherals, he senses that Ardyn has stood up.

“I believe so, Mr Amicitia. I wish you luck in your future endeavours.” Gladio looks up and sees a courteous hand outstretched towards him. No one could say that the man isn’t polite, even if his character is less than savoury. Straightening his posture, Gladio takes Ardyn’s hand in his and gives it a firm, tight shake. He sees the older man wince from the grip and Gladio smiles.

“Goodbye, Mr Izunia.” Then he turns on his heel and leaves the office.

As he steps into an empty elevator, he turns to see Ardyn smiling at him. “Oh and do give dear Noct my best regards,” he says as the elevator doors begin to close, only giving Gladio enough time to almost walk into the doors with the intent of storming back into the office floor and permanently disfiguring the man’s face. As it is, the doors close before he could commit assault. He punches the elevator wall. “Son of a bitch.”

-----

With plans to fully move into the house on Saturday, Gladio occupies himself with packing. Monday, he packs up the master bedroom and clears the attic, sorting items into categorised boxes. Tuesday, he clears half of the living room and half of the kitchen, deciding that he and the kids can survive over simple to cook dinners and take-aways for the rest of the week (not that Iris or Talcott would complain too much about that). Wednesday, he packs the other half of the living room, almost breaking two lamps in the process. Thursday, he puts away the rest of the kitchen items and packs the children’s bedrooms.

On the Friday morning, Gladio almost finishes packing the last of the bathroom essentials when he hears someone at the door. Thinking it’s the movers who’ve come to take the boxes, he speaks as he opens the door. “I’m pretty sure I asked you guys to come at noon- oh.”

“Don’t look disappointed or anything, Gladiolus.”

“Not disappointed, just surprised, that’s all, dad.” Gladio steps aside to allow Clarus Amicitia, his father and also the Head of Secret Service, to enter his barren home. He rubs his arms anxiously, wondering what he would say to him. When Gladiolus had married Aranea Highwind, a decorated Niflheim general, it had put a strain on his relationship with his father. But since her death, Gladio is subject to surprise visits from his father. No doubt that he’s checking up on him to ensure all is well. “What brings you out of your busy schedule then?”

“I came to see if what the Glaives said is true. That you’re moving into a zoo.” The ‘Glaives’ is a codename for the Secret Service; Gladiolus is a Glaive himself. “You cannot be serious in spending all of your inheritance and savings on a run down zoo.”

Gladio folds his arms across his chest defensively. “What’s it to ya? The kids love it.”

“And the kids love Kenny Crow but they’ll change their mind in a few years time,” Clarus retorts.
“Well they’re my children, not yours.”

“They’re my grandchildren.”

A sarcastic laugh escapes Gladio’s lips. He shifts his weight from one foot onto the other. “Oh, so _now_ you remember that you’re their grandfather? Where was this when Talcott wondered why his grandpa didn’t show up for his third birthday; where was this when Iris personally invited you to watch her ballet recital but you cancelled on; where was this when they spent hours baking a cake for your fifty-fifth birthday that you didn’t even show up to? _Where was this when Aranea was still alive_?” His tone mutates from sarcasm to anger. No matter how true his words were or how much they hurt to hear, Clarus remains unflinching. Gladio scoffs and walks over to an open box with his back to his father, grabbing masking tape and sealing it.

“Gladiolus,” Clarus begins carefully, “words aren’t enough for apologies.”

“You damned right they aren’t.”

“I have been entirely unsupportive of you and your family. And though I cannot do anything to change that—”

Gladio turns around with a hard look etched on his face. He presses the roll of tape against Clarus’ chest, almost using it as a tool to push him away. “Don’t say it. Don’t say, ‘I know I was an asshole back then and now Aranea died so I’m going to make it up to you by being the decent person I should have been years ago,’ because honestly, you need to start a club with Loqi.” Gladio turns back around and picks the box up, carrying it over to the other side of the room.

There’s a lethargic moment of silence hanging in the room, pregnant with tension; Clarus, unable to come up with a suitable response that won’t anger Gladio further, and Gladio, waiting for his father to say something. The latter caves in first as he sits down on the sofa. “You know, one reason I bought the zoo was because it reminds me of the camping trips you used to take me on when I was a kid. During the summer, you’d drive us out of the city and you just kept on driving while we listened to whatever songs the radio played. Sometimes I’d read and it always surprised you when I did because I never got motion sick.” Gladio smiles fondly at the memory, chuckling as he rubs the back of his neck. “We used to sit out and watch the stars and you’d tell me about the different constellations or you’d talk about the different animal calls that we’d hear during the night.” He chuckles nostalgically. “The good ol’ days… I want my kids to experience that too.”

“I didn’t realise those trips impacted you so much, I’m... I’m glad you think fondly of them.” Clarus sits next to his son, careful not to sit too close just in case he irritates Gladio to get up. “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you more of a childhood. You…” Clarus trails off, thinking back to the late nights he’d come home from work and he would see Gladio asleep on the sofa of their shoebox apartment, with a dozen empty Cup Noodles on the table. “You deserved better than what I could give you.”

“Dad, we had difficult circumstances and you did the best you could. I mean, mom _left_ us.” The twenty year old wound remains fresh and Clarus looks away, fixating his gaze upon the potted succulents along the windowsill that have yet to be packed. “She _chose_ to leave. She didn’t have to but she did. So yeah, maybe I didn’t get to go to university. But you raised a kid all on your own and gave him the best start in life that you could afford. That’s what I’m trying to do, dad. I mean, Aranea _died_. And like you, I’m raising my kids on my own. I’m not sure what’ll happen in the future, but if buying this zoo will mean seeing that smile on my kids’ faces for a least a few years while I’m sorting shit out, then it’s worth it.”

He pauses a moment, then Clarus places his hand on Gladio’s knee to get his attention, causing him to look at his father. “You’re a good father, Gladiolus; a better father and a greater man than I ever
hoped to be. And you’re wrong, you know.”

Gladio raises an eyebrow. “Say that again.”

“You’re not raising the kids on your own,” Clarus clarifies simply. “You have Noctis. You have Loqi. And you have me; just as I had Regis to help me when I was raising you.” The younger man stares at his father’s face for a while, searching for any sign of faltering falseness and yet, all he sees is sincerity and a plea to be trusted.

“Well,” Gladio says, getting to his feet then tossing the roll of tape towards Clarus who catches it effortlessly, “since you’re here, might as well use the extra pair of hands.”

-----

“Guys, I think I see the moving van!” Prompto squeals excitedly, peeping through the veneer blinds of the diner, practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. He turns around and brushes his hair lightly with his fingers. “Does my hair look okay?” He asks, eyes wide and cheeks pink.

“If ya want yer hair to look like a chocobo’s butt then yeah, it’s okay,” Cid slurs with a grin.

Prompto’s eyes widen more and his cheeks bloom from pink to red. He starts spluttering and frantically tugs at his blond locks. “My hair does not look like a chocobos butt!” He yelps.

Cindy rolls her eyes and steps over to the younger man, brushing his hair back to its initial style. “There. Don’t you listen to paw-paw, I know I sure don’t,” she says, flashing her whites as she grins at him. “And calm down. Your heart’s racin’ faster than a chocobo on Sundays.”

“I can’t help it,” says Prompto helplessly.

“Could it be, perhaps, meeting Gladiolus is making you so agitated?” Ignis offers. He, along with the others, are sat at the table closest to the double door entrance of the diner.

“Uhh, of course?” The blond splutters out, as if it is the most obvious thing. “He still hasn’t said whether he’s selling the zoo or not. Today’s our day to convince him to keep the zoo on.” Ignis holds a finger up and opens his mouth as if to correct Prompto on the meaning of his question, but then lowers his hand, deciding against it.

“And how do you propose we do that, genius?” Ravus asks in a bored tone. “I would suggest bribing him, but if the man can afford this place, he wouldn’t need the bribe.”

“Or,” Lunafreya begins as she sends a sharp look to Ravus who rolls his eyes, “we could petition to him the benefits of keeping the zoo on. Plead to his sentiments.”

Prompto shakes his finger at Luna, as if to say that he’s thinking on a similar line. “Yeah, yeah, exactly. I’ll take him on a tour around the zoo while the movers shove boxes in his house. Get him to meet guys while you do your jobs. I’ll have to be the one doing the persuading then…”

“I suppose that’s our cue to leave, everyone,” Gentiana says, standing up and tucking her chair back beneath the table. She walks over to Prompto, the heels of her thigh-high boots clicking lightly against the floor, and places a gentle hand on his shoulder, offering a kind, delicate smile. “Whatever Mr Amicitia decides, it will all work out for the better, Prompto. Good luck.” Then she turns and heads towards the door, her waterfall jacket blowing behind her as she leaves.

Next to leave are Cid and Cindy. The older man tips his cap at Prompto while Cindy salutes him with two fingers before shoving her hands into the pockets of her yellow jacket. “Yeah, like what
Genny said. It'll all work out, jus’ you wait an’ see!” She grins at the blond before following her grandfather out.

Then it’s Ravus and Lunafreya. Ravus is rigid, unsurprising for Prompto, but still, he places a hand on the younger man’s shoulder and nods as if says it all. It does. He leaves, running a hand through his silver hair as he exposes himself to the gentle breeze of the Leiden desert. Luna takes the younger man’s hands in hers, as if she is his mother, and he her child. “I wish you the very best of luck, dear Prompto.” She then kisses his cheek lightly before brushing down her dungarees and following suit.

This leaves Ignis.

“I hope you don’t expect me to leave… as this is where I am generally stationed,” he points out as he wipes down the surface of the counter.

Prompto chuckles. “Nah, you stay here. And I’ll go and meet Gladio.” As soon as he steps outside, it’s clear that the Leiden heat is particularly merciless and he wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Prompto almost goes back into the safety of the air-conditioned diner when he sees Gladiolus leaning on the barrier of the porch as movers transfer the boxes from the truck and into the house.

Wearing naught but dark grey jeans and an open shirt, exposing his bare, chiselled chest, Gladio practically basks in the sunlight with a gentle breeze blowing against his hair. He looks like a scene from every corny rom-com that Prompto has watched. The blond’s cheeks flush red at the thought.

He walks towards the main house, smiling and waving at Gladio who sees him approach. “So I see you’ve bought the house,” he begins, leaning against the pillar of the porch, arms folded across his chest in an attempt to look casual.

“And the zoo,” Gladio adds. “I decided I’m keeping the zoo.” Prompto blinks. Huh. That was a lot easier than he thought it was going to be. The surprise shows on his face and Gladio is quick to point it out. “Surprised, huh?”

“Did I make it that obvious?” Prompto asks, chuckling nervously.

“A little.”

“Well I’m pretty much an open book; feel free to read me any time.” That comes out more suggestively than Prompto intends.

“I do love to read,” Gladio admits with a shrug. Prompto is tempted to ask exactly what the man means by that but decides against it. The last thing he wants is to make things awkward between him and his now-boss by assuming that said-boss was flirting with him. Thankfully, Gladio clears his throat and diverts the conversation elsewhere. “You’re Prompto, right?”

Prompto looks down at his name badge then back up to meet Gladio’s amber eyes. “I guess so. I mean, that’s what it says on my name badge.” Gladio chuckles lightly and smiles at the blond.

Gladio shakes his finger at him then snaps his fingers, as if he has realised something, and he has. “You’re the guy that begged me not to send the animals to Altissia if I sold the zoo.”

“Oh.” Prompto is sheepish and he feels the heat creeping up past his collar and onto his neck. “You remember that, huh?”

“It’s difficult to forget the cute blond who defended his animals with such passion.” And now Prompto is sure that the heat has reached his cheeks, causing him to flush red again. Gladio chuckles
at the young man’s fluster, and finds his reactions both endearing and adorable. He truly isn’t receiving enough compliments if this is how he reacts to them. “Say, if you ain’t doing anything, you mind giving me a tour of the place and introducing me to the people who work here? It’d be good to know what I’m actually paying for and to meet the people responsible for keeping this place up and running.”

Again, Gladio takes the offer from Prompto’s mouth, and the blond is certain that the man is a psychic of some sort. “S-Sure! I’d be happy to! No one knows this zoo better than I do! Except for Ignis… maybe.” Prompto walks alongside Gladio, and realises the major difference in height between them. The man is huge. And that alone is an understatement. They head towards the diner first, the closest place to them.

“Ignis?” Gladio asks.

“Ah, he’s one of the people who work here.” Prompto tells him. A bell rings at the diner door, signalling their arrival. “He used to be the head chef at the diner here-“

“And pray tell, what are you implying, Prompto? Am I no longer the chef?” Ignis questions humorously as he comes out from the kitchen, wearing a chef’s white attire. His attention, however, diverts to the unfamiliar man at the blond’s side. Ignis walks around the counter and stands face to face, extending a hand to him. “Ignis Scientia, at your service, Mr…?”

“Gladiolus Amicitia, but just call me Gladio. None of that fancy ‘mister’ or ‘sir’ stuff.” He shakes Ignis’ hand, smiling at him. When he releases, he looks around the diner and lets out a low whistle. “So you run this joint, huh? Impressive.”

Ignis finds himself surprised at the compliment but welcomes it nonetheless. “Thank you. It looked much better back in the day, I assure you.”

Gladio shakes his head. “Don’t need your assurance, I believe ya.” Ignis exchanges a questioning look with Prompto who simply shrugs in response. A person like Gladio is certainly not what Ignis was expecting.

“You must be exhausted from the move and I doubt you have fresh groceries for dinner tonight. What is your preference? I’ll only be too happy to whip it up for you,” Ignis offers. Gladio turns, meeting the man’s eyes with surprise at the kind offer.

He shakes his head, already declining the offer. “Nah, don’t you worry about me. I got Cup Noodles to keep me going.”

“Dude!” Prompto exclaims, surprised at Gladio’s refusal. He stands next to Ignis, throwing one arm around the man and squeezing him. “Ignis is one of the best chefs I’ve ever met. I mean, I haven’t met that many chefs, or any aside from Ignis, but, he grins, “his food will convert you.”

Ignis chuckles and smiles humbly. “Oh Prompto, you flatter me.”

“Uh, that’s the idea, Iggy? Come on, keep up.” He releases the older man from his one-armed hug and punches him lightly on his upper arm. Prompto turns his attention to Gladio who seems amused at the exchange between them. “Come on, Gladdy, you can’t pass up an opportunity like this.”

Gladio laughs lightly, mostly at the newfound nickname, and nods. “Since he comes so highly recommended, why not?” He turns to Ignis with his mind racing through the different kinds of dishes he likes. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to make Prairie Style Skewers, would ya?” Ignis takes out a notebook from the inner pocket of his jacket and flicks through several pages; his eyebrows
“I believe I do. We should still have some anak meat and leiden pepper. Come by in an hour or so and I’ll have dinner ready.”

Prompto nudges Ignis with his elbow. “Is that dinner for everyone?” He asks with a cheeky grin.

“As always.”

“Great! I’ll tell everyone to swing by the diner for dinner later. See ya, Iggy!” The blond waves at Ignis’ retreating figure then looks up to Gladio, surprising himself again at the height of the man. “On with the tour then!” As the two leave the diner and head towards their next destination, Prompto points out different attractions (which had to be shut down due to shortage of staff), and explains the zoo system. He doesn’t talk for long, arriving at the workshop and garage.

A pair of legs stick out from underneath the Park’s truck and Prompto kicks the foot slightly. “Hold yer chocobos jus’ one minute! I’ll be right out!” The voice is muffled from under the vehicle.

Prompto leans towards Gladio and points to the person beneath the truck. “That’s Cindy, she’s the Park’s mechanic,” he tells him, “she deals with all our vehicles and stuff. She’s pretty amazing at her job.”

Cindy rolls out from underneath the truck, grinning up at the two men with a smudge of oil on her jaw as she stands up. She wipes her hands on a nearby cloth, tosses it on the hood of the truck, and then extends her hand out to Gladio who takes it and shakes it. “How do ya do? My name’s Cindy,” she nods behind her, “and the old man taking a snooze back there is my paw-paw Cid.”

“Who ya talkin’ bout, girl? I ain’t slacking off.” Cid comes out from the workshop and stands next to his granddaughter. “So you mus’ be Gladiolus, the new big boss ‘round here.”

“Yes, sir, but please just call me ‘Gladio.’ So what’s your job here?” He asks.

“My job is keeping the entire place ship-shape, which more than blondie over there does.” The old man gestures to Prompto whose jaw drops open. “Shut yer trap, you’ll catch flies.”

“I do keep the place ship-shape!” Prompto protests, but Cid simply rolls his eyes and waves him off as he walks back into the workshop.

“He’s the Park’s craftsman and carpenter. He’s in charge of the enclosures and the maintenance of the security system,” Cindy explains to Gladio whilst Prompto recovers from Cid’s comment. She punches the younger man lightly in the shoulder. “Oh don’t you mind paw-paw, ya know he only does it to wind ya up.”

“I know, I know,” Prompto says, waving it off dismissively.

“If that’s all y’all be needing, I best get back to work on the old girl,” says Cindy, grabbing a wrench from her toolbox.

“Yeah that’s it, thanks Cindy. Oh and Ignis is cooking dinner for all of us, to mark Gladdy’s arrival here.” Cindy raises an eyebrow at the nickname but says nothing, and instead grins and nods.

“Right then, I’ll see y’all in an hour or so. Enjoy the rest of your tour, Gladio!” The two wave to her and then head towards the next stop on the tour.

The sun slowly starts to dip, colouring the sky from blue to a pale orange: the beginning of a sunset.
The Sylleblossoms that decorate the floor almost seem to glow in the fading light. The air starts to cool and Prompto is glad that he’s wearing a shirt with sleeves as opposed to his usual sleeveless shirts. They walk further out towards the enclosures for larger, wilder animals where Prompto hopes to introduce Ravus. He silently prays to the Astrals that Ravus would be in a good mood. “So, how come you bought a zoo?” Prompto questions, causing Gladio to turn to face him as they walk. “I mean, you’re a city guy coming to the countryside. It’s just a bit strange. But if the reason’s too personal then I totally get it, you don’t have to say, but I was just curious.”

Gladio shrugs. “I mean, basically I just want a new start for myself and my kids,” he begins to explain, “and yeah, I’m a city guy, but my dad used to bring me out camping in the countryside all the time when I was a kid. He showed me how to read the stars, how to scavenge, how to make a fire, and all that kind of survival stuff. I guess, I kind of want to give that to my kids too. I saw how they loved this place and I’d do anything for them if it meant I’d keep seeing those bright smiles on their face.”

Prompto smiles softly at the sentimentality of the reason and hearing how all Gladio wants is to see his kids smile. He wishes his own father had been like that when he was a child. “That’s really sweet, Gladio. Speaking of your kids, where are they?”

That reminds Gladio. He takes out his phone and briefly reads the text messages from Noctis, who tells him that he treated the kids to a deluxe kid’s meal at the Crow’s Nest. He chuckles and quickly types a reply, saying how he’ll call at bedtime, before tucking his phone away into his pocket. “They’re staying with a friend of mine tonight and then he’s bringing them over tomorrow morning.”

“Ah, I see. So what’s your job then? Aside from being a dad and now the owner of a park, I mean.”

Gladio raises an eyebrow at Prompto. “Asking a lot of questions this evening, aren’t we?”

Prompto flushes pink with embarrassment. “I-I-” he stammers, “I didn’t mean to ask so many. J-Just trying to get to know you better, that’s all.” But instead of a look of annoyance, Prompto is met with a look of… endearment? Or amusement. Perhaps it is both.

“I’m just kidding, Prom.” He ruffles his blond hair and Prompto is surprised at the level of intimacy shared. This is the second time he has met Gladio, and they’ve already breached personal boundaries. It’s clear to Prompto that Gladio is an intimate guy. “I work as security for some people.”

“Like a bodyguard?”

“I guess you can say that.” It’s not as if Gladio can just reveal that he’s a Glaive, one of President Regis’ Secret Service, to anyone. Not even to a cute, flustering blond young man.

It’s evident that Gladio won’t elaborate further on the topic, so Prompto chooses to focus back on the tour. “So we’re coming up to the wild beasts’ enclosures. We have three coeurls, two cockatrices and four chickatrices, two dualhorns, one spiracorn and one duplicorn, four sabretusks, and the king of them all, a behemoth.” Gladio lets out a low whistle at the mention of the behemoth. “I know, though we did have more animals back in the day. Anyway, all the zookeepers here maintain and look after all the different animals, but Ravus specialises in wild beasts so you’ll usually find him somewhere around this area.” He gestures around him.

“Tell me about Ravus. What kind of guy is he?”

Oh where to begin? Prompto looks out to the landscape, thinking of how to best word his answer. “Ravus? Uhh, he’s a good guy. Doesn’t seem it and sure as hell doesn’t act like it, but he’s got a good heart. Can be a dick, but it’s not personal. He’s a dick to everyone except his sister Lunafreya
and Gentiana, both of whom you’ll meet later.”

Gladio nods thoughtfully, processing the information. “I see. Well if you say he’s a good guy, I’ll take your word for it.”

Prompto checks his watch. “Five thirty, that means he’ll be in the coeurl enclosure and giving them their dinner.” He beckons for Gladio to follow him to the enclosure on the east side of the park. They arrive in time to watch Ravus lovingly feed the coeurls, all of whom encircle the man, their whiskers waving in the air as they wait their turn to be fed. “Hey Ravus!” Prompto calls out, waving at him.

The man looks up unamused, and then signals that he’ll come up in a minute or so. From the way Ravus holds himself in the presence of the coeurls, it’s clear to Gladio that he has established himself as the alpha, or rather Elder Coeurl of the pack. They respect him as much as he respects them. When he finishes and comes up to meet the two, he immediately turns to Gladio, blindsiding Prompto. “So you must be the new owner of the zoo.” He offers his hand to which Gladio shakes courteously. “Ravus Nox Fleuret, at your service.”

“Gladiolus Amicitia, at yours.”

“As much as I’d love to stay and chat, I’ve got to feed Bessie.” There is mild sarcasm in his tone, but not too much that Gladio cares to notice.

“Who’s Bessie?” Gladio asks.

“The behemoth,” Prompto answers. “Oh and Iggy’s cooking dinner for all of us, ready in about,” he checks his watch, “fifteen minutes. Be there or be square.”

“Understood. We’ll talk more at dinner then.” Ravus nods once then he turns away and heads towards the behemoth enclosure on the farthest side of the park. Prompto continues the tour and heads towards the tamed beasts area.

“Not a very chatty guy,” Gladio points out.

“Ravus? Yeah, he isn’t. Unless he’s making fun of you, then he talks, but otherwise nah.” It doesn’t take long for Prompto and Gladio to reach their destination, their walk only lasting a quick five minutes. “Right, so now we’re in the tamed beasts’ area. We currently have two anaks, three garulas, one bulette, five cactuars, two slactuars, one gigantuar, and seven chocobos. I personally specialise in chocobos, but I’m mainly in charge of the tamed animals. When I’m not around, Luna usually takes over for me.” Gladio recalls Noct telling him about Prompto’s specialisation in ornithology but doesn’t bring it up.

“So Luna is… Ravus’ sister?”

“You got that right. Usually, she’s with the water animals like the catoblepas in the lake or the shieldshears, or tending to the landscape since she’s the groundskeeper, but like I said, since I’m touring you around, she’s taking over for me.” They find Lunafreya, and surprisingly Gentiana too, in the chocobos stables, giving them their dinner for the night. He waves at them, smiling brightly as he and Gladio enter the chocobos stables. The scent of greens and chocobos feathers hit Gladio’s nose. It’s not necessarily an unpleasant smell, it’s more unfamiliar to Gladio, though he expects he should desensitise himself to it as he’ll be living at the zoo on the daily. “Hey Luna, hey Gentiana. This is Gladio Amicitia, the guy who bought our zoo.”

Lunafreya smiles as she shakes Gladio’s hand. “Lunafreya Nox Fleuret, at your service, Mr Amicitia. It’s a pleasure to meet you at last. Prompto spoke good things about you.”
Gladio turns to the blond, raising his eyebrows in amusement. “Oh he did, did he?” Prompto smiles sheepishly, his cheeks pink again as he shrugs his shoulders. “Pleasure is all mine, Miss Fleuret. Please, call me Gladio, Mr Amicitia is my father.”

“Only if you will call me ‘Lunafreya’ or ‘Luna’.”

He smiles at her. Gladio likes her already. “Deal.” He turns to Gentiana who smiles at him. There’s something cold about her smile, Gladio thinks. Not a menacing cold, but a kind of cool on a summer’s day. It’s a comforting feeling. “And you must be Gentiana.”

“That I am.” Gentiana shakes his hand before dropping her hand back to her side. “I’m the bookkeeper and secretary of Three Valleys.”

“I expect I’ll be asking for a lot of your help in the coming days then.”

She smiles again, her teeth as white as freshly fallen snow. “Summon me, and I’ll be there for you, Gladio.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Hey guys?” Three heads turn to face Prompto whose eyes fix upon the phone in his hand. He looks up at them and gestures to the exit of the chocobos stables as he tucks the phone back inside his pocket. “We should probably head back now. Iggy’s just texted to say that dinner is ready in five, so if we walk back now, we’ll make it in time for dinner.”

Gladio grins and rubs his hands together with eagerness. “Can’t wait to taste those skewers.”

-----

“And they all lived happily ever after, the end.” Noctis closes the storybook and sets it on the bedside table. The moogle dangles from Iris’ hand as she rubs her eye and yawns. Noctis smiles at the young girl and reaches out with his hand to ruffle her hair. Beside her, Talcott has already fallen asleep, curling up against his older sister with his stuffed cactuar tangled in his arms. Noctis pulls the duvet covers up and around the children’s shoulders.

“Thank you for the bedtime story, Mr Noct,” Iris says sleepily. She yawns again. “It’s nice to have stories again.”

Noct frowns. “How come?”

“Mama and papa used to tell stories when I was younger,” Iris explains, albeit drowsily. “Then they got busy at work again and would come home late.” She shrugs, though from her tiredness, her shoulders sink further. “It’s okay though. I tell Tally stories so he doesn’t miss out.”

Noctis smiles and chuckles within his breath. “I think you’re a great big sister, Iris. I’m sure Talcott will appreciate it in the future.”

“He better. I’m tired of reading ‘Jack and the Gigantuar’ to him…” her voice falls away and her eyes shut for the night. At this, Noctis dims the nightlight but keeps it on a low brightness for the night. His natural instinct is to kiss them on the forehead, even if he’s not personally keen on affection. That’s what Uncles do, right? But not teachers. And Noctis is both uncle and teacher to the kids. In the end, he settles for ruffling their hair and ensuring they’re tucked in.

Noct leaves his bedroom, having given it up for the children to share the double bed, and lies down on the sofa, using multiple cushions for a pillow and the sofa throw as a blanket. He is just thankful
that he has the capability to sleep anytime, anywhere.

He checks his phone for notifications, his eyes squinting at the screen brightness against the surrounding dark. Noctis has an official e-mail from the Citadel, sent from President Regis’ secretary informing him of a public event that he’ll have to attend to appease the press and citizens. He rolls his eyes as his thumb hovers over the ‘trash’ button before deciding against his initial reaction to the e-mail. “I suppose if I have to…” Noctis mumbles to himself as he types a quick confirmation reply and sending it.

Since the age of fifteen when his father was first elected, Noctis has been subject to the demanding eyes of the public. The press wondering whether he will follow in his father’s footsteps in politics, wondering what antics and misdemeanours he may have participated in. To their disappointment, Noctis didn’t have a scandalous youth. He ate, slept, showered and more like an ordinary person. This led to the press making the most outrageous of headlines over the smallest of things. Noct recalls one particularly memorable headline from ‘The Sol’ tabloid newspaper, ‘Noctis Caelum Spotted at Hotdog Stand! Does He Mock the Working Class?’

Even now, in his father’s second term as President after his re-election, nine years later, Noctis gets the occasional paparazzi or two showing up at the school he teaches at, trying to compromise anything they can get their hands on. Noctis continues to scroll through his notifications: two messages from Nyx Ulric, a message from Prompto, and a missed call from his father Regis. He decides to reply to them in the morning and sets his phone on the coffee table.

Noctis wraps himself within the sofa throws and soon enough, settles into a deep sleep.

-----

Gladio and Prompto leave the diner in laughter. As in, back-slapping, stomach-holding, head-throwing laughter. One look at them and one would think that they have known each other for years rather than a day and be none the wiser. Prompto’s knees threaten to give in so he leans into Gladiolus’ side for support. “I never would have pegged Ravus for a lightweight. I can’t believe he actually removed his arm to hit you with it,” Gladio chortles.

“I’ve worked with Ravus for five years and never in those five years did I realise he had a prosthetic arm or that he was such a lightweight!” Prompto titters, hiccupping slightly from the alcohol he drank at dinner.

He takes a step forward but ends up stumbling over his own feet. Prompto would have fallen face first into the dirt, had it not been for Gladiolus’ sure, strong arms catching him. “My saviour,” he giggles as Gladio sets him back on his feet. Then he pats his arms, indicating to be let go. “I can walk on my own, Gladdy!” Prompto insists. One step more and he slips again, this time, Gladio is too late to catch him as he falls with his ass flat against the ground.

Whether it is because of Gladio’s body mass in muscle or a strong alcohol tolerance, he isn’t as tipsy as the young blond is. “Come here, princess.” He effortlessly picks Prompto up and throws him over his shoulder, causing a yelp of surprise from him. “Where’s your place… shack… thing?”

“Literally just opposite the diner.”

“…you couldn’t walk thirty feet to your front door?”

“Maybe I was just messing about so you’d pick me up.”

“Were you?”
“Were I what?”
“Messing about so I’d pick you up.”
“Maybe. Haven’t decided yet. It depends.”
“Depends on what?”
“Can’t tell you that.”
“Why not?”

Prompto cups his mouth and leans into Gladio’s ear. “Because it’s a secret.”

Gladiolus sighs deeply and decides not to pursue the matter further. There is no getting answers from Prompto, not when he’s in a tipsy state like this. He carries the young man into his shack and lies him down on his bed. Prompto’s sober enough to be able to unlace his boots himself and kick them off but too lazy to change out of his clothes. “Goodnight, Prom. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be here.” As Gladio walks back towards the front, Prompto calls out for him again. “Hey wait! Where’re you sleeping? They didn’t deliver your beds, right?” Halfway through dinner, Gladio received a text from the movers that getting the boxes in the house took longer than expected and would transfer the furniture the following day.

Gladio shrugs. “In my car. I got two blankets and two pillows there anyway.” The blankets and pillows which are used by Iris and Talcott whenever they desire to nap during long car journeys.

“Just sleep here,” Prompto offers, sitting up in his bed.

“That’s the alcohol offering, not you.” Thunder rumbles in the skies above, signalling for Gladio to leave soon. He doesn’t want to be caught in the rain.

“What do people say? Drunk minds speak sober thoughts, right? Well I’m not drunk, but tipsy enough to offer my boss to share my bed,” Prompto says. “Look, Gladdy, it’s weird I know. We literally met, like twice, so I get if you don’t wanna take my offer up because I’m basically a stranger to you.”

“It’s not weird.” Weird is the wrong word. Inappropriate is what comes to Gladio’s mind. He didn’t want to seem as if he is taking advantage of Prompto’s state. What if he did and in the morning, Prompto wakes, having no recollection of the night before and sees Gladio next to him? “I don’t want to seem… inappropriate.”

Prompto snorts with laughter. “It’s not as if we’re sleeping together. I mean, we are, but not like that. You’re a decent guy, I trust ya.”

The growing pitter-patter of the rain follows a loud rumble of thunder. Gladio sighs. He doesn’t like the idea of getting wet in his walk to the car with no change of clothes. At least in Prompto’s shack, he’s already dry and warm. “…fine.” He concedes.

Prompto shuffles to the other side of the bed, allowing space for Gladio to slide in comfortably under the covers. The bed itself is smaller than a double bed, but larger than a single. It’s perfect for someone like Prompto, a single individual who likes to spread out during his sleep, but a tight squeeze for two people, one of whom is built like a behemoth. Prompto finds himself naturally relaxing against Gladio’s body, his head resting in the older man’s shoulder crook.
It feels oddly complete.

“’Night, Prompto, sleep well,” says Gladio. He doesn’t hear a response but instead feels Prompto’s chest rise and fall against his back. The blond’s fast asleep. Gladio chuckles lightly, a smile coming to his lips. “Thanks for today,” he whispers before he too closes his eyes and falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing like Ravus taking his prosthetic arm and whacking Prompto with it. Also, if y'all are on tumblr, follow me @ton-berry and yes a shameless self promo, fight me. Or don't. I'll most likely cry and neither of us wants that.
Big Spoon Prompto

Chapter Summary

Prompto and Gladio wake up but both think the other is asleep so neither get up in fear of waking the other. Noctis experiences car trouble and is rescued by a knight in shining glasses.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to the very talented Iree, otherwise known as @ohprcr on tumblr who drew an amazing fanart of this fanfic and honestly, I'm still dying over it, it's so cute and pure and I love it and you should too.

The link for the fanart is here

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something is wrong. Prompto knows this when he reaches across the width of his bed for his phone and meets a rock-hard mass instead. He pats along the length of the mass to determine exactly what is in his bed with him and finds… warm skin? Defined muscles? A chiselled chest rising and falling in synchronisation with their heavy snoring. Perhaps the question Prompto should have been asking himself is who is in his bed.

Opening one violet-blue eye, he peeks at the figure beside him and has to cover his mouth his hand to muffle the squeak from his mouth. It’s Gladio, and thankfully, he’s still asleep and they are both wearing clothes. Not daring to move his body in fear of waking the older man, Prompto lies still as he assesses their positioning.

He’s the big spoon. Prompto is the big spoon. How does that even work when he is so much smaller than Gladio? His chin is nestled comfortably in the crook of Gladio’s collar over his shoulder; his arm is hooked under the man’s armpit while the other drapes under and around his neck, his fingers dangling just centimetres above his pecs; his left leg stretching over Gladio's body with Gladio holding his leg in place. Oh Six, he smells so good. Like leather-bound books, sandalwood and… Cup Noodles? How in Eos did he get in this position? Yes, Prompto accepts that he was tipsy the night previous, but he’s adamant that he and Gladio slept with a fair distance between them to start with at least.

Gladio. Oh Gods. What will he do when he wakes? Prompto imagines the worst and his cheeks burn with embarrassment and shame. And yet, despite his active imagination, he finds himself rather comfortable in the position he’s in. If the inner voice in his head would shut up, Prompto could admit to himself that he likes holding on to someone and to be held on by someone, even if that someone is his boss. As it is, the inner voice is particularly relentless today and all Prompto can do is think of the worst. Of course, Prompto doesn’t believe Gladio to be capable of doing anything too horrible to him should he react badly. Sure, he’ll be surprised but what else is one supposed to feel when someone – practically a stranger – is wrapped around them like a newborn cub to his mother?
Despite the risks of waking the bigger man, he makes one last attempt for his phone and manages to drag it across the mattress with the tips of his fingers. At the movement, Gladio shifts slightly in his sleep, causing Prompto to freeze. He mumbles something under his breath. Prompto is sure that it sounds something like, “’Nea,” or a derivative of the sort and he wonders who or what “’Nea” is. It’s a moment or two before Gladio settles again into sleep, pulling Prompto’s leg further up his torso that the blond could feel his knee resting against the man’s abdominal muscles.

Once Prompto is sure that he’s asleep, he presses the home button of his phone to lighting the screen, revealing several notifications. He peers over Gladio’s shoulder to get a better look as he scrolls through with his finger. He has a text from Ignis informing him that he’ll be late into work because of an optometrist appointment in the city, and another from his father. Prompto replies to the former, and then deletes the latter message without reading it. He notices that his best friend Noctis has yet to reply to his message from the night previous and he can’t help but feel his stomach drop slightly. Of course Noctis, the son of the President of Lucis, is busy with more important affairs. How Prompto wishes that he and Noctis were fifteen years old again, young and free from the burdens of adulthood and responsibilities.

There are several other notifications on his phone – most are status updates on his character on King’s Knight – but they could be dealt with later when he isn’t latched onto Gladio’s body. Prompto locks his phone and closes his eyes as he nestles into the crook of Gladio’s shoulder once more.

-----

It’s a little after nine when Gladio wakes up. And when he does, he’s immediately aware of someone else’s body pressing against his back. Is he the little spoon? It’s a strange feeling; Gladio’s so used to being the big spoon in every situation, in cuddling, sleeping, spooning since he’s so much bigger than everyone else. The sound of soft snoring hits his ear, quite literally, as Prompto’s head rests in his shoulder. Using the full length mirror directly across the room, Gladio sees the blond’s face in the reflection. The sunlight that streams between the broken blinds illuminates the freckles on his face and highlight individual golden strands within his bed-head hair. There’s a faint smile pulling at his lips and a small dimple appears in the corner of his mouth and Gladio thinks he must be having a good dream. Prompto looks so peaceful and beautiful and just full of bliss.

Gladio envies him. He hasn’t been able to sleep well for months and some nights he didn’t sleep at all. Always dreaming of the day he lost his Aranea. He was there when it happened. Gladio saw it all. He wants to get up and start the day, but he doesn’t want to wake the younger man and disturb him from his dreams. Careful not to pull himself too far away from Prompto’s hold, he reaches for his phone on the bedside table and then checks through his notifications.

There’s a series of texts from Noct, 'Morning, just gave the kids a cooked breakfast.' Gladio’s eyes widen. He’s fully aware of the young man’s lack of skill in the culinary arts.

He reads the following message bubble, ‘lol don’t worry. I didn’t cook. We went to the café down the street. Should be on the road within the hour if Talcott ever finishes his stack of cactuar pancakes.’ Gladio smiles at that.

‘Urggghhh. Stuck in traffic at the bridge. Iris won’t stop whacking the back of my seat with her moogle. Pls make her stop.’

‘HI PAPA ITS TALCO.’ Gladio blinks twice. What?

His thumb swipes up, revealing the following text, ‘That was Talcott. He took my phone while I was refuelling at Hammerhead. Should be at Three Valleys in like half hour or something idk.’ Gladio
checks the time stamp and finds it was sent an hour ago. Huh. Noctis and the kids should be here by now and if not, Noct would have sent a text explaining the hold up. Gladio tells himself not to panic. Anything could be the cause of the delay. Maybe Talcott got motion sick and needed to take a breather? Or perhaps they left something in the Hammerhead Petrol Station and doubled back for it? Yet every instinct in Gladio’s mind and body tells him to prepare for the worse.

It’s another minute or two before there’s a heavy banging against the door of the hut, yet it’s only when Ravus barges in that both Prompto and Gladio jump up, both now fully awake. “Prompto, there’s someone at the- Holy Shiva,” he gasps, the silver-blond haired man turns away with a hand covering his open mouth. It isn’t seeing another man sharing Prompto’s bed that shocks Ravus, but whom he is sharing his bed with that shocks him. “I’ll wait outside,” he says and leaves.

Prompto and Gladio look at each other before bursting into snorts of laughter which they stifle with their hands. “Hey, Ravus! Wait up!” Prompto calls out as he scrambles out of the bed, his foot catching on the sheets causing him to trip and fall to his knees, causing Gladio to break composure and laugh exuberantly. Well, at least Prompto’s fears of Gladio reacting badly in waking up next to him are proven wrong. Once he’s on his feet, he turns to the man in his bed, his hands out. “Stay here, alright?” And without waiting for a reply, he’s out of the door.

“Please tell me you haven’t slept with our boss within less than twenty four hours,” Ravus says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

The blond slaps him on his back. “Well I did, but not in the way that you’re thinking.”

“Pray tell, what do you think that I’m thinking?”

“That he and I… did… things…” Prompto’s cheeks bloom with awkward red hue. He rubs the back of his neck nervously. It’s not the kind of conversation he imagines having with Ravus, or anyone, ever.

“So how did he end up in your bed? What happened last night?”

“You mean before or after you hit me with your prosthetic arm – which I didn’t know you had by the way – and passed out?” Prompto questions. Any shock that Ravus has is replaced with eyes sharpening to a glare. He holds up his hands in defence. “Okay, okay! Well after you passed out, Gentiana took you and Luna home, since y’know, Luna can’t drive. Then Cindy had to take Cid home ‘cause he was complaining about his knee again. Then it was just me, Iggy, and Gladdy. We drank, we chatted, we laughed, and then Ignis had to leave since it was late, of course, he didn’t drink anything the entire evening so he drove home-”

Ravus rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, that’s all very riveting, but why is he in your bed?”

“Well if you had just let me finish my story,” he gives the older man a pointed look, “you know how I am with alcohol. Such a lightweight, like you apparently; doesn’t take much to get me tipsy. Gladio helped me into my shack and into bed. Then it started raining and he was going to sleep in his car since the movers hadn’t put his bed in yet so I said he could share my bed for one night. Saves him from getting drenched in the rain and sleeping uncomfortably in the backseat of a car.” Prompto shrugs nonchalantly.

Ravus seems to accept the explanation and the tension in his shoulders relaxes. “Right, well don’t sleep with him. I’m referring to the other kind of sleep. It’s dangerous and risky. Never date your colleagues.”

Prompto groans and rubs the side of his face, feeling much like a child whose mother said something
very embarrassing. “I got your meaning.” He looks back to the door of his shack, wanting very much to return to the attractive man, though he’s unsure of what he’ll do once he’s in the room. Prompto isn’t entirely sure of where he stands with Gladio. Where do the boundaries between friend and colleague begin and end? “So why’d you come barging in anyway?”

“I thought you might like to know that Ignis has returned.”

He can’t believe it. Ravus wakes him up because Ignis finally arrives after his appointment? “Is that it?”

Sensing the annoyed disbelief, he replies, “No. There’s more but t’would be best if Gladiolus accompanies you to the diner. I believe he’ll be most happy.” Then he leaves, his silver hair bouncing slightly in the bun at the crown of his head with each step. Prompto stares after the man. How vague can he get?

Nevertheless, he goes back into the shack and for the first time in his life, Prompto understands what people mean when they say their eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. Standing before him, with his back towards him, is Gladio bare from the waist up, exposing one of the most intricate and majestic tattoo designs that Prompto has ever seen. A grand eagle coats the man’s back, and on anyone, it would look heavy, as if the eagle itself is dragging them down. But by gracing Gladio’s back, it’s as if the man has wings himself. Of course, Prompto had seen hints of the tattoo the day previous peeking out from beneath sleeves but this is more than he had anticipated. “I- uh- wha- huh- wow,” he fumbles over his words, his gaze dropping to the ground, hoping that if he can’t see Gladio, Gladio can’t see him, though he knows this to be futile.

“You alright there, Prom?” The older man asks, raising an eyebrow in concern. “Hope you don’t mind, but I used your bathroom.”

Prompto forces himself to look up at Gladio. He smiles, though it’s not difficult to do so in Gladio’s presence. “N-No, of course not.” He clears his throat and nods towards the tattoos. “You look amazing- I mean!” His cheeks redden by each passing second. His hands wave around expressively. “Y-Your tattoos look amazing. I don’t mean that you don’t look amazing too but I mean-,” He sighs in exasperation, one hand dropping to his side and the other rubbing his forehead. “It’s a work of art, is what I’m trying to say,” he says, a weak smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

Gladio smiles, finding Prompto’s flustered explanation endearing and sweet. Finding dates and company for lonely nights was all too easy for Gladio in his youth. He has enough self-esteem to know that he’s a ruggedly handsome man. But does he truly possess such an effect on people that cause them to fluster and stammer in such a fearful, shy manner? Because of his imposing figure, the Glaives often refer to him as the ‘Behemoth’ of the squadron. But like a behemoth, did he scare people? Gladio takes two steps closer to Prompto. “Thanks, I got them done shortly after I became a Gla- bodyguard, a couple of days before I turned twenty.” If Prompto had caught the almost slip-up, he certain gives no indication of it.

Prompto’s hand reaches up to touch the eagle’s head on the left side of Gladio’s chest but hesitates, drawing his hand back slightly. His shy violet-blue eyes look up to Gladio. “May I?” He asks softly. Gladio nods in approval and Prompto’s fingers lightly trace over the outline of the eagle, as if it is a scared tome in a forgotten temple. Whether it’s from Prompto’s cold fingers or from the act of being touched, Gladio shudders slightly. “It’s beautiful,” he says in revered hushed whispers.

Then something flashes in Prompto’s eyes. A sudden reminder. He draws his hand to his side and takes a step back. No, no, Gladio wants his hand back. He yearns to be touched again. “Sleep well?” Prompto asks with a bright smile, as if the past few minutes never happened. He takes a fresh new shirt from his drawers, replacing the one he’s currently wearing.
Alright, Gladio will follow his lead. He takes his shirt from the foot of the bed and pulls it on, fastening the buttons together. “Yeah I did, thanks for letting me stay. It’s real kind of you.”

“No problem. Listen, if you ever need someone to sleep with—“ Prompto stops himself, eyes closed as he flinches at his own words. “I-I didn’t mean it like that—”

He’s cut off by Gladio’s oddly soft laughter. “Don’t worry about it, I got what you mean. I’ll hit you up if I ever need someone to nap with.” He winks and lightly Prompto’s shoulder. “So what’d Ravus want?”

Prompto shrugs. “Something about meeting Ignis at the diner. Knowing him, he’ll probably want you to bring you up to speed with the zoo’s affairs and stuff.” The two leave the hut, stepping into the immediate heat of the Leiden wilderness. It’s spring, and it’ll only get hotter until the autumn.

“I got a question for you, Prom.”

“Shoot.”

“How come this place shut down a few years ago? I get that it’s a sore topic but I think I have a right to know.”

Prompto sighs and rubs the back of his neck. “It’s a long story and I promise that I’ll tell you all about it one day but the gist of it is that the previous owner of the place, Verstael, got into some illegal activity, made some bad business deals and took the entire place down with him. Only reason the place still exists today is because he made me a shareholder when I graduated.”

“Sounds like you know the guy personally.”

The blond chuckles. “I suppose that’s one way to say it.” He nods towards the diner door. “Come on, Iggy’s waiting for us.” Gladio makes a mental note to ask Prompto about the subject further later.

The diner door opening triggers the bell, but that’s not the first thing either Prompto or Gladio hear.

“PAPA!”

-----

“Shiva’s freaking tits,” curses Noctis under his breath as he glares at the ‘No Service’ in the left hand corner of his phone screen. He’s tempted to throw his phone as far into the Leiden wilderness as he can but wills himself to angrily shove it into his jacket pocket instead. The car lets out another discouraging hiss of steam from the hood, making Noctis wince.

Out of all the things that he could be thinking about, whether Gladio will have gotten his previous text or not, how long he and the kids will be stranded in the desert for, or if Prompto crushed his warrior in King’s Knight, only one thought harangues over him: Cor Leonis is going to kill him. Not literally, of course, but Noctis wouldn’t blame the guy if he does as it’s the third time that month that he’s taken the Regalia, President Regis’ personal car, without telling anyone. Technically he does tell his father. Usually through text. Cor is the President’s Chief of Staff, or to Noctis, a stand-in for his busy dad. He will not hesitate in confining the twenty-four year old man to his apartment after finding out that Noctis has not only taken the car, but also broken it.

“Uncle Noct, how long will it take for you to fix the car?” Talcott asks, his arms folded and resting on the open car window.
Noctis turns back and tries to put his most convincing smile on. “Hopefully not long.” A lie. “I’ll see if I can call someone up to help me fix the car quicker, alright?” Also a lie, since his phone has no signal out in the desert.

Next to Talcott, Iris scoffs and gives Noctis a deadpan look. “We’re stuck here.”

“We’re not!” Noctis defends, too adamantly. Iris gives him another look and he sighs in defeat. She gets her intellect from both gene pools of Gladio and Aranea, there’s no outsmarting Iris Amicitia. “I’m going to have a look at the engine, why don’t you two play ‘I Spy’ or something?”

“I spy with my little eye, crows picking at our bodies because we die out here.” Noctis almost hits his head on the hood of the car.

“Iris!” He scolds sharply, but she grins at him.

“What? We’re going to die out here?” Talcott whimpers. “Are we never going to see Papa again?”

Oh no. Iris realises her mistake and her eyes widen at the soft squeal of a cry escape Talcott’s lips and the way his face twists, preparing itself for floods of tears. Noctis moves around the car and is prepared to open the car door and carry Talcott to calm him down when Iris acts first.

“Hey, Hey, Tally! I bet you my moogle can beat your cactuar!” She takes her moogle’s arm and playfully whacks the cactuar’s face.

Talcott sniffs. His eyes dart back and forth between the moogle plushie and the cactuar action figure in his hand. Iris and Noctis hang onto the tension in the air, waiting to see what Talcott will do. “Never! Not with my thousand needle attack!” Noctis breathes a sigh of relief as Talcott and Iris engage in a play-fight between their toys. Crisis averted. He stares at the car engine without the slightest of clues on how to fix it or what’s even wrong with it in the first place.

With a sigh, he decides to try his luck with hitchhiking and hopes that no one will recognise him as the President’s son. Several cars pass by without a second thought until a sleek, glossy black car, outward bound from Insomnia, pulling up next to them. The driver’s window rolls down, revealing a young man.

Noctis swallows hard.

Gods, this young man is gorgeous. He first notices the man’s eyes. They’re a beautiful green, lined with butterfly lashes and shielded by half-rimmed, rectangular glasses which glint against the sunlight. Then it’s his hair. Noctis wonders how much hairspray or hair gel the man would need to use in order to achieve his cockatoo-esque hair. Then again, Noctis is in no position to judge. His lips are the next to follow. Soft and supple-looking, unlike Noct’s own chapped lips.

“Is everything alright? Do you require assistance?” Oh Ramuh. His accent is a rich, velvety Tenebraen accent.

“Yes please. Do you have room for me and two children in your car?”

“And your destination?”


“That zoo has been shut down for a few years now. What business do you have there?” Noctis supposes he could understand the man’s suspicion. After all, what business does a young man with two children – both of whom clearly aren’t his – have in a zoo in the middle of the Leiden...
"I’m a close friend of the new owner." Noct looks over his shoulder and nods towards Iris and Talcott, both of whom are still playing, and then turns back to the young man. "I’m bringing his kids over. He’s expecting me." The man considers it for a moment, staring hard at Noctis as if to ascertain whether he’s telling the truth or not. It’s a little unnerving to be under such intense study. Then he reaches over to the middle panel of the car and presses a button twice, unlocking the car doors.

“Fortunately for you, I work there. I’ll escort you and the children there and send someone over to tow your car back and fix it for you.” Noctis blinks. Perhaps he won’t get murdered by Cor today.

“You serious?”

“Do you see me laughing?” Deadpan humour. The kind of humour Noctis both loves and hates. After getting Iris and Talcott strapped into the backseats of the man’s car, Noctis sits himself in the passenger seat. “I believe I have yet to introduce myself.” The young man extends a hand towards him. “Ignis Scientia, at your service.”

Noctis takes his hand and shakes it. “Noctis, at yours.”

Ignis raises his eyebrow in suspicion. “No last name to go with it?”

He shrugs as he pulls his hand back to his side. “You’ll find out soon enough, I imagine,” he replies casually. The name ‘Noctis’ isn’t exactly common. All Ignis need do is moogle his name on his phone and he will be the first person within the results.

“Quite mysterious of you,” Ignis remarks.

“Really?” Noctis says. His lips form a small, thoughtful pout. “Good mysterious or bad mysterious?” He asks.

Ignis keeps his gaze fixed upon the road ahead of them but smiles and chuckles. “Good, I hope. You don’t strike me as the malicious type. You have a too kind-looking face for it.”

“Oh, uh, thank you, I guess.” Noctis had never been good at receiving nor giving compliments. He always sounds too insincere and blunt when the opposite is true. "And thank you for basically rescuing us. Like a knight."

Ignis snorts slightly. "In shining armour?"

Noct considers it for a moment then shakes his head. "Shining glasses," Ignis smiles but says nothing in return. The rest of the journey is spent in comfortable calm. Iris and Talcott play quietly in the back seat and Noctis catches a chance for a quick nap. With the road stretching on in endless wilderness, Ignis permits himself to steal a glance at the younger man at his right side.

Pretty is the word that comes to Ignis’ mind. But it seems, no, it is an injustice to Noctis. Ignis is adamant that he has seen this young man somewhere before and is sure that he has heard the name before. But from where? Ignis knows that unless he figures it out, the thought will never leave him alone.

They finally arrive at the zoo and Ignis reverses into his parking space at the side of the diner. He turns around to address the children. “Iris and Talcott, was it?” The two nod, ceasing their play. “Go on into the diner and wait there, alright?”

“Okie dokie! Come on, Tally.” Iris takes Talcott’s hand and leads him out of the car and into the
diner, leaving the two men alone. Noctis is still asleep. Ignis clears his throat, hoping it’s enough to rouse the young man from sleep. When he doesn’t stir, Ignis sighs and gently shakes his shoulder. Still nothing.

“Noctis?” He says endearingly. Perhaps coaxing him awake would do the trick. “Wake up, we’ve arrived.” In his sleep, Noctis waves dismissively at Ignis before his hands reach out and pull him to his body, as if he were hugging a pillow. Startled, Ignis’ eyes are wide with surprise and he’s quick to pull himself out of Noctis’ grasp. This is enough to wake him up. “Are you alright, Noct?”

Noctis rubs his eyes sleepily and yawns slightly. “Never better. How come?” It’s clear to Ignis that he has no recollection of his actions.

“No reason. Come now, we’ve arrived. Come inside the diner,” he invites as he steps outside of the car. The two walk into the diner. Noctis joins Iris and Talcott at the counter while Ignis walks around and puts on a white apron. “I imagine your journey was rather lethargic. Have you had breakfast yet?”

“I had pancakes in the shape of cactuars!” Talcott proclaims to Ignis. At first, he’s unresponsive and Noctis is prepared to say something in the boy’s defence, after doing it so many times towards so many parents who scarcely take the time to bond with their children. Then Ignis grins. It almost seems unnatural for someone as sophisticated and as proper as Ignis to be grinning with children.

“Did you now? Well how would you feel about a gigantuar pancake?” Talcott gasps in disbelief, his jaw dropping.

“No way,” says Talcott, but Ignis is already making the pancake batter, then uses a large, crepe pan and designs a gigantuar within the pancake, five times larger than usual cactuar-shaped pancakes. Ignis flips the pancakes thrice successfully, earning him few rounds of applause from the three. He serves the dish to Talcott who gasps again. “No Way!” Then he proceeds to devour the pancake. Iris’ face twists in slight repulsion at how Talcott consumes his food.

“Eww, Tally. Slow down, or you’ll get an achy belly.”

“Imoufmare.”

“Huh?”

Talcott swallows. “I don’t care,” he clarifies before returning to his pancake.

Ignis turns his attention to the young girl. “And you? What would you like?”

Iris considers it for a moment, tapping her chin in thought as her eyes fix upon the menu above Ignis’ head. When both arms rest on the table, she’s come to a decision. “Just a cookies and crème milkshake, please.”

“Coming right up, madam.” Iris giggles at Ignis’ address to her. Noctis smiles at how Ignis treats the children. He never intended to be a kindergarten teacher. Initially, it was for the sake of a monthly income. Then Noctis grew close to the children he taught and he realised why. He wants to be a secondary parental figure for those children whose parents are too busy to take the time to know them, something he, as a child, was deprived of.

Ignis serves the cookies and crème milkshake to Iris, then turns to his last customer. “And you? What would you like?”

You in my bed. Noctis eyes widen at his own thoughts. “Uhh, you know what? I’m fine at the
moment. Maybe later.”

“As a lazy tailor would say, suit yourself.”

The door rings. Noctis and Ignis turn to face the new arrival. A young man, no older than thirty four, with silver hair tied in a bun, strides in. “Morning, Ignis- Noctis? Is that truly you?” Noctis grins and gets to his feet, and then takes three large strides before embracing the man. The two laugh, piquing Ignis’ interest. How did the two know of each other? Perhaps they are childhood friends. Ravus mentioned in the past how he and his sister oft visit Lucis. Or perhaps in college?

“You let your hair grow,” Noctis points out, nodding to Ravus’ hair, “long enough to be put in a bun.”

Ravus rolls his eyes and takes a few spiky locks of Noctis’ hair from the back of his head. “Says the person who grows his hair out and not down.” He retaliates. Then he shakes his head. “What in Shiva’s name are you doing here?”

Noctis nods towards Iris and Talcott; the former slurping the last of her milkshake loudly through her straw, and the latter attempting to swallow a large mouthful of pancake. "Gladio’s kids. Told me to swing them by today so they can settle in and everything.”

“Ah, well I’ll go and get Gladio and Prompto for you then.” Then he leaves.

There’s a moment of silence between Noctis and Ignis and it’s the former who breaks it first. “You’re probably wondering how I know Ravus.”

“You’re quite the psychic,” Ignis compliments sarcastically.


“I do pride myself on my wit and charm.” Though Ignis is joking, his tone makes it difficult for Noctis to determine whether he’s joking or not.

“Anyway, long story short, I was an exchange student from Insomnia to Tenebrae in my third year of university. I dated his sister, Lunafreya for a bit and he didn’t particularly like me at that time because why would you like your sister’s boyfriend, right? Then when we broke up, we became friends and have a lot more in common than we first thought. Kept in touch all these years since.”

“So she broke up with you?” Ignis questions.

Noctis narrows his eyes, disbelieving of what he was hearing. “That’s all you get from the story? That she broke up with me? Are you saying that I’m more the dumpee than the dumper?”

“Well did she? And are you?”

Noctis scowls and Ignis smirks. “Yes and yes,” he grumbles. “Oh you shut it. Not all of us have it as easy as you do.”

That sends Ignis’ eyebrows to rise in surprise. “I’m not sure I understand your meaning.”

The scowl grows. “You know what I mean! All perfect hair, perfect teeth, perfect eyes, perfect manners and clothes…” He trails off. “I bet things come so easily to you. Who could say no to you?”

Ignis chuckles as he restocks the serviettes in the dispensers on the counter. “You would be surprised at the amount of people who do, Noct.”
Just as Noctis opens his mouth to answer, the diner door rings. He turns around and sees his childhood friend Gladio standing at the door. Iris and Talcott see him too and scream in joy. “PAPA!” They leap out of their counter seats and fling themselves at their father. Gladio carries Talcott in one arm and Iris in the other, both children wrapping their arms around him, almost getting whacked in the face with either a soft moogle plush or a hard cactuar action figure.

As father and children reunite, Noctis looks up and sees another figure in the doorway, someone who was hidden behind Gladio when they arrived. His cheeks are pink, violet-blue eyes gleaming brightly, and his blond hair swept up like a chocobo, he’s unmistakable.

His best friend, Prompto Argentum.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was more of a bridge to the next chapter, I admit, but I hope the development of Promptio and the introduction of Ignoct was worth it? Also, the interaction between Ravus and Noctis is not in character I know but damn it, this is an AU and I will have the Noctis/Ravus friendship that I deserve!!
Chocoboz With a Z

Chapter Summary

Noctis and Ignis become closer at the diner while Cindy fixes the Regalia. Gladio and Prompto take the kids on a tour of the zoo via chocobos and Talcott finally meets a cactuar.

Chapter Notes

I'm not going to lie, this chapter feels a bit slow and is more of a development chapter than anything. Things should pick up in the next chapter, but I said that about the previous chapter and look where it's gotten me. Oh well, I hope y'all still enjoy!

“So this is why you didn’t answer my text last night,” Prompto says, grinning as he pulls his best friend into a hug, slapping his back, “you were coming down anyway.” Noctis chuckles as the two pull apart, Ignis watching them with curiosity from behind the counter. He wonders just how many of the zoo staff Noctis is in acquaintance with. By dating Lunafreya in college, he knew Ravus. And from the exchange he witnesses between Noctis and Prompto, he calculates that it must have been before college that they've known each other. Then there’s the matter of his friendship with Gladiolus. Clearly, Noctis is well connected. The question that nags in Ignis’ mind is how. “Why didn’t you just say?”

Noctis scoffs and ruffles his blond hair, pushing him away playfully as if they were fifteen years old again, and not in their mid-twenties with responsibilities. “I don’t think you understand the basis of surprises, Prom. The idea is to not let the person you’re surprising know that you’re surprising them.”

“Well a little heads up would have been nice! I would have changed or something,” Prompto pulls at his shirt and brings a sample to his nose, taking a quick whiff of the fabric. There’s a faint smell of chocobos feathers and gysahl greens. “I might have even showered this morning,” he tells him, though not to remove the smell of birds, but rather the smell of behemoth; a certain behemoth of a man by the name of Gladiolus Amicitia whose scent stains his clothes after a night of sleeping next to each other. The man in question sits in a booth with his two children, telling them all about the zoo as Iris drinks her cookies and cream milkshake and Talcott devours his gigantuar pancakes.

“Noctis waves a finger in Ignis’ direction as if he agrees with him, before pointing at Prompto. “Yeah, yeah exactly. Listen to Specs. Just because your hair looks like a chocobo’s butt doesn’t mean it has to smell like one.” Ignis raises an eyebrow at the newfound nickname but makes no comment on it. He’s undecided whether or not he likes it.
Prompto’s cheeks flush red. “My hair does not look like a chocobo butt!” He protests vehemently, but a smile accompanies his words and he and Noctis burst into laughter. With another roll of his eyes – it seems that Ignis has done a lot of that since meeting Noctis with no surname – he picks up the cloth and spray, placing it in their wall-holders before walking through the kitchen doors to the back. Ignis takes his phone from his apron pocket and presses Cindy’s contact number, knowing the woman is more likely to pick her phone rather than pick up the direct line of the workshop and garage.

It’s another two tones before Cindy picks up with a perky Leiden drawl, “Whyheythere,MrSci-en-tia,” she emphasises each syllable in his last name. “WhatcanIdoyafor?”

“Hello Cindy, I have a favour to ask of you, if you’re not preoccupied.”

“Why of course, anything for ya.” There’s a pause. “Provided you swing by that schnitzel sandwich later on,” she adds.

Ignis chuckles as he switches his phone from one ear to the other. “Of course, I’ll have it ready for you when you get back.”

“And exactly where am I going?”

”Towards Hammerhead, a mile or so out from the town; I believe Gladio’s friend Noctis is in need of having his car towed and fixed.” He hears Cindy squeal over the phone which is certainly out of her character.

“Noctis? Shortish kid with spiky black hair and the bluest eyes you ever seen on a person?”

“Y-Yes. How on Eos do you know him?”

“Oh, I don’t know him personally. But ol’ paw-paw knew his dad back in the day before he got all famous and stuff.” Famous? Noctis’ father is famous? No wonder why Noctis keeps a low profile and why he refuses to give out his last name. It would be all too easy for Ignis to discover who he truly is. “Anyways, I’ll go now and tow the car. I should be back in about thirty minutes tops.”

“Your sandwich will be waiting for you here when you arrive.”

“I’m counting on it, Iggy.” Then she hangs up. Ignis looks through the kitchen windows and sees Noctis and Prompto sitting by the counter and catching up, then he looks back to his phone. It’s time to find out who Noctis truly is. He opens his Moogle browser and types ‘Noctis’ in the search bar. When the results load, there’s a italicised caption beneath the search bar which says, ‘Kupo! Your search hit over 6,700,000 results, kupo!’

Lo and behold, the very first result on the Internet is the Moogledia page of Noctis Caelum, the only son of the President Caelum of Lucis. That’s why he looks so familiar to Ignis. He looks over to the young man who he sees laughing with Prompto, then compares it to the photo shown on his Moogledia page. He certainly looks nothing like his photograph. Of course, physically he’s very much the same, even with the picture outdated by a couple of years, but there’s a sort of charm to the real person. Unlike the photograph which shows an indifferent, almost arrogant, young man.

He clicks on the Moogledia page and reads through the sections. Ignis discovers Noctis’ birthday – 30th August – and that he’s two years younger than himself. He had graduated as ‘summa cum laude’ from the prestigious University of Insomnia, majoring in History, specialising in Lucian history, and with a minor in Computer Science. Furthermore, he’s the third-year running champion of the annual Navyth Fishing Tournament, also the youngest champion in the tournament’s history.
And Ignis finds that he is the assistant headteacher at the Palamecia Elementary School. He’s impressed; despite his age, Noctis is truly an accomplished young man.

His conscience nags at him to stop reading and his thumb ceases to scroll. How many people have done the exact same thing to Noctis? Researching him and studying him before they even have the chance to properly meet him? How many potential friendships and relationships had Noctis lost in the shadow of his father? Ignis sighs. He will not be one of those people. Like Prompto, Ravus, Lunafreya, and Gladio, Ignis will earn Noctis’ friendship. He tucks his phone away, deciding to allow Noctis to tell him who he is in his own time, rather than telling him that he’s searched him up.

Ignis prepares Cindy’s schnitzel sandwich for her and when he’s done, he places it in the food heater, keeping it warm until she returns and continues to do work around the kitchen, keeping it in immaculate condition. It’s a little under half an hour when he hears the diner bell ring. He looks over and through the kitchen window and sees Cindy waving at him. Ignis grabs the sandwich plate and brings it out, handing it to Cindy who grins down at the food. Then she looks up at him with a raised eyebrow. “Extra ketchup, thick on the sirloin, with no mayo?”

“Oh course.” She grins at Ignis before going on her tip toes and briefly pressing a friendly kiss to his cheek. “Thanks, honey! I’ll get princey’s car fixed in a jiffy!” Cindy turns to Noctis with a hand on her hip and nods towards the backpack that she had brought in. “I figure that’s yer bag. It’s pretty darn heavy so I figured there was something important inside.”

“If you count writing school reports important, then yes, it’s important,” Noctis chuckles as he takes the backpack and takes out his KupoBook laptop. “Thanks for towing my car and for offering to fix it.”

Cindy nods towards Ignis. “Thank Iggy, he’s the one who called me up about yer beauty of a car. Honestly, such a work of art should be better taken of!” She gently whacks Noctis on his head before leaving the diner with her sandwich, eager to get her hands on the beautiful engine and bodywork of the Regalia.

Noctis turns to Ignis and smiles. It’s a sweet smile, one that Ignis finds himself wanting to see more of. “Thanks for calling Cindy up. It, uh, it means a lot.”

Ignis waves dismissively. “It’s nothing. I told you I would get someone to tow your car and fix it, and I have. I am a man of my word.”

“You really are,” Noctis says softly. They hold each other’s gaze for a long moment; a moment long enough for Prompto to cough awkwardly at the side. Noctis tears his eyes away from Ignis and focuses back on Prompto. “What were you saying again?”

“I-- Oh nevermind,” Prompto says with a roll of his eyes. “Hey Gladdy,” he calls over, “you ready for that tour yet?”

“Are you two off somewhere?” Ignis questions.

“The four of us actually,” Gladio says as he exits the booth with Iris and Talcott hopping out and following after him. Talcott spots Prompto and runs up to him with his stubby arms wide open, giggling as the blond picks him up and spins him around. Gladio smiles at the sight then turns back to Ignis. “Prom’s gonna give the kids a tour of the zoo chocobo style.”

Ignis smiles down at Iris whose nose just manages to sit above the counter when she’s on her tip toes. “Have you ever ridden a chocobo?”
“Once!” Iris tells Ignis excitedly. “When papa took mama, Tally and me out camping, we rented chocobos to see the catoblepas in the lake!” Both Ignis and Prompto’s ears catch on to the word ‘mama’ and wonder who and where she is. It hasn’t escaped their notice that Gladio neglected to mention her at all, making them wonder if she had left them or worse.

Ignis leans over the counter to reach the young girl’s ear and whispers, “Did you know that we have a catoblepas in our lake?”

A quiet, awed gasp escapes her mouth and she begins to bounce on the toes of her feet. Gladio raises an eyebrow in suspicion. “Iggy… what did you just tell my daughter?” Ignis opens his mouth to answer but Iris is already dragging her father towards the door, rambling on and on about she needs to see the catoblepas now. Gladio shoots Ignis a murderous look as he allows himself to be dragged outside the diner by Iris, whom he’s certain, will inherit his strength, or better yet, her mother’s strength. Ignis waves him off with a smile.

“I suppose that’s our cue, buddy,” Prompto tells Talcott, whom he’s still carrying in his arms. He looks over to Noctis. “You’ll be okay here, right, Noct? Iggy’ll be here to keep ya company, oh, and the wifi password is chocoboz with a z.”

“You’re a nerd,” Noctis says with a roll of his eyes.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Most brands of lipstick contain fish scales.”

Prompto’s face twists in disgust. “Dude!”

Noctis shrugs. “You told me to tell you something you don’t know. Anyways, makes you think twice about kissing people with lipstick, right?”

Prompto glances at Gladio through the window. His cheeks tint with a light pink before he turns back to Noctis. “Y-Yeah, makes you think twice.” He clears his throat. “I’ll see you later, Noct.” He waves one last time before he leaves the diner with Talcott in his arms.

----

“Happy now, Iris?” Gladio asks as he hoists the young girl back up on the chocobo saddle. After Prompto fixed them up with two chocobos – Gladio and Iris on one and Prompto and Talcott on another – the young girl demanded that she see the catoblepas first before anything else.

“Uh huh. Miss Luna said that she’s happy to have me around to help next time!” Iris tells her father with a giggle. “She says I can even help with planting sylleblossoms and all kinds of flowers around the zoo!”

“As long as you’re not inside the house playing with the KupoTablet all day like you used to do, I’m not complaining,” Gladio says with a chuckle, before hoisting himself up and swinging his leg over the chocobos. The bird lets out a disgruntled kweh! under the weight and Gladio winces. Prompto laughs as he brings his chocobo up next to Gladio and ruffles the dyed ruby red feathers comfortingly. “I feel like she’s going to collapse under my weight,” he grumbles.

“Nah, she’s stronger than she looks. Ruby just hasn’t had her lunch yet, that’s all. We’ll swing by the chocobos stables after we head on over to the cactuar camp.”

Talcott gasps so loudly that it startles Prompto. “CACTUAARSSS!” The young boy screams jubilantly. Prompto laughs as he covers his own ears. Perhaps he should have left his surprise a secret
from the boy. “LET’S GO LET’S GO LET’S GOOOOO!” Talcott attempts to wrangle the chocobo reins from Prompto’s grasp to hijack the chocobos, earning him a sharp reprimand from Gladio.

“Talcott, that’s enough. You’re going too far.” His voice is stern, strict, fatherly, but full of love. Talcott hangs his head in shame and mumbles a pitiable apology.

“No no, it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have brought it up until we arrived there,” says Prompto, patting Talcott’s head gently. “I was just like you when I was your age. I was about to meet my first chocobo and I was so excited that I peed myself!”

Iris squeals, “Ew! That’s gross, Mr Prompto!”

“I know. Boys are gross. Be glad you’re not a boy, Iris.” Prompto bops her nose with his finger and she scrunches her nose with a giggle. He looks to Talcott where a smile cracks beneath his sullen mood. “What I’m trying to say is that I understand your excitement, Talcott.” He pats the blue dyed feathered head of the chocobo. “Just try not to pee on Skye. She won’t like that very much.” Talcott giggles and nods. Prompto gently tugs at the reins, urging his chocobo to trot along. Gladio follows next to him and mouths a ‘thank you’ to which Prompto responds with a smile.

“So Mr Prompto,” begins Iris as they travel to the cactuar camp, “why do you keep animals locked in cages? It doesn’t seem very fair on them, I mean, I wouldn’t want to be trapped in a cage.”

The stigma surrounding zoos has followed Prompto all his career. *How could you support putting animals in cages? Why do you enjoy using animals for sport and entertainment? How do you live with yourself?* It all comes from misunderstanding. True, there are places such as the Galviano Arena in Altissia which openly use animals and creatures for sport but establishments such as the Three Valleys Wildlife Park fights against such principles. “We don’t keep animals in cages, Iris. This zoo is a conservation park, meaning we take in animals which are hurt or endangered in any way and we care for them, before setting them free back into their natural habitats,” he explains as comprehensively as he can for a child, “and during their stay here, we have open enclosures for them where we can monitor them and make sure they’re safe but they’re very much comfortable in their surroundings.”

“Ohhhh,” says Iris, her mouth slightly agape in understanding. “I got confused because when I told my friend from school that I’m moving into a zoo, she got really mad at me!” Her lips form a small pout.

“She should be mad,” says Gladio. Iris turns her head to look up at her dad behind her. “Your friend isn’t the one who gets to live in a cool zoo with chocobos and cactuars, is she?”

Iris shakes her head with a smile. “I suppose not.”

It’s another ten minutes by chocobo until they reach the cactuar camp. It’s a large open field, so large that Gladio can’t see where the fencing ends. Prompto grabs some cactuar feed from the basket bag hanging on the chocobo. He crouches down and places it in Talcott’s hand. With a hand on Talcott’s back, he steadies the boy and takes out his beast whistle from his pocket and blows. “So cactuars are super super fast, right?” Talcott nods ecstatically, unable to believe that this moment is truly happening. “Well because they run around so fast and so much, they need a lot of space to do all their running in. Give it a few minutes. They have keen sense of smell and should have smelt this feed by now.”

Behind them, Gladio and Iris watch. Iris remains sitting upon Ruby, their chocobo for the day, and Gladio stands beside her, resting his arm against her. He realises he can’t stop smiling. At least, he
can’t stop whenever he’s in Prompto’s presence. There’s something about the younger man that radiates sunshine.

It’s not long before several cactuars speed by. Talcott gasps in awe, almost spilling the feed in his hands. “Stay calm, stay still,” Prompto murmurs as he steadies Talcott’s hand. One cactuar in particular hops towards Talcott, and it takes every ounce of willpower in the boy to not squeal from excitement. Gladio and Iris hold their breath as the cactuar draws closer to Prompto and Talcott. “He won’t eat from your hand, so you have to lay it on the ground, alright?” Prompto whispers in the boy’s ear. He nods and follows the zookeeper’s instructions, laying the feed on the ground.

Then it happens. The curious cactuar hops twice more before bending down and taking a few nips at the feed. The sudden snap of a stick alarms the cactuar and it speeds off. Prompto turns around and sees Gladio wincing. “Sorry,” he apologises sheepishly, “I didn’t mean to step on the stick.” He approaches Talcott, putting a hand on his back, topping Prompto’s own hand. “Sorry, kid, I know it was your first time meeting a cactuar and I ruined it and—”

“That. Was. AWESOME!” Talcott cries out. “Did you see me, dad? Did you see?! He was so close to me, dad! And I fed him! Wait ‘til I tell everyone at school! Iris, did you see me?!” Talcott bounces over to Iris and begins to ramble on excitedly about his cactuar experience while Gladio and Prompto stand up and watch the children from behind.

“It probably doesn’t seem like much,” says Gladio quietly so that only Prompto could hear him, “but it means a lot. It’s refreshing to hear the kid laugh again, y’know? I’d do anything if it meant I could see him smile like that again.”

Prompto shrugs humbly and his cheeks are pink from the heat and from Gladio’s words. “I-It’s nothing. I know I haven’t known your kids long, but I like them a lot. Kinda like the little nephew and niece I’ll never have.”

Gladio quirks an eyebrow. “You’re an only child?”

“Is that a surprise?”

“A little. I always had you pegged down for a family-orientated kind of guy.”

“I am, but I don’t need a huge family for that,” says Prompto with a smile. “I mean, growing up, I didn’t have siblings so I relied on friends. Though, I didn’t have many of those either until I met Noct. He’s like the brother I never had. And someday, I hope, I’ll have kids of my own.”

“You’d be a great dad,” Gladio says.

Prompto’s violet-blue eyes twinkle up at the older man. “You really think so?”

Gladio smiles. How could he even ask such a thing? Why, his very first encounter with Gladio was when he was allowing Iris and Talcott to play with his chocobos. “I really do, Prompto. I hope whomever is lucky enough to be called yours realises how lucky they are to have your children.”

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can cook for you while you work?” Ignis asks as he pours Noctis another glass of ice water. “I doubt you’ve had breakfast and lunch has come and gone.” The tapping on the keyboard is consistent and Noctis either hasn’t heard Ignis or refuses to answer. Ignis is inclined to think it’s the latter. He’s about to ask again when Noctis shuts his laptop lid down and looks at Ignis with a small smile. “I assume you’ve completed your work?”
Noctis rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry, I’m not good at multitasking when it comes to work. I’d rather just get the entire thing done and then relax and enjoy myself. But yeah, since you’re offering, just some saxham rice and chickatrice legs.”

“With salad?” Ignis offers.

Noctis pulls a repulsed face. “Urgh, no.”

“No salad?”

“No vegetables of any kind. You know what people say about your taste buds changing as you grow up? Yeah? Well it’s a lie. I never liked vegetables as a kid and I don’t like them now.” It’s almost laughable. In fact, Ignis does laugh and Noctis scoffs before he too begins to laugh. “What? What’s so funny about that?”

“It’s not necessarily your answer which is amusing, but more so the delivery of your answer,” Ignis explains, taking his glasses off and wiping them with the bottom of his shirt. “Very well, I will cook some rice and chickatrice for you. Just don’t tell Ravus as chickatrice legs are his favourite part of the animal.”

“Oh I will try my hardest to keep this secret.” Noctis winks. After Ignis sets the rice cooker, he begins work on cooking the chickatrice. “So what’s your story? I mean, by chance, I happen to know virtually everyone who works here except for you.”

“A forward question,” comments Ignis with an eyebrow raised.

“If nothing is put forward then nothing will move,” Noctis points out before taking a drink of water.

Ignis chuckles. “True enough. Well, let’s make a deal. You ask me a question, and then we both answer it, and vice versa. You get to know something about me, and I about you.”

Noctis rubs his chin in consideration. “Alright, you’re on.” The game lasts for about an hour in which they share anecdotes and facts about each other. Ignis learns about Noctis’ hobby of fishing —though he knew this already from his brief research of the man earlier— and learns how deep the man’s repulsion towards vegetables runs. In turn, Noctis discovers that cooking began as a necessity for Ignis when his uncle became sick before it ever became a hobby, let alone a profession.

“So a schoolteacher? You don’t seem the type,” says Ignis as he takes Noctis’ empty plate away, setting on the side to take to the back later. He and Noctis are sitting opposite each other in a booth.

Noctis shrugs as he leans back against the soft back of the seat; his hand rests on the table, toying aimlessly with a serviette. “I know. I didn’t intend on becoming a teacher in the first place but anything to pay the rent and bills at the end of the month, right?”

“I understand. As you know, I never intended on becoming a chef, let alone working at a conservation park. But the work here is legitimate and noble and it’s a good cause,” Ignis says. He drums his fingers against the surface of the table, his hand close to Noctis’. “You mentioned your fondness for fishing, correct? Well, you should visit the coast of Ulwaat in Tenebrae.”

“That’s where you were born, right?”

“That is correct.”

“Well I suppose you’ll have to take me there one day. I’ll need a local to show me the sights,” says Noctis casually. His hand brushes against Ignis’ but neither one makes a comment. Either they didn’t
notice it or they choose to ignore it.

“I… I suppose I could one day.” Damn. There’s that damn smile again. Ignis wants to smack it off his face. With his lips. He’s thankful for the diner bell ringing, causing Noctis to turn around instead of seeing the pink blush on Ignis’ cheeks for his somewhat unchaste thoughts.

It’s Lunafreya and Ravus who arrive. They join Ignis and Noctis at the table, Luna sitting beside Noctis and Ravus with Ignis. “I believe the two of you have had the chance to become acquainted then?” Ravus asks.

“Until the two of you arrived, of course,” says Ignis with dry humour.

“Is our company so undesired, dear Ignis?” Lunafreya teases with a smile. “My, my, brother what have we done to warrant such behaviour?”

“Nothing to my knowledge. Perhaps Noctis is the influence over Ignis’ sudden change in behaviour,” Ravus says, a grin playing on his lips. Noctis’ jaw drops open.

“Excuse me? I am not a bad influence!” He insists.

“There was that time in college when you—“

Ravus is interrupted by Noctis, “We will never speak of that.” But the look on Ravus’ face suggests he has other plans. “Ray— no, don’t you dare—“

“He managed to convince Prompto to pull off my prosthetic arm.” Across Ignis, Noctis hides his reddening cheeks with his hands and his black hair, unable to see Ignis’ aghast expression.

“Understand that this was when he and Lunafreya were dating and thus he and I had a somewhat tumultuous relationship and frankly, I would have done the same in his position.” Noctis makes a whining noise as he moves to hide his face in Lunafreya’s shoulder. The young woman laughs lightly and pats his back. “So he convinces Prompto to pull off my prosthetic arm when we were in a nightclub and the poor man felt so terrible that we had to convince him that he was drunk and had ripped off my jacket sleeve instead of my actual arm.”

Ignis snaps his fingers in realisation. “That explains why he was so stunned to discover your prosthetic arm last night. I did think it strange that you two have known each other for years and yet he remained unaware of it.”

Lunafreya shakes Noctis gently. “Noct, dear, the story’s over now.”

“It’s all in the past, alright? Please, don’t think badly of me.” That is directed towards Ignis.

Ignis holds Noctis’ gaze for some moments before he smiles and says, “Never.”

Then the diner door bell rings again. The set of footsteps are unfamiliar to Ignis and he looks over to see who it is. It’s a stranger. A stranger with hair shaved at the sides and wearing a formal suit: black blazer, black shirt, black belt, black trousers, black shoes, and Ignis figures, black socks and underwear. The stranger looks around, as if searching for someone in particular and instead spots Ignis and Ravus first. He walks towards them. “Hey, you. Have you seen a young man in his mid twenties? Spiky, black hair, blue eyes and—and he’s right here.” The man folds his arms across his chest as his eyes fix on Noctis who shrinks in his seat.

Noctis half lifts his hand, waggling his fingers. “H-Hey there, Nyx.”
Also, I have an Atlantis!Ignoc AU fanfic which I recently posted and if you fancy having a read, then the link is [here](#). Thank you so much for reading this far!
Mr Mog vs Mr Cactuar

Chapter Summary

Noctis has several self-reflective moments during his talk with Nyx. Prompto babysits Iris and Talcott while Gladio is grocery shopping with Ignis and Luna. Gladio receives some news which require a carefully considered decision which determines the future of not just his family’s life, but those around him.

Chapter Notes

I confess, I was really stumped for this chapter for a while until last night at midnight when I had a random motivation boost and managed to bust out a 7k chapter for you. Also, reading back through previous chapters, I realised how Ignoct centred it is (or at least that's how it was to me) but don't worry, this chapter does have brief Ignoct but it's focused back on Promptio and the kids which tbh I had tonnes of fun writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Instinctively, Ignis rises from his seat and puts himself in between Noctis and the so-called Nyx. He isn’t sure why he reacts defensively on Noctis’ behalf, but there’s something about the imposing authority that Nyx clearly possesses and the way that Noct shrinks in his seat that encourages his reaction. As he seems to be an inch shorter than the man, Ignis’ hands remain at his side as he straightens his posture and lifts his chin to make up for it. “What seems to be the problem?” He asks tersely.

Behind him, Noctis is staring at both men with wide eyes; at Nyx for his sudden, though expected, arrival and at Ignis for… for defending him? Is that what he’s doing? Beside him, Lunafreya looks at Nyx thoughtfully. She recognises him from a conference several years ago. It had been when her mother was the Prime Minister of Tenebrae and shortly after President Regis’ re-election. It doesn’t take much for her to realise that he’s some ranking security officer, and rather high ranking given his personal search for Noctis.

Under the table, Ravus sends a quick text to Prompto, briefly telling him of the situation and that it would be best if the children’s tour is cut short so Gladio can come and make sense of it all. Nyx raises an eyebrow suspiciously at Ignis, wondering what spurred the defence. Nyx has tabs on all of Noctis’ friends, colleagues, even the barista who serves him his regular coffee before his commute to work and he does not recognise Ignis’ face from any of those files. “Nothing that I have to explain to you,” he answers shortly. He nods towards Noctis. “He knows exactly why I’m here, don’t you, Noct?”

Noctis winces, wishing the earth would open up beneath him and swallow him up right there and then, but nods eventually. He gestures to the diner door with his thumb. “Y-Yeah, let’s talk outside.” Noctis stands up and shuffles past Luna. He meets Ignis’ eyes as he places a hand on his shoulder and gives him a small smile. “I’ll explain later, alright?” But he doesn’t wait for an answer as he walks out of the diner with Nyx on his tail and Ignis watching the door they leave through.
Now Ignis is no fool. From his recent moogle search, he knows that Noctis is the President’s son and it follows that Nyx must be part of his security detail. Why else would he have ventured so far out from the city? But no one knows that he knows. So Ignis plays ignorance. “I wonder what all the fuss is for over a schoolteacher, a kindergarten teacher for that matter,” he says as he slides back into the booth next to Ravus.

The Fleuret siblings exchange a look with each other, and then look to Ignis. “You mean to say that he hasn’t told you?” Luna asks.

“How?” Ignis feigns innocence.

“Nevermind,” Ravus mutters. “I suppose Noct will tell you in his own time if you’ve not figure it out for yourself yet.” That’s exactly what Ignis is waiting for. Only, he isn’t sure how long he will have to wait before Noctis trusts him enough with his identity.

Outside, Noctis shrinks under Nyx’s stern look. The Glaive’s arms are folded across his chest in a rather authoritarian stance before he relaxes and puts his hands in his pockets. He nods his head towards the diner. “Who’s the guy back there? I recognise the other two from your college days but the one with glasses—“

“He’s new,” Noctis cuts in. “I just met him today.”

“Name?”

“Ignis Scientia. He’s a good guy, Nyx, you don’t have to do your background search on him like you do with everyone else.” It isn’t the first time Noct has made a plea like this. It happens every time he meets someone with potential. Someone with the potential of being something more than a someone; a friend, a lover. People don’t like knowing they’ve been searched up and read upon. Noctis knows he certainly didn’t.

Prompto Argentum is the first person he remembers asking his security detail to not look up. He was a really friendly kid. Granted, Prompto was average academically but he excelled in the Track team. Noctis saw no reason for further background search but he remembers Clarus’ words, “You can never be too careful.” Fifteen years old and with his dad newly elected as President, no one was going to listen to him. It turned out that he was from Niflheim. That he and his father were refugees in the war and wanted a new life for themselves. It never mattered to Noctis whether Prompto was Niflheim or not. And despite having this knowledge about his friend, he waited for Prompto to tell him in his own time. And he did. Twenty years old, drunk on cheap Duscaen beer on the roof of their college dorm, Prompto confessed his roots to Noctis. And Noctis never told him that he already knew. It was pointless to do so.

The second person Noctis had asked security to not look up was his college girlfriend, Lunafreya Nox. They had met when Noctis was in his penultimate year of his undergraduate degree and when Luna was halfway through her masters. Luna was – is still – good. She was one of those people that radiate light in their step, their eyes, their smile, and honestly, Noctis thought sheer dumb luck was on his side when she agreed to go on a date with him, and then another, and then another. It wasn’t until the fourth date that Noctis was finally told that she happened to be the Tenebraen Prime Minister’s daughter using her grandmother’s maiden name as a cover identity from the media. Noctis couldn’t blame her. He had been doing the same thing and posing himself as “Noctis Gar” so no one could peg him for the Lucian President’s son. They spoke about it over their fourth date and that was the date that they became official, despite Cor, the Chief of Staff and Advisor, disapproving of the relationship.

But one person that Noctis had asked his security detail to look up was Ravus Fleuret, otherwise,
Luna’s brother. When he and Luna became an official item, their previously antagonistic relationship turned tumultuous and he wanted any scrap of information he could use against the older man. It was petty and Noctis knew it. That was when he discovered his prosthetic arm that he had gotten after his service in the war. Shortly after, Noctis managed to convince Prompto to pull off the man’s prosthetic arm. It was a dick move and he regretted it the moment it happened. Having power and authority is a means to use it wisely, and not for petty, selfish reasons. That was the lesson Noctis learnt that day. He’s more comfortable now knowing that Ravus holds no ill will towards him, and even laughs about it.

“I have to do a background search on him when I get back, Noct,” says Nyx, though he’s no happier about it than Noct is. “We can’t afford to just trust people nowadays, I mean, look what happened between your dad and Drautos.”

Noctis flinches at the mention of the traitor. Titus Drautos had been the Vice President of Lucis until his conspiring coup with Niflheim (though not proven, everyone knows) was made public. It’s a miracle that Regis was even re-elected at all. But with his new Vice President, Weskham Armaugh, at his side, things begin to look up.

“I suppose we can’t,” Noctis mumbles. He straightens his posture but puts his hands in his jean pockets. “But you’re not here because of who I’m with.”

“I’m here because of the Regalia. And because you didn’t answer any of my texts, so of course, as your personal bodyguard, I’m gonna get worried.”

Noctis shrugs. “My battery died and I have no signal out here.”

“And last night?”

“I fell asleep.” Though not without having read Nyx’s messages but he decides to leave that detail out.

“This morning?”

“I just forgot. I was busy looking after Gladio’s kids.”

“Noct.”

“I’m sorry!” Noctis throws his hands up in the air. “But I’m not fifteen years old anymore, Nyx! I’m almost twenty-five! Believe it or not, I’m actually an adult. I can take care of myself without the Glaives breathing down my neck.”

“Yeah, if you were any other twenty four year old, but you’re not. You’re still the President’s son. The President’s only son.” Noctis scowls at the older man and turns away, giving him the view of his back. “And if you were really an adult, you wouldn’t be stealing your dad’s car like a teenager would.”

Noctis whips around to face Nyx, looking even more annoyed. “I didn’t steal it! I texted dad that I was taking his car for the day and he said I could! Would you like me to show you the text messages or—oh wait, you’ve probably already looked through my phone, haven’t you?”

“Noctis, please,” Nyx begs. He’s just as tired of it all as Noctis is. When the younger man sits down on the steps of the diner, Nyx joins him. He drags a hand down the side of his face before he rubs it tiredly. “Just a few more months,” he tells him, “a few more months and your dad won’t be president anymore. Then you can be free again.”
The younger man makes a sideways glance at Nyx and took note of the bags under his eyes looking darker and heavier against the dimming light of the late afternoon. He’s a tired man. And Noctis knows he isn’t making Nyx’s job any easier. Noctis first came to know him when he came to the Citadel as part of the refugee recruitment scheme that his father came up with to provide jobs to those coming from Galahd, Tenebrae, and other war-affected areas. When Nyx’s history in the military was discovered, he was offered a chance for higher training which he took and that is how he became part of the President’s security detail. A year into his new job, he was assigned to Noctis’ security detail with Gladiolus Amicitia. Nyx came to care for Noctis. Not just as his charge and responsibility, but as a brother he’ll never have.

Noctis sighs. “Sorry,” he says quietly, though Nyx can hear him clear as day given the lack of noise. The only thing that can be heard is the quiet chatter from inside the diner, the faint humming of the lights, and the sound of animals in the distance. “I know you’re just doing your job and I don’t do anything to help with that but I am trying.”

Nyx pats Noctis on the back. “I know, kid, I know. But times are tough and with that Drautos running back to the Niffs, anything could happen.” Nyx doesn’t mention it by name but he doesn’t have to. Anything could happen. Anything did happen. When Noctis was sixteen and he and his entourage were attacked by Niflheim mercenaries and they had almost succeeded in kidnapping Noctis for leverage when Clarus had come and saved the day. No such incident has occurred since then but one couldn’t become complacent and lax.

“So,” Noct says, dragging out the last syllable, “how badly does Cor want to kill me?”

Nyx snorts. “If he didn’t have an emergency last minute meeting with your dad and Weskham, he was gonna come down here and murder you himself.”

“Well thank the Astrals for that meeting,” Noctis mutters.

“I’m serious, Noct. Bring a portable charger for your phone next time, and some change for a payphone if you don’t have service. If anything, Cor was more pissed that you weren’t answering texts or calls than he was about the car. Luckily, you didn’t break the car or anything.” Noctis tries not to react too obviously. Maybe he wouldn’t have to tell Nyx?

“Hey there, Noct, how ya doing this fine evening?” The two men look up and find Cindy walking towards them. She stands in front of them, hand on hip as she wipes the other on her shorts. “By the way, your girl is all fixed and ready for ya.”

Nyx raises an eyebrow. “His girl?”

“Yeah, that sweet beauty of a car called the Regalia. Didn’t have to fix much so thank yer lucky stars.”

Noctis tries not to look guilty.

He fails.

“Noct?” Nyx says, his tone much like a parent’s. “What does she mean by fix?” His eyes narrow at the younger man who shrinks again under his gaze. “You broke the car, didn’t you?”

“It’s not like it was intended.”

“Of course it isn’t! Nothing is ever intended, but they happen! Like how Niflheim didn’t intend to invade Tenebrae but oh look! They did!”
Noctis stares at Nyx and Cindy looks at the two, wondering if she came at a bad time and whether she should just walk away. “That’s a bit of a reach, Nyx.” Noctis looks up at Cindy, smiling at her. “So is the car ready?”

“Sure is. I’ll drive her over to the main parking area and drop the keys off at the diner.” She leaves with a saunter in her hips.

Noctis looks back at the diner and then stands up, offering a hand to Nyx who takes it and is pulled up to his feet. “We should get back inside and explain the situation to Ignis. He probably thinks you’ve arrested me or murdered me or something.” Nyx nods and he follows Noctis into the diner, hands in pockets to appear casual instead of formal and business-like. They walk back over to the booth. As they do, Ignis, Ravus, and Lunafreya look up to them.

“Is everything alright, Noct?” Ignis asks. His voice is gentle but firm. His green eyes dart to Nyx then back to Noctis.

“Yeah, uh, I should probably explain but alone? Ray and Luna know about me already.”

“Of course.” Ignis slides out of the booth and occupying the vacated space, Nyx slides in, using this opportunity to talk to the son and daughter of the former Tenebraen Prime Minister. Not for business purposes, but for Noctis’ sake. Ignis follows Noctis into the kitchen where the man leans against a counter, waiting for him to ask a question. “If I may ask, why does a kindergarten warrant such attention? Are you in some kind of trouble, Noct?” Part of Noctis wishes he was. It would be easier to admit that than to admit the truth.

Noctis sighs. He didn’t want to tell Ignis this way. He didn’t want to tell him at all, or at least, not this soon. But Nyx had to come along and do his job like any good person. What a dick. “Because I’m not just a kindergarten teacher. I’m Noctis Caelum.”

There’s a silence. And Noctis is unsure of whether that’s a good sign or a bad sign. He’s inclined to think the latter.

Ignispretends to be surprised. “Caelum? As in President Regis Caelum?”

Noctis chuckles emptily. “Good ol’ dad.”

“So that man who came asking for you…”

“Secret Service. Part of my security detail. He got worried when I didn’t answer his calls or reply to his texts and so came after me to make sure I haven’t been kidnapped or anything.”

“I see.”

Ignis’ short responses concern Noctis. Is he angry with him for concealing the truth? Ignis is a reasonable, compassionate man. Surely he can understand his reason behind the omission of truth? “I’m sorry for not telling you sooner but you can understand why. I hope this doesn’t change things between us—”

“Should it?”

Noctis stops himself. “Huh?”

Ignis steps closer. “Should it change anything between us?” He clarifies.

“I-I- uh—” He’s at a loss for words. “I hope not. I like… talking to you.” Noctis resists the urge to
slap his forehead in embarrassment. He feels like a pubescent teenage boy again, raging with hormones and unable to talk to attractive people without sounding like a fumbling fool.

To his pleasant surprise, Ignis smiles at him, stepping closer once more. The toes of their shoes touch and Ignis is looking down at Noctis, feeling his head brush ever so slightly against his chin. “I enjoy your company too.”

Noctis melts.

-----

“Noooooooo! Mr Cactuar, please have mercy—NOOOOOO!” Prompto cries out before he falls on his back, arms and legs spread like a starfish as he feigns death. Talcott giggles as he bounces his cactuar action figure along Prompto’s stomach and up his chest.

“No fear! Mog and I will save you!” Iris declares heroically. She leaps from the couch with her moogle stretched out in front of her as she lands next to Prompto, pushing Talcott out of the way so she can ‘heal’ him. Iris presses the moogle plushie’s stuffed wand against Prompto’s forehead. “Kupo, kupo! You’re now alive!” She announces with a giggle. Playing the part, Prompto gasps as he rises from the floor and on to his feet. He looks around for his ‘saviour’ before his eyes land on Iris.

“My hero!” Prompto cries out, picking Iris up and spinning her around, much to the young girl’s amusement and joy as she laughs. When he sets her down, he kneels in front of her. “How can I ever repay you, my lady?”

Iris giggles at the term of address but stands tall, pretending to be some majestic ruler. “An infinite supply of piggybacks whenever I want them!”

“Your wish is my command, Lady Iris!”

“THOUSAND NEEDLE ATTACK!” Talcott roars, leaping at Prompto from Gladio’s armchair. The young zookeeper manages to catch Talcott in time before he hit the floor, though in doing so, he falls back against the floor with Talcott on top of him. He presses the cactuar’s arm against Prompto’s chest. “Do you surrender?”

“Will you spare my life?” Prompto asks, his hands above his head.

“If you surrender.”

“Then I surrender.”

Talcott whoops in triumph, jumping on Prompto’s stomach, causing the young man to groan under the weight of the four year old, not that Talcott notices. “VICTORYYYYY!” He declares. To Prompto’s relief, Talcott stands up, his feet either side of Prompto as he holds up his cactuar action figure to the ceiling in a Simba-like stance. “CACTUARS RULE!”

Prompto is babysitting while Gladio is out shopping for groceries and other supplies with Ignis and Lunafreya. The kinds of things they need can’t be bought in the Hammerhead grocery store, so they venture out to the city of Insomnia. It’s been a week and a half since the Amicitia family has moved into the zoo and with the help of the other employees, Gladio was able to unpack the majority of his boxes and sort the furniture out. Other than the finishing touches and the odd bit here and there, the house is beginning to look like a home.

“Tally,” says Iris, dragging out the last syllable. “Get off Mr Prompto.”
Talcott looks at his older sister quizzically. He looks down at Prompto then back to his sister. “But I’m not on him. I’m standing over him.”

“Same thing.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Uh huh.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Uh huh.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Nuh uh.” It’s like watching a tennis match.

“Uh huh.”

“Nuh uh.”

“Stop it, Tally! Or I’ll eat your doughnut.”

Talcott gasps in horror. “You wouldn’t!”

But Iris simply smiles at her little brother. And like that, Talcott leaps towards the kitchen, with Iris following after him. Prompto gets to his feet and looks around the room. There’s several cushions and a sofa throw (which they had used to represent the ‘safe zone’ when they played ‘the floor is lava’) strewn around the floor. He drapes the throw over the sofa, and then proceeds to toss the cushions over to the sofa. Prompto misaims and throws one over the sofa, hitting the mantle over the fireplace, causing a few photo frames to fall. He winces and silently hopes that none of them are shattered or cracked. He doesn’t think they’re broken, he would have heard the definitive sound of cracking glass.

He picks up the photo frames and puts them back in their place, smiling at each one as he places them back. There’s one of Iris and Talcott playing in the sea at Galdin Quay and another one with Talcott sitting on Gladio’s shoulders as Gladio holds Iris in his arms while they watch the fireworks in Lestallum. It makes Prompto wonder who took the photos, but his question is soon answered by the last photograph in his hands.

It’s a woman. A woman with silver hair and piercing green eyes – Talcott’s eyes – wearing a deep red leather jacket, her arms wrapped around Gladio’s neck as he gives her a piggyback. Bright identical grins on both his and her faces as the sun beams down on them. Their laughter is sealed in a frame and it’s almost as if Prompto can hear the joy ripple through the photo paper and glass. Prompto concludes that it must be her. She must be the mother of Iris and Talcott. He thinks it strange that Gladio never mentions her, not even by name. Had she done something? Had she left them? What happened to her?

A scream from the kitchen pulls Prompto out of his thoughts. He sets the photo frame back where it belongs and makes a mental note to ask Gladio about it while he dashes into the kitchen. “Iris! Talcott! Are you… all… right…?” There’s no blood. Nothing’s broken. So what’s all the fuss?

Talcott presses his face against the window of the back door. “Mapa und Iggy n Una!”

Prompto looks to Iris for a translation. “Papa and Iggy and Luna!”

Ah, they must’ve completed their shopping. He looks through the window and sees the car reversing.
to park. “Stand back, Tal, give them a bit of space when they come, alright?” The young boy nods as he peels himself off the window and hops off his stepping stool. He sits patiently at the dinner table, playing around with his cactuar action figure as he always does. Iris, on the other hand, is on the hunt for food. Well ‘hunt’ is an understatement. She’s throwing cupboard doors open and even climbing inside to see if there’s anything at the back. “You looking for something, Iris?”

“Nooo,” she whines. “I want chocolate.”

“I’m sure your dad bought you chocolate. Just wait a couple more minutes, alright, little bean?” Iris isn’t happy with waiting, not that many children are, but she nods and joins Talcott at the table with a sour look on her face.

Prompto opens the back door, allowing a figure resembling Gladio to walk in. The man’s more plastic than he is man with bags upon bags hanging on his arms, belt loops, legs, and even a pineapple is tucked underneath his chin as Gladio waddles into the kitchen. Behind him, Luna and Ignis walk in, carrying no bags at all, save for the few trays of eggs that Ignis carries in his hands. “Uh… why?”

“Because Gladiolus refuses to make more than one trip to the car,” Luna explains, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face.

“And why aren’t either of you carrying anything…?”

Luna snorts lightly. Luna never snorts. “As if we could stop him from taking all of it. He insisted.”

“Though I had to draw a line at the eggs,” Ignis says, placing the trays on the counter.

“Uh guys? A little help?” Gladio says, his voice distorted by the amount of bags he carries and by the pineapple tucked into his chin. Prompto laughs and begins unloading the man. Iris and Talcott hop off their seats to help or rather, take each bag off to find whatever they’re looking for. “Iris, Tal, no. You’ll get your sweets after we’ve put everything away.” Iris and Talcott pout and stomp through the archway and into the living room. Prompto smiles and shakes his head, chuckling to himself as he takes the pineapple from Gladio’s chin, setting it down on the kitchen counter. When the last of the bags is disjointed from Gladio’s body, he rubs his hands and brushes his shirt and jeans down. “Were they well-behaved?” He asks.

Ignis and Lunafreya work together in shelving and storing the groceries and Prompto runs his finger along the length of the back of the dining chair, avoiding Gladio’s gaze. When Gladio asks again, he looks up. “On the whole, yeah.” He scratches the back of his neck nervously. “After you left though, Iris threw a fit. Kept demanding to see you like she thought she was never gonna see you again. I managed to distract her by whipping up a milkshake in Iggy’s diner though.”

“Excuse me?” Ignis says, his hand holding a Cup Noodles to stack in a shelf as he turns around.

“I cleaned everything I used, don’t worry, Igs! It’s not like last time!” Ignis makes an ‘hmph’ noise before returning to his conversation with Lunafreya about their college days. Prompto looks up at Gladio, his amber eyes pensive and thoughtful. “After that, they were pretty good. We played around and we watched this cartoon series called Voltron: Legendary Defender and honestly, I think I enjoyed it more than they did,” says Prompto with a laugh. “Though we didn’t even get to finish the pilot episode since Talcott wanted to play ‘the floor is lava’.”
“Huh, I’ll have to watch it with you then,” says Gladio casually, opening a bag of clementines and pouring them into a fruit bowl. Prompto feels his ears turning pink. “You and the kids, I mean,” he adds on. “After we’ve put all this away.” He gestures to the kitchen littered with groceries.

“O-Oh yeah! Of course!” Prompto says with a bright smile. He takes a bunch of bananas and places it in the fruit bowl just as Gladio puts some apples. Their hands brush against each other but neither notice. “Hey Gladdy? Why did Iris act like that?”

Gladio is quiet, considering what to say. He doesn’t like talking about it. “Another time, alright, Prom?”

Prompto tries not to feel deflated. After all, it’s none of his business, they’re not his family. Not yet, the little voice in the back of his mind nags. He mentally pushes it aside. Gladiolus is his boss. Sharing a bed together one night and babysitting his kids does nothing to change that. “Y-Yeah, sure.”

After Ignis and Lunafreya help Gladio sort out the kitchen, they leave to attend to their other duties: Ignis providing feed for the chocobos and Luna grooming the chocobos. As Prompto moves to follow after them, to help Luna as after all, they’re his chocobos, Gladio calls out to him. “Hey Prom, where’re you going?”

He turns back to face the older man with a puzzled look. “To do my job? That’s what I’m being paid to do, right?”

Gladio shrugs as he stands in front of the door, practically barricading Prompto inside the house. “Well yeah, but it’s your day off today.”

Prompto folds his arms. “I don’t get days off. I live here so from the moment I wake up to the moment I’m asleep, I’m working.”

“I’m your boss, right?”

“…right.”

“So as your boss, I’m giving you a day off.” Prompto stares at him. Why is Gladio making such an effort for him to stay? “Besides, you said you’d watch Voltron with me and the kids.”

Prompto hesitates. “I really couldn’t—“ He begins but stops when Talcott runs up to him and latches himself onto Prompto’s leg while Iris tugs at his hand.

“Please Mr Prompto? Please stay with us! We had fun today, didn’t we?” Iris asks, looking up at the blond with big, bright, amber eyes. She has her father’s eyes, the same colour, the same shape, the same effect of making Prompto weak in the knees – though he suspects that last part to be due to Talcott.

“Sure we did, Iris, but—“

“Then stay!” Talcott yelps from below.

“But I—“

Then Iris whimpers. Oh no. Oh no. “You don’t want to be with us, do you?” She sniffs, rubbing her nose with the Mr Mog’s (the moogle plushie’s) hand and Prompto’s heart shatters in his chest. “You don’t like us anymore.”
“NO. I mean, of course I like you, Iris! And you too, Tal, don’t you start,” he points a finger down at Talcott who merely grins up at him. “But I—I really shouldn’t—fine. I’ll stay.”

Then Iris perks up as if nothing had happened. Clever little minx."Yay!" She giggles before she and Talcott proceed to drag Prompto to the couch. He turns his head to mouth 'help me' to Gladio but instead finds him smiling.

Gladio is smiling. *Goddamn that smile.*

Screw it. Let his professional relationship with Ravus disintegrate as he deliberately ignores the man's advice of 'not getting close to the boss'.

-----

“Pidge is the best character hands down,” Prompto declares as he presses the remote to start the fifth episode. "I mean, yeah, I'm most like Lance *but* Pidge is precious." His declaration is met with a scoff coming from Gladio.

“No way, the best one is Shiro. He’s a natural born leader, level-headed, handsome, amazing hair and a cool scar,” says Gladio.

“I feel like you’re talking about yourself.”

Gladio can feel the smirk forming on his lips as he turns his head to look at Prompto. “So you admit that you think I’m handsome, have amazing hair and a cool scar?” Prompto flushes red under his gaze and turns his head to face the television screen.

“I didn’t mean—you’re twisting my words!” He exclaims, earning a hearty laugh from Gladio.

“Quiet!” Iris scolds. “I can’t hear what Princess Allura is trying to say!” The four of them nestle nicely into the couch. Gladio and Prompto sit side by side each other, with Gladio’s arm resting along the back of the couch behind Prompto’s head. Talcott sits on Prompto’s other side, his legs kicked up and stretched across the man’s lap while Iris snuggles up to her father’s other side, squeezing Mr Mog close to her chest.

Sometime during the episode, Gladio feels a heavier weight pressing against his side. He looks to his left and sees Prompto’s head resting against his shoulder with his hand on his chest. He’s asleep. Gladio couldn’t blame him. It had been a long day and the young man works tirelessly day and night. Plus, his body is a natural heater so it makes it all too easy for Prompto to fall asleep against him. Gladio cranes his head to look for Talcott but he has fallen asleep too, his head against the arm rest of the sofa.

“Hey Iris?” He whispers, trying not to wake the other two up.

“Hmm?” She murmurs.

“You still awake?”

“Uh huh,” she answers drowsily. The sleep in her voice is a clear indication to Gladio that if she hasn’t fallen asleep yet, she’s about to.

“You go on and go to sleep upstairs, princess,” he says softly, rubbing her cheek with his hand.

“Nuh uh. I’m still awake!” Iris insists, though she snuggles closer to Gladio’s side.
Gladio concedes. There’s no arguing with Iris and doing so would mean waking up Prompto and Taltcot and he doesn’t want to do that. So instead, he chooses to remain where he is and finish the episode. Maybe even start the next one because Prompto’s right, it’s a really good cartoon series and he probably enjoys it more than his kids.

“We had a bonding moment! I cradled you in my arms!” Keith, from the TV show, exclaims at Lance. At that, Gladio immediately looks down to Prompto; still asleep with Gladio’s arm wrapped around him. Gladio isn’t quite sure precisely why he’s so drawn to Prompto. He just is. And in truth, he didn’t anticipate for anything like this to happen. Not so soon after Aranea’s death. Oh Astrals, what is he getting himself into?

But all that Gladio knows for certain is that he likes Prompto. Probably more than he should. But he likes him. He likes his profound love for chocobos. He likes his passion for the zoo and devotion to his friends. He likes the way he treats his children. He likes the way his hair is like a chocobo butt. He likes his violet-blue eyes and the joy he sees in them whenever Prompto rides a chocobo. He likes the way he stutters and fumbles endearingly. He likes his smile. He likes his laugh. He really likes Prompto Argentum.

As if echoing his thoughts, Iris mumbles. “I like him.”

Gladio thinks she’s referring to a character on the show. “Who? Keith? Lance? Hunk?”

He feels her shake her head against his side. “Nuh uh. Mr Prompto. I like Mr Prompto.”

“I like him too, Iris.” And Gladio finds himself telling the truth.

-----

A month later, after Gladio returns to work, everyone has fallen into a comfortable routine. Gladio would take the kids to school early every morning, and every Monday and Thursday, he would pick them up from school. Every Tuesday, Ignis usually replenishes zoo supplies in the city and picks the children up from school; every Wednesday, Cindy collects the children after collecting spare parts from Insomnian junkyards; and every Friday, Noctis takes the kids home with him after school and depending on his schedule, he drives them back to the zoo and sleeps overnight or waits for Gladio to pick them up after his shift.

The weekends are more manageable. While Gladio works long shifts to make up for lost hours in the weekdays, the zoo staff take it upon themselves to look after the kids. When Noctis does stay overnight from the Friday, he helps the children with their homework while doing some of his own work. And on weekends Noctis is absent, Gentiana helps the children with their homework, and even gets a little extra tutoring done on the side. Afterwards, the kids choose where they want to hang out. More often than not, they’re found in the Tamed Beasts area, in the chocobo stables with Prompto or by the lake with Luna. Sometimes, they’re in the workshop with Cid, who has taken a liking to them, or with Ravus whenever he feeds the coeurls or Bessie the behemoth. Whenever Gladio returns home, everyone waits for him at the diner with dinner all prepared and they sit down together and eat like a family. Sometimes, even Loqi takes time out of his busy schedule to come down and spend time with them.

And with every high comes a low.

Gladio meets this low point when he walks into the Citadel for work and he’s immediately met by his colleague and fellow Glaive, Nyx Ulric, at the entrance; as if he has been waiting for him to turn up. “What’s the matter, Nyx? Don’t tell me you misplaced your kukris again,” he laughs but the serious look on the other man’s face causes him to cease.
Nyx says nothing at first and beckons for Gladio to follow him to the elevator. He does and when the elevator doors shut, he finally says, “I think you’re in trouble.”

Gladio blinks and his mouth is agape incredulously. “What? What do you mean?”

“I was walking by Clarus’ office last night, just signed off from work, and I heard raised voices,” he begins to explain. “Naturally, I eavesdropped and recognised that Luche and a couple other of the Glaives were arguing with your dad… about you.”

His amber eyes narrow in confusion. “Why would they—“

“Something about inequality within the ranks. From what I could tell, they’re not happy with you having less hours than the rest of us.”

“That can’t be helped! I live outside of the city, I got two kids to take care of, and I got a zoo to manage—“ That’s a partial lie. Gentiana, Prompto and Ignis have been running the zoo together in his stead while he tries to manage his time.

“I know that, Gladio!” Nyx cuts in again, his voice as sharp as the kukris he wields in his shoulder sheathes, hidden by his black suit jacket. “I’m on your side here, alright? That’s why I’m telling you this. You should really speak to your dad.”

Silence fills the elevator as it passes the thirtieth floor. Then Gladio speaks again. “Are all the Glaives feeling like this?”

Nyx shakes his head. “Not all of them. Just Luche and the other dicks in the squadron. Libertus, Crowe, Pelna and me got your back.” He raises his fist and Gladio bumps it with his. “Home and hearth.”

“Home and hearth,” Gladio repeats religiously. The elevator stops on the forty-fourth floor and Gladio steps out. He turns back to look at Nyx who remains in the elevator. “I’ll see later, alright?”

Nyx laughs. “You’ll see me tonight actually, I’m picking Lunafreya up for dinner.”

Gladio’s eyes widen in surprise. Firstly, he isn’t even aware of their acquaintance, let alone that Nyx is taking Luna out on dates. How long had this been going on for? Before he can ask Nyx any questions, the elevator door shuts on him and he curses to himself under his breath. Gladio turns on his heal and walks towards the Head of Security’s office, aka his dad’s office. He knocks on the door and after hearing a muffled permission to enter, he opens the door and walks into the room.

Clarus looks up from his paperwork and at the sight of his son, he smiles and stands up, walking around the desk and pulling his son in a hug. “I was just about to come and look for you.” This sets off warning sirens in Gladio’s head. Sure, the Amicitias are a touchy, intimate bunch, but not in a working environment. He’s stiff in Clarus’ arms and when the father pulls away, he narrows his eyes at him in suspicion.

“What’s brought this on?” He wonders.

“Can’t I hug my own son?”

“Dad, you can lie to Niflheim officials but not to me. What’s going on?”

Clarus sighs, knowing there’s no easy way to break what news he had to Gladio. He leans against the front of his desk with his arms folded. “We’ve had some… complaints recently. About you.”
“Me?”

“Not you personally, but rather, your record.” Clarus turns and picks up a file from his desk before turning back round to Gladio, flicking through different sheets. “You’re working below the required amount of hours for the pay you’re getting. And before you say it, I know it can’t be helped. You need financial support to help you and your family, I know, I’ve pleaded your case to Cor and even to President Regis, both of whom are happy to help you.”

“I sense a ‘but’ right about now,” Gladio mumbles.

“But this can’t keep going on,” says Clarus. “We’re spending more money than we have to on the Glaives who take up your leftover hours while we still pay you for those unworked hours. And some of the Glaives are getting restless and keep on harping on about favouritism and inequality within the ranks and it’s not entirely a lie. You’re my son, of course I’ll favour you over the others.”

“Dad…”

“I know. And I’ve tried to negotiate with people from every department imaginable in this Citadel about your situation but the fact is, you’re going to have to choose.”

Gladio feels his heart stop in his chest. No. He couldn’t. “Choose what exactly?” Gladio says, his tone dangerously calm and even. Clarus recognises it from his own voice and clears his throat.

“You’ll have to choose between keeping your job as Secret Service or the zoo you bought,” he says gravely. “I’ve spoken with your realtor, Mr Izunia,” Gladio’s fist clenches at the mention of him, “and he says that it’s possible for you to keep the house but sell the zoo on. As much as it hurts me to say this, son, but if you want to keep your job here, you’ll have to sell the zoo. Otherwise, we’ll have to let you go. I’m so sorry, son. I tried everything.”

The world around him is white noise and everything stands still. Gladio feels his heart banging against his ribcage a thousands of miles per second and yet feels a strange sort of calm that envelops him. It’s like one of those movie moments where everything is still but the central characters. That’s how Gladio feels. “I understand, I’ll consider it.” Gladio can feel his mouth moving in accordance with his words but doesn’t hear himself say it. He turns on his heel and leaves through the door.

Gladio almost walks into a diplomat in his disorientated state. He manages a weak apology before walking down the hallway and slipping into an elevator before the doors closed on him. It’s cramped, especially with someone with Gladio’s size taking up a good quarter of the reasonably sized elevator.

He takes out his phone and types, “Can you meet me at the Maidenwater?” Then sends the message.

The reply is almost instant. “What, now? A bit early for drinks.”

“I need to talk to someone. And I need a drink.”

There’s a moment of consideration before another message pops up. “Alright, I’ll meet you at the bar in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks Loqi.”

Chapter End Notes
Who else is loving the zoo family all working together to look after Iris and Talcott because I do... a lot. It warms the cockles of my heart I swear and something about Gladio refusing to make more than one trip to the car just really amuses me and it's inspired by this.

AND yes, I recently got into Voltron: Legendary Defender and I just HAD to slide it in because I'm trash. Anyways, I hope you all enjoyed this chapter!!
New Recipeh: Roasted Prompto

Chapter Summary

Loqi and Gladio bond over bourbon and sangria. Group chat shenanigans. Prompto learns about Aranea.

Chapter Notes

This chapter kinda got away from me... Like, I had a set outline for this chapter and somehow... it just... didn't... happen... so yeah, enjoy this mess of a chapter, like idk how it happened.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Want another one big guy?” Takka the bartender asks as he cleans the inside of a pint glass with a cloth. The Maidenwater is a popular bar restaurant establishment in central Insomnia, though there’s little evidence of this at twelve o’clock on a Friday afternoon where few people are in attendance.

Gladio shakes his head and raises his half full rocks glass up at Takka. “I’m good for now, thanks, Takka.”

“Well let me know if you need anything.” Takka reaches across the counter and places a hand on Gladio’s shoulder, patting him gently. “It’s nice to see you here again, Gladiolus.” Then he walks to the other side of the bar.

“It’s nice to be back.” The muttered response is genuine, even if the delivery is empty.

It’s another fifteen minutes before Loqi arrives. He walks through the door, wearing a deep red tie with a white button shirt beneath a waistcoat, with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His blazer jacket hangs casually on his arm as he holds his leather briefcase. With his businessman ensemble, Loqi looks rather out of place. Gladio waves him over. “Took you long enough, fancy pants.”

Loqi joins him at the bar, setting his briefcase on the counter. “This is the best you get when you text me during a meeting.”

“You were in a meeting? Then why’d the hell you show up?”

The blond shrugs as he tugs at his tie, loosening it before pulling it off and tucking it inside his briefcase. He lifts two fingers up to Takka across the bar. “Just a sangria for me, thanks.” Then he turns his attention to Gladio. “And because you needed me, right? I meant what I said. That I’d be the brother-in-law that you deserved from the beginning.”

Gladio downs the last of his bourbon. “Well yeah, but you were in a meeting.”

Loqi shrugs as he takes the sangria glass in hand. “Not an important one.” He takes a small sip and considers his words again as Gladio gives him a look. “Okay, perhaps the Lestallum City Governor
was there but he doesn’t like me anyway so what does it matter to me?” There’s a passing moment of silence and Loqi taps his fingers against the mahogany counter. “But I wonder why you asked me to meet you here of all places…”

Gladio grunts slightly, his grip on his empty glass tightening. “If I keep avoiding every place we’ve been to, I’ll run out of places to go,” he mumbles. The Maidenwater is where Gladio took Aranea for their first date and is where he proposed to her. The place oozes with memories, nostalgia, and sentiment; it’s almost as intoxicating as the alcohol they serve. Gladio glances over his shoulder at the corner booth by the front window of the restaurant. Faded images pass through as he relives the memory again. He can almost hear the laughter in Aranea’s voice, he can almost see the silver of her hair if he squints his eyes hard enough. His chest tightens and he forces himself to look away, instead focusing his attention on the empty bourbon glass in front of him.

Loqi signals to Takka for another bourbon glass before he tentatively pats the bigger man’s shoulder. “It’ll be okay, Gladio. So why did you ask me here? Has something happened with the zoo? Work?”

Gladio mumbles a ‘thank you’ to Takka before downing his bourbon glass in one, much to Loqi’s concern. There’s a crease of worry in his forehead and he puts the now-empty glass to one side. “I have to choose,” he mutters. “Between the zoo or being a Glaive.”

“Why?”

“Some dicks in the squadron—“

“Luche Lazarus?”

“Yeah.”

“Thought so, carry on.” Gladio goes on to explain his situation and all the while, Loqi listens intently as he takes few chaste sips of his sangria. When he finishes, Loqi lets out a heavy breath, unaware that he had been holding it in for all that time. “Well,” he begins uncertainly, unsure how to best proceed with his sentence, “what will you do?”

Gladio narrows his eyes at the blond. “I don’t know, that’s why I asked you to come here.” Then he signals to Takka for another bourbon glass – he’s lost count of how many he’s had – much to Loqi’s disapproval and concern.

“No matter what I’ll say, you won’t like it.” He gestures to Takka for a glass of water.

“I don’t care. Just say something. Anything.”

Loqi sighs. His finger circles around the rim of the empty sangria glass as he considers his answer. He’s a logical man, favouring reason over instinct, choosing mind over heart. And yet, no matter how much he tries, no matter how many alternative solutions he comes up with, he always comes back to Aranea. What would his sister say in his stead? Unlike him, Aranea toys with her instincts and has – had – the rare skill of being able to temper her passion with reason and logic. “Speaking as an advisor, I would say that there’s security in your career as a Glaive. It pays well and offers certain privileges scarcely found elsewhere. You have your dream home, what other reason would you have to keep the zoo? Sell it, and you’ll gain profit from that. It’s the most logical choice you could make.”

“And speaking as yourself...?” Gladio asks, his amber eyes narrowing at Loqi, wondering what the alternative answer could be.

“I was speaking as myself, Gladio,” Loqi tells him. Gladio’s heart drops and he looks away. “But,” Gladio looks up at him again, “if my sister were here, she would probably tell you to go with your
gut instinct. With what makes you and the kids happy.” Then he takes a sip of his water. “And she’ll probably tell you to leave those bloody Glaives once and for all. She’s always hated them and you know it.”

Gladio half chuckles and half sighs. “Yeah… but it’s not that easy, y’know? I don’t know how I can fund the place, let alone run it.”

“I’ll help you.”

“I mean, Gentiana, Prompto and Ignis are basically running the place for me— wait what?” Gladio looks over to Loqi incredulously, then looks to his empty bourbon glass and wonders if he has had too much to drink that he’s heard his brother-in-law incorrectly.

Loqi winces slightly, every instinct in him fighting against the words he’s trying so hard to get out. “I’ll help you,” he repeats again, this time there’s no shaky uncertainty in his voice. “Gladiolus, I’m a wealthy man. One could say I have too much wealth for one man—“

“That person would be telling the truth,” Gladio interrupts, earning him a sharp glare from Loqi.

“And I’ve repeated it time and time again but I truly meant it when I said I’ll help you.” He takes a deep breath, a hand on his chest as if to help him level out his breathing. “I have money. I’m willing to invest into your zoo, provided that you put every blood, sweat, and tear your body is capable of and more into your zoo.”

Gladio stares at Loqi, his mouth slightly agape, trying to decide whether it’s the alcohol or if it’s Loqi speaking. “The offer’s genius—wait, generous, that’s the word—but I can’t accept it, Loqi. It’s too much.”

“You say that now when you’re drunk but you’ll say differently when you’re sober.”

“If I’m saying no when I’m drunk, I’ll say no when I’m sober.”

“I don’t think so.”

Loqi drags a hand down his face in exasperation before it falls against the surface of the bar counter. “Look, just consider it, alright? It’s a lot of money, I know, but it’s something I want to do, for ‘Nea and for you.” He knocks his knuckle against his glass of water, making a lovely clink sound. “Besides, if you happen to pull it off, you’ll be making me more money so it’s a win-win situation.” Gladio chuckles at that.

“Alright, I’ll think about it,” he concedes. Then he looks past Loqi and raises his empty glass to Takka. “Another one, Takka!”

It’s another hour and a half by the time Loqi can no longer bear his phone alerts to return to work. Aside from the sangria, all he’s had to drink is water, while Gladio has downed several shots of bourbon – Loqi lost count after eleven. As Gladio slumps over the counter, burying his face in his arms, Loqi calls the zoo reception in the hopes that one of them will come and pick Gladio up, as there’s no safe possible way for the man to get himself home without causing at least two accidents.

After the first two rings, Gentiana picks up. “Three Valleys Wildlife and Conservation Park, how may I help?”

“Gentiana? It’s Loqi, Gladio’s brother-in-law.”

“Oh yes, you were the one who couldn’t handle the spicy curry last Saturday.” Loqi’s ears turn red
from embarrassment and he’s glad that Gentiana can’t see him and that Gladio’s too concerned with the scar on his arm to notice.

“Yeah,” he chuckles nervously, “that’s me, listen, I have a favour to ask of you.”

“If it’s within my power, I will endeavour to achieve it.”

“It’s Gladio. He’s drunk and can’t get himself home. I would drive him but I’m due at work. Is there any possible way to get him home? We’re at the Maidenwater in central Insomnia.” There’s a pause and Loqi hears the sound of shuffling papers and a phone dial, followed by another conversation he can’t quite make out. Then she picks up the landline again.

“Prompto will pick Gladio up, though he’ll be another half an hour at best until he arrives.”

“That’s fine, I’ll wait with him until he arrives. Thank you, Gentiana.”

“My pleasure, Loqi.” Then she hangs up.

Luck must be favouring them today as Prompto arrives twenty five minutes later in a pick-up truck with a faded Three Valleys Wildlife logo slapped on the door. He’s not wearing his uniform and instead wears a deep red sleeveless shirt and black jeans, with a matching flannel tied at his waist. He gives Loqi a two-fingered salute as he enters the establishment and approaches the two men. “Heya, you alright?”

Loqi glances to Gladio at his side then back to Prompto. “Better than some.”

Prompto’s face twists in discomfort and worry and he reaches over to Gladio, patting his back awkwardly. “Do I wanna know what happened to the big guy?”

“Probably not,” Loqi answers with a shrug, “but chances are that he’ll tell you himself.” Then he hooks Gladio’s arm around his neck and nods for Prompto to do the same. “Come on, I’ll help you drag the behemoth to your truck.” Between the two of them, it’s a struggle. Gladio is a much larger person than they are, in both muscle and height, and Prompto is thankful that he’s not alone to carry the man. They awkwardly shuffle towards the door and Takka has to come and open it for them before they finally step outside. “Can we just—” Loqi takes a shallow breath, “can we just dump him in the back?”

Prompto uses one arm to reach for the passenger door. His fingers brush against the handle agonisingly before he grunts and pushes himself, his fingers clasping around the door handle and pulling it open. “I—I got it!” He wheezes. With a joint effort, and some mild complaining, the two miraculously manage to get Gladio into the seat, seatbelt buckled in and all. Prompto and Loqi exchange a sloppy high-five as they lean against the truck to catch their breath. “That—was –harder than I—expected.”

“The man’s heavier than he looks… and he looks pretty heavy.”

“Gotta tell him to lay off on those Cup Noodles,” he laughs, though it turns into a cough as he struggles to regain his breath again.

Loqi pats Prompto’s back, swallowing hard. “I need… to get back to the office… Text me when you’re home, alright?” Prompto manages a stiff nod before Loqi waves and leaves. He takes a minute to get his bearings before rounding the truck and sliding into the driver’s seat, starting the ignition. He looks over to Gladio who’s fiddling with the bobbling dashboard figurines. There’s a chocobo, a moogle, a cactuar, and a hula dancer. Prompto shakes his head, laughing softly to himself as he pulls back onto the road, beginning the drive back to Leide.
Prompto Argentum added Gladiolus Amicitia, Ignis Scientia, Noctis Caelum, Lunafreya Fleuret, Ravus Fleuret, Cindy Aurum, Cid Sophiar and Gentiana Glace to this conversation

**Prompto**: GUYS!!!! EMERGENCY!!!!!! CODE RED!!!!!!

**Cid Sophiar** left the group chat

**Prompto**: WHAT THE

**Prompto**: WHY’D HE LEAVE :(((

**Ravus**: Evidently he wishes no part in this group conversation.

**Ravus**: Something we both currently have in common.

**Prompto**: u love me ray ray ;)

**Ravus**: Don’t call me that.

**Prompto**: </3

**Cindy**: paw paw said that he has no time for that and for you

**Prompto**: this is acc breaking my heart </3

**Cindy**: he said “good”

**Ignis**: I’m just surprised it’s taken us this long to have a group conversation.

**Prompto**: GASP

**Ravus**: Someone tell me he didn’t just write ‘GASP’

**Lunafreya**: Ignoring Ravus, what are you GASPing about?

**Prompto**: NICKNAMES

**Prompto**: it’s a necessity

**Prompto**: no a tradition

**Prompto**: no a scared rite of EVERY group chat

**Ignis**: Oh no.

**Ravus**: Oh no.

**Cindy**: AWW HELL YEAHHHH

**Prompto**: DIBS ON GETTING TO CHOOSE EVERYONE’S NICKNAMES

**Gentiana**: On one condition, you can’t choose your own nickname, Prompto.
Prompto: …

Prompto: that sounds ominous but deal

**Prompto** set Cindy’s nickname to **grease monkey goddess**

**Prompto** set Lunafreya’s nickname to **lady sylleblossom**

**Prompto** set Gentiana’s nickname to **ice queen**

**Prompto** set Ravus’ nickname to **i-need-a-hand**

**Prompto** set Noctis’ nickname to **sleepy bean**

**Prompto** set Ignis’ nickname to **eggnis**

**Prompto** set Ignis’ nickname to **doctor eggman**

**Prompto** set Ignis’ nickname to **igneous rock**

**Prompto** set Ignis’ nickname to **iggy azalea**

**Prompto** set Ignis’ nickname to **cooking mama**

**grease monkey goddess**: PICK ONE ALREADY

**Prompto**: I CAN’T

**Prompto**: THEY’RE ALL TOO GOOD

**cooking mama**: I’m glad my name has inspired your creativity, Prompto.

**lady sylleblossom**: I personally like ‘cooking mama’ but that’s just my opinion.

**ice queen**: Agreed.

**Prompto**: lady sylleblossom and the ice queen have spoken

**Prompto**: their word is law

**sleepy bean**: wtf

**sleepy bean**: what am I doing in this chat

**sleepy bean**: AND WHY AM I A SLEEPY BEAN

**sleepy bean**: i don’t even like beans

**cooking mama**: You don’t like many things, Noct.

**sleepy bean**: I like sleep and you.
lady sylleblossom: Aww that’s cute :’)

i-need-a-hand: Stop flirting.

Prompto: for once I agree with ray ray stop flirting

sleepy bean: IM NOT FLIRTING

cooking mama: That’s a shame.

sleepy bean: WAIT A SECOND SPECS

Prompto: shh and go to sleep(y bean)

sleepy bean: nuh uh not until I get a say in urs and gladio’s nickname

sleepy bean: WAIT

sleepy bean set Gladiolus’ nickname to big cup noodles

grease monkey goddess: pretty sure there’s a bigger size than that

ice queen: I moogled it and there is a larger size: King.

sleepy bean: that’ll just add to his ego but ok

Prompto: like ur one to talk buddy

sleepy bean set Gladiolus’ nickname to king cup noodles

i-need-a-hand: I believe Noct and I have the perfect nickname for Prompto.

cooking mama: I’m intrigued.

lady sylleblossom: I second that.

ice queen: I… third… it?

Prompto: oh

Prompto: no

sleepy bean: :)))

Prompto: IT’S GONNA BE AN INSULT ISN’T IT

i-need-a-hand: And what about “i-need-a-hand”? 
Prompto: …touché

i-need-a-hand set Prompto’s nickname to chocobutt hair

grease monkey goddess: BAHAAAAHADHFJDWSED

grease monkey goddess: paw paw said he approves

chocobutt hair: MY HAIR DOES NOT LOOK LIKE A CHOCOBO BUTT

chocobutt hair: RAYMOND HOW DARE YOU

i-need-a-hand: Raymond? That’s not my name.

chocobutt hair: IT WAS INTERNATIONAL YOU DOUCHE

chocobutt hair: **INTENTIONAL

i-need-a-hand: International.

cooking mama: International.

chocobutt hair: stop it :’”(((

sleepy bean: international B)

ice queen: International.

lady sylleblossom: International :)

grease monkey goddess: international :P

chocobutt hair: I don’t know why I’m friends with any of you

cooking mama: Need I remind you that you’re the one that began this group conversation?

chocobutt hair: yeah, a decision I’m beginning to regret

cooking mama changed the group conversation name to New Recipeh: Roasted Prompto

chocobutt hair: EGGNOG

chocobutt hair: HOW DARE

chocobutt hair: YOU

cooking mama: :)


lady sylleblossom: Amazing.

grease monkey goddess: so what’s the emergency?? You said you had an emergency???

chocobutt hair: OH YEAH

i-need-a-hand: Clearly not an emergency since you were so easily side-tracked.

chocobutt hair: shut it raven

i-need-a-hand: Never.

chocobutt hair: ok uhh yeah basically Gladio and I are kinda stranded in hammerhead

sleepy bean: what

sleepy bean: explain

chocobutt hair: loqi called gen to pick Gladio up from the maidenwater bar bc he’d been drinking

chocobutt hair: like a lot

chocobutt hair: something about his job or something idk I didn’t wanna ask

chocobutt hair: and when we pulled into hammerhead to refuel, it turns out I forgot to bring my wallet

chocobutt hair: so we’re kinda stranded here

chocobutt hair: help?

lady sylleblossom: Firstly, is Gladio okay?

cooking mama: Ensure his airways aren’t obstructed.

lady sylleblossom: Agreed. Have a bucket nearby or be in very close proximity to a restroom should he vomit.

cooking mama: Do you remember how to do the recovery position?

chocobutt hair: GUYS I AM QUALIFIED FIRST AIDER

i-need-a-hand: Says the man who pulled off my arm twice.

chocobutt hair: WTF I APOLOGISED FOR THAT I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW

chocobutt hair: wait twice??? Wtf????? Nvm that’s a question for another time

grease monkey goddess: I woulda come and picked you up myself but you took the only truck that works

sleepy bean: I would offer to pick you guys up since it’s my day to pick the kids up but Nyx drove us here and drove back with the car
ice queen: Doesn’t Ignis have a car?

chocobutt hair: YES HE DOES

cooking mama: Not today I don’t.

chocobutt hair: …WHY NOT?

chocobutt hair: …..??

grease monkey goddess: *******

cooking mama: I caught a lift with Noct, Nyx and the children.

i-need-a-hand: But you go to Insomnia for supplies on Tuesdays not Fridays

i-need-a-hand: Unless you weren’t collecting supplies and were there for another reason…

chocobutt hair: :O

chocobutt hair: so noct, when u said “Nyx drove us home” you mean u and ignis and the kids

lady sylleblossom: Someone is being rather quiet.

lady sylleblossom: Nevermind, I found Noctis. He’s asleep on Gladio’s couch with his phone on his chest.

grease monkey goddess: how convenient

king cup noodles: Whaaaa

king cup noodles: t

king cup noodles: Whaaaaat?

cooking mama: Wonderful. A full house.

chocobutt hair: I took his phone away, didn’t realise he woke up lmao he’s still a bit out of it

chocobutt hair: also don’t think ur getting off that easy iggy we all wanna know why ur with noct

i-need-a-hand: I believe we all know why.

ice queen: We can discuss that later, let’s focus on the matter at hand.

grease monkey goddess: I GOT IT

ice queen: Then please share

grease monkey goddess: give me a minute to type jeez

grease monkey goddess: (((I say that with love)))

ice queen: I’m aware.
**grease monkey goddess:** even though we can’t get a car out to you right now, we’ll get one to ya tomorrow, meanwhile, y’all stay in my apartment in hammerhead

**chocobutt hair:** talented, brilliant, incredible, amazing, show stopping, spectacular, never the same, totally unique

**i-need-a-hand:** Did you just Gaga her?

**chocobutt hair:** yes yes I did and ignoring the fact that you know who Lady Gaga is (we will have words later) how are we gonna get in cindy’s apartment??

**chocobutt hair:** wait aren’t you supposed to be coming home anyway????

**grease monkey goddess:** well I WAS but someone took my truck so we’re just gonna camp out in gladio’s house

**chocobutt hair:** whoops sorry about that

**grease monkey goddess:** nah don’t mention it. Also the spare key’s taped to the bottom of the welcome rug

**grease monkey goddess:** just ignore the mess

**grease monkey goddess:** and don’t leave more mess

**grease monkey goddess:** we’ll get you a lift in the morning

**chocobutt hair:** u r a lifesaver <3 <3

-----

Prompto tucks his phone back into his pocket and walks back to the truck, opening the passenger door, letting Gladio out. “Come on, big guy, looks like we’re staying at Cindy’s tonight.” He reaches out and holds Gladio’s hand to lead him to the apartment, his cheeks flushing red when he feels Gladio intertwine their fingers together.

“Cindy’s?” Gladio asks, his facial expression being of complete bewilderment and confusion. It’s actually rather endearing and adorable to see; a side of Gladio that Prompto never thought existed, let alone being able to see it.

“Yeah. She’s letting us stay at her place until they can get a car out to us in the morning since we have no money for fuel,” Prompto explains.

“Ohhhh,” Gladio murmurs and says nothing else. Beyond the Hammerhead outpost diner, the sun dips behind the horizon and a gradient of oranges, yellows, and pinks bleed into the haze late afternoon sky. With the Leiden wilderness stretching for miles and miles, the only thing silhouetting the sunset are the few desert trees and rocks. It’s a wonder to behold, and even Gladio in his intoxicated state, takes a moment to appreciate it. Prompto lets go for a moment and fumbles around his pockets for his phone.

“I-Lemme get this shot,” he says. Prompto wishes he brought his camera with him and thought it odd that he had forgotten it as he never fails to bring his camera wherever he goes. Still, even if it’s captured on his lower-quality phone, he’s able to preserve nature’s own work of art. He takes Gladio’s hand again, ignoring the heat that comes to his face.
“You like photography?” Gladio asks curiously, though his words come out slightly slurred.

Prompto chuckles and nods. “I do. I like taking photos of animals, landscapes—“

“And people?”

“And people,” Prompto confirms.

Gladio seems to consider this for a moment before asking, “Would you ever take a photo of me?”

Prompto tries not to choke on his own air. His first initial thought is the iconic Titanic scene where Rose asks Jack to paint her like one of his French girls. He is Jack Dawson. Gladio is Rose Dewitt Bukater. And Prompto is seriously overthinking the question too much. He’s sure that Gladio means nothing sultry or sensual by it. And even if he does, he’s not in a sober state of mind. “Y-Yeah, I suppose could if you wanted me to.”

Thankfully, they arrive at Cindy’s studio apartment and following her instructions, Prompto takes the key from under the welcome rug and lets himself and Gladio inside, locking the door behind him. His first thoughts are, “what mess was Cindy even talking about?” as the place looks immaculate. Alright, so perhaps there’s a clothes pile (clean clothes, Prompto presumes but doesn’t want to find out), in the armchair, some discarded socks by the side of the sofa, and an empty pizza box on the kitchen counter but otherwise the apartment is pretty much spotless. There’s a double bed on the far side of the room and on the adjacent wall, there’s a TV with two small armchairs and a loveseat accompanied with a shallow coffee table in the middle, on top of what Prompto assumes is an Altissian rug. It isn’t what Prompto expected, but he’s pleasantly surprised.

After taking to Prompto’s advice of showering so he can begin to sober up, Gladio walks back out of the bathroom. His shirt clings tightly to his moist skin, perfectly outlining his pectorals, abdominal muscles, and biceps. Prompto tries to look away.

“So,” he begins, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly, “did you want to take the bed and I’ll sleep on the couch?” Though it only happened once before, Prompto doubts Gladio wants to share a bed with him again. “I don’t mind. You probably need the bed more than I do, and I’ll actually fit on this loveseat,” he jokes lightly.

“No.” The response is so immediate that Prompto doesn’t process it. “No,” Gladio repeats, his voice firmer, more commanding. “I don’t like sleeping on my own,” he adds as an afterthought. His voice is so uncharacteristically soft that it sends goosebumps up Prompto’s arms.

Before he can stop himself, the question slips off his tongue. “Why not?” Prompto hopes that Gladio doesn’t answer. Chances are that anything drunk Gladio says is something that sober Gladio wants to keep hidden and unspoken. Prompto doesn’t want to find something out before Gladio is ready to tell him, if he will ever tell him.

“Because I don’t sleep well. I haven’t slept well since she died.” The little slithers of moonlight that seep through the blinds are enough for Prompto to see the sombre, sobering expression upon Gladio’s face.

Perhaps Gladio needs a conduit for his repressed emotions and thoughts. And if it means that Prompto would have to listen, then he will. “Since who died?” He asks gently, sitting with Gladio on the foot of Cindy’s bed.

“Aranea, my wife.” So that’s who the woman in the photograph is. He sees Gladio clench his fist and Prompto wraps his arm around him and rubs his back soothingly in the attempts to calm him.
down. “She died and it’s my fault,” he hisses, half in anger and half in grief.

“I’m sure that’s not the case, Gladdy,” Prompto assures him in the softest of tones. “I’ve never met her but I don’t think she would ever blame you for what happened.”

Gladio pulls away from Prompto’s touch, and he tries not to be hurt by the action. “You weren’t there. You weren’t there when there was an attack at the Accordo Peace Talks. You weren’t there when a grenade was thrown in the room. You weren’t the one who chose to save the President over his wife.” Gladio is hunched over now, his elbows resting on his legs as he puts his head in his hands. His entire body shakes as he holds back a sob and right there and then, Prompto’s heart breaks for him.

He remembers seeing news of the attack on TV. A group of extremists had targeted the peace talks between the four nations of Lucis, Accordo, Tenebrae, and Niflheim, believing that compromise is not true peace. They had intended to remove the chance of compromise because they believed that there is no compromise. The leaders of each nation survived with few injuries but eleven people had lost their lives that day. Prompto places a tentative hand on Gladio’s back, rubbing softly to assure him that he’s not alone. “I’m so sorry, Gladio.” Though Prompto knows apologies are futile.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Gladio says helplessly, lifting his head from his hands and looking at Prompto. “Nea always had the answer and without her, I’m just screwing up my life, my children’s lives, and everyone else around me.”

“No, no you’re not,” Prompto is quick to say. “You haven’t screwed up anyone’s lives, especially not mine. Since you came into my life, it’s never been better and I’m so grateful that I get to be a part of your life, even it’s only a small part. Maybe you don’t have all the answers, but that’s okay. Not many of us do and we do the best with what we have. And you have a lot. You have a family that loves and cares for you. I’m not just talking about Iris and Tally but I mean me, and Noct, Iggy, Luna, Ravus, Cindy, Cid, Gentiana, Loqi, your dad, wait—did I already say me?” Prompto counts the people on his fingers before shaking his head and giving up on it. “The point is, is that between all of us, it’s almost certain we’ll find the answers you’re looking for. And if we don’t, we won’t stop until we do.”

Gladio stares at Prompto. His eyes, usually such a vibrant violet-blue, darken to a nightly indigo in the dim light. He brings a hand up to Prompto’s cheek, caressing him with his thumb. Under his touch, Prompto feels heat crawling up his neck, rising to his cheeks and he silently prays to the Astrals that Gladio can’t feel it. They hold each others’ gaze for a fleeting moment and Prompto swears that he sees Gladio begin to lean in. Holy Shiva’s Tits, is this really happening?

“Thank you, Prom, I… I needed that.” Then Gladio drops his hand back to his side. Where Prompto should feel relief, what replaces it is a sense of disappointment, as if he wants Gladio to have leaned in just that little bit further. Wait, what? Prompto surprises himself with his own thoughts and feelings. He’s so consumed within his own mind that he doesn’t hear Gladio call him to bed until the man is literally pulling him to his side. “And to think that I’m the drunk one,” he snorts in amusement as he turns on his side.

Prompto lays on his back, staring up at the ceiling, letting his thoughts wander from him. He wonders if Gladio will remember any of this in the morning. He wonders what will happen tomorrow, when and Gladio are forced back into the reality of their world. He wonders if he can stay a little longer by Gladio’s side. Even if all it entails is laying side by side, hands brushing against each other, wondering what the other is thinking about them.

Chapter End Notes
Ok, ok, I had WAY too much fun writing that group chat conversation ngl, like Prompto and Cindy strike me as casual, multiple message bubble texters, Luna likes using the blushy, smiley face emoji (not the passive aggressive one, the cute one I mean), Ignis and Ravus roast Prompto the most in the group chat, and in retaliation, Prompto keeps referring to Ravus with the wrong name. He can't do anything to Ignis because Ignis cooks his food lmao. Also can we just wrap Gladio in a blanket please? Big man needs a big hug.
Quit Moping, Keep Hoping

Chapter Summary

Gladio tells Prompto everything. Noctis, Ignis, Nyx, and Lunafreya return from a double date. Gladio goes through a lot of emotional turmoil. Even in death, Aranea is still saving everyone’s asses.

Chapter Notes

Okay, there are a few things I want to say before you read on.
1) I’m sosososos so sorry that it took so long for this chapter to come out. I’ve had coursework deadlines, and now I’m revising for my final exams which start in a little over a week, plus, I’m also moving house so I’m packing AND revising, which is a bit of a struggle. Thank you so much for being patient with me.
2) Prepare yourself for angst in this chapter? Gladio goes through a lot and idk why I did that to him but it just happened.
3) While writing this, I realised there was a fault with Prompto’s background because in Chapter 6, I wrote that his parents died in the war but in actuality, his dad is still alive (and still a douche). So I’ve gone back and amended that.
4) I haven’t proofread this yet because I just wanted to get it out there so please tell me (nicely) if you see any mistakes!

Ok, ok, now read on and I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regret. Regret and self-directed annoyance, with a side of a throbbing headache, is what Gladio feels when he wakes in the morning. He can feel the warmth of the morning sunlight rest on his face, and while on usual days he’s happy to greet the sunrise, he doesn’t feel as accommodating today. Instead, he groans and turns over on his other side, pulling and wrapping the blanket around him as he tries to go back to sleep again. He reasons with himself, thinking that he will deal with the consequences of his overconsumption of bourbon after he’s sobered up a bit more.

It’s not long until he feels someone sit at the side of the bed, causing the mattress to sink slightly, then a gentle hand on his shoulder, followed by a soft voice. “Hey, Gladio? You better wake up and eat something before Cindy gets here.” It’s Prompto and there’s a clack of metal utensils against a plastic surface. “I’m not Iggy, but I managed to whip up some eggs and bacon. Oh! And no hangover breakfast is complete without some OJ and aspirin,” he says with a light laugh.

Gladio opens one eye, peeking at Prompto. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed, with a food tray on his lap with a plate of sunny side up eggs and crispy bacon, along with a tall glass of orange juice and a couple of pills of aspirin. The blond smiles down at him and for once, Gladio looks away from him, thinking the whiteness of his teeth to be too bright at this time of the morning – regardless what time of the morning it actually is. He hears Prompto set the tray down on the bedside table. “I wanted to let you sleep in, but Cindy texted and said that she’ll be here in an hour or two so it gives you the
chance to recover and eat.” He feels Prompto’s hand on his shoulder again, before he rises from the bed and walks to the kitchen on the other side of the studio apartment.

Gladio sighs and decides to get up, wanting to be rid of his incessant headache. His legs swing over the edge of the bed as he sits up, rubbing the side of his face with his hand before massaging his temple with his thumb and finger. “I didn’t do anything embarrassing yesterday, did I?” He asks, his voice deep and gravelly from waking up.

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘embarrassing’ but you were clearly out of it,” Prompto answers from across the room. He’s tidying up the kitchen, putting the uncooked bacon rashers back into the fridge and putting the used frying pan and utensils into the dishwasher. “You just acted out of character, that’s all. It’s nothing out of the ordinary, I mean, Luna gets all giggly and affectionate when she’s drunk – that’s not to say she’s not when she’s sober I mean – I lost my point,” Prompto sighs. He hopes that Gladio doesn’t ask further. It would mean telling him that he knows about his late wife, and that’s not a fun conversation to have, especially when the grieving person in question is hungover.

Gladio murmurs thoughtfully to himself as he eats the breakfast that Prompto cooked for him. “So, you can cook, huh?”

Prompto feels his cheeks turn pink. He laughs his bashfulness off and rubs his neck. “I try to avoid it when I can. I tend to burn food rather than cook it. It’s kind of the running joke at the zoo,” he chuckles nervously as he tries to find something to tidy in the kitchen so Gladio can’t see his pink, flustered cheeks. “Actually I burned the bacon twice before I got it to the right crispiness for you. And I may have accidentally burst the yoke of the first fried egg I cooked so I had to try again.”

“Well I think it’s pretty great. Thanks for cooking this up for me.” Gladio feels his gratitude isn’t fully expressed, but he had never been particularly too great at expressing himself as he expresses himself too much or not at all.

Prompto turns around and smiles at him. “No problem, big guy.”

After he finishes his breakfast and takes his aspirin, Gladio takes another shower, despite having already taken one the night previous when they first arrived at Cindy’s apartment. It gives him time to reflect on what happened the day before. Yes, perhaps he drank more than he usually did but not so much that he forgot Loqi’s generous offer of an investment. Taking the offer would mean quitting the Glaives and dedicating himself fully to the zoo to make it into the renowned establishment that it had once been. And not taking it would mean keeping his job, selling the zoo and letting go of the people who are not only loyal employees, but people who have become personal friends to Gladio. It’s not a choice he can make lightly, for whatever he chooses, it will affect everyone involved, for better or for worse. When he comes out of the bathroom with a towel hanging around his neck and his hair pulled back into a small ponytail, he sees Prompto on the phone with his back to him.

“Noct, you knew about her all this time and you didn’t think to mention it at all? To any of us? Didn’t you think that information might have been important for us to know?” Gladio stands still and silent in the doorway of the bathroom. He doesn’t mean to eavesdrop, but he is curious to hear what Prompto has himself worked up over. Then Prompto sighs, his shoulders sinking in defeat. “Yeah… I suppose you’re right, buddy. I mean, I get that it’s his thing to say and not yours, and I would probably be the same in his position, but still…” Prompto trails off and Gladio wonders to what he’s referring to. “I just kinda thought that we connected, y’know? Is that weird to think?” If there’s a response from Noctis, Gladio doesn’t wait to find out as he clears his throat, alerting Prompto to his presence. The blond jumps slightly, violet-blue eyes wide as he turns around to meet Gladio.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to make you jump,” he apologises with a cheeky grin, indicating to Prompto that
he’s not apologetic in any sense of the word.

Prompto sighs with a smile and puts the phone back to his ear. “I’ll see ya soon, Noct. Gladio just got out of the shower.” Gladio can hear Noct respond, but doesn’t hear the exact words. However, whatever those words are, it causes Prompto’s eyes to widen again and his cheeks to flush with heat. “S-Shut up! S-Speaking from experience with Ignis, are we?” His eyes widen again as he pulls his phone away to look at the screen, before looking up at Gladio. “What a prick, he hung up on me!”

Gladio snorts as he puts the towel down on a chair and pulls a shirt on. “So what exactly did you mean by what you said that caused Noct to hang up?”

“Things,” he answers evasively.

Gladio plays along and gasps. “How dare he.”

“I know, right?” Prompto scoffs as he tosses his phone on Cindy’s bed, wincing when it bounces off the bed and onto the floor with a clatter. “So uh, you feel better now? All sobered up?”

“Yeah, well, better than before at least.” Gladio walks over to the couch and sits down, resting against the back with his arm stretching across the length of the back of the couch and the other on the arm rest. “So what time’s Cindy getting here?”

“She texted me that she just left and since it’s a Saturday, it’ll be busier on the roads so I’ll give it ‘bout half hour or more before she gets here.”

“Ah right.” Gladio looks around the room thoughtfully, wondering how to fill time. He clears his throat. “So uh, we shared a bed again, and this time I was the drunk one. Don’t tell me that you put me on your shoulder like I did with you.”

Prompto snorts at the mere suggestion. If it takes the combined strengths of both himself and Loqi to drag – not carry, drag – the man to a truck, there’s no chance on Eos he could carry Gladio on his own. “No chance of that, big guy. But yeah, we shared a bed… again… we did that.”

“Well thanks for looking out for me.”

Prompto joins him on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees as he leans forward slightly, turning his head to the side to look at Gladio. “So what happened yesterday? Got in trouble with your boss or something? It’s not really like you to daytime drink.”

Gladio stiffens at the mention of it and looks away as a scowl forms on his lips. “Something like that,” he grumbles. “It’s a whole loada crap and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Talk to me. I mean, I’m not wise old Iggy, but I have the occasional nugget of wisdom sometimes. And if anything, just talking about it helps. It lets all the bad energy and emotions out.” Prompto offers, scooting a couple inches closer to Gladio, placing a comforting hand on his knee. Gladio holds their shared gaze for a moment before he finally sighs, relenting to Prompto’s persuasion.

“Alright then. It’s a long story though.”

Prompto checks his watch. “We have time.”

“I suppose I should start from the beginning,” Gladio says uncertainly, rubbing the back of his neck and looking to the side. Then he drops his hand back to his side and looks at Prompto again, determined to confront and accept his past. Talking about it is a step in that direction. “I was twenty when I met Aranea Highwind. Recently recruited into the Glaives, President Caelum’s Secret
Service, I was fresh meat. She didn’t hold any official title like General or anything, but she had a fearsome reputation as a mercenary, even as young as she was. She and her men were hired out for Aldercapt’s security detail for negotiations. I don’t know if I was attracted to her or her reputation at first to be honest with you,” Gladio chuckles, trying a small smile.

“After Lucis and Niflheim came to an agreement over whatever it was – I actually don’t remember – I went down to the Maidenwater with Nyx and a couple of other, more seasoned, Glaives for drinks. Turns out, Aranea and her men were there for the same idea. After several shots, Libertus thought it was a great idea to play a game he liked to call ‘have you met Gladio?’ and that was how I talked to her for the first time. The rest of that night was history. Our relationship was never anything serious. Not at first, at least. It was casual hook-ups and drunken nights. We knew it would never work between us. She was from Niflheim and I’m a Lucian, and our countries had never gotten along, even if we weren’t currently at war. Then one night, she seemed different, she seemed scared actually.”

“She got pregnant,” Prompto says softly.

The corner of Gladio’s pulls up in a half-smile. ‘Yeah, she did. With Iris. It was that moment that we decided to take things seriously between us. We did the whole dating thing that we never did to see if there was any chance for us, any chance for our baby to have a good family. I took her to the Maidenwater for our first date, and ended up proposing to her there about two months later. As you can imagine, a lot of people didn’t approve of the relationship because I’m a Lucian, and she’s a Niff. Her younger brother shut her out and my dad essentially disowned me, even if he never said those words aloud. But it didn’t matter to us. We had each other, our baby, and that’s all that mattered. We got married in a simple ceremony with a few friends witnessing, like Noct, Nyx, Biggs and Wedge and then six months later, Iris popped out.

“We were happy for a while. So happy that three years later, we had Talcott. By then, Aranea stopped being a mercenary for Niflheim, well, for anyone really. She actually worked for the local police precinct as a detective and I had my job as a Glaive, even if she always told me to quit there. Noct would visit and help out when he could. Things seemed to going right for us. Until Niflheim decided to occupy Tenebrae two years ago. I worked longer shifts and so did Aranea. Then earlier this year, at the Accordian Peace talks with the four nations, I went with President Caelum as part of his security detail and guess who was also there?” It’s a rhetorical question, and even when Prompto opens his mouth to answer, Gladio cuts across him. “Aranea. I thought she was home with the kids but turns out that she left them with Noct. Aldercapt personally hired her again.” Gladio ends that sentence with a venomous hiss.

“And she died,” Gladio’s voice cracks and he shakes his head and looks away. He feels Prompto’s comforting hand on his knee and he’s too emotionally tired to push him away. “I could’ve saved her — I should have saved her—and I didn’t. I made the hard call. When I came home, I had to break the news to Iris and Talcott. Iris took it the hardest between them. She remembered her whereas Talcott remembered her at the time, but now, he only remembers the idea of her unless we show him our home videos. Iris refused to let me out of her sight for a month. She was terrified that the next time I ‘go away’ will be the last time she sees me. I mean, she panicked every time she realised I wasn’t in the same room as her. She had to sleep in my bed for that month until she started to cope. She’s alright now, but she still has the occasional moment or two. So four months after the funeral, I decided we needed a fresh start. Moving house seemed to be the way and I found this place. You know all about that already.”

Prompto stays quiet for a few moments, waiting to see if Gladio will continue his story, then he clears his throat before speaking. “Y’know, I wondered why you looked and sounded familiar and now it makes sense.” Gladio looks at him with a confused raised eyebrow, the one with the scar
running down through it. “Noct… he always made sure the Glaives were out of sight whenever I was around to visit. Wanted to pretend he was a normal guy, y’know,” he chuckles lightly, “but they were always close by. I think I remember your name coming up a couple times in conversation but we never got the chance to meet because you were busy doing Glaive-y stuff.”

“I’ve known Noct since we were kids. Our dads were best friends and he’s like a little brother to me. After I married Aranea, certain people didn’t want me assigned to his security detail anymore and so Nyx took over.” Gladio shrugs as if it’s no matter, but Prompto can tell by the dulled colour of his amber eyes that it pained him.

“I’m sorry, Gladio.” Prompto moves his hand from his knee to the back of his shoulder, rubbing gently in comfort. “Thank you for sharing your past with me. It means a lot that you trust me enough with it. But what does it have to do with yesterday?”

Gladio tenses and Prompto feels the muscles tightening in his shoulder. “My dad, Head of the Glaives, told me that they couldn’t afford to support me financially any longer. And without that benefit, I can’t afford to maintain the zoo. So I have two choices, quit my job and focus on the zoo or — “

“Keep your job and sell the zoo, letting the rest of us go,” Prompto finishes quietly. There’s a slight crack in his voice and he draws his hand away from Gladio, turning away from him. He wants to be angry with him. He wants to swing his fists left and right at his perfectly lined jaw. He wants to scream about how he can’t give hope and then take it away. But none of this happens. Instead, what Prompto feels is an overwhelming sense of compassion for him. He sees a man who has lost so much and will continue to lose whichever choice he chooses. The least he can do is ease the pain of his decision, even if it causes personal suffering for himself. “The choice seems obvious, big guy.” He chuckles weakly in an attempt to keep things light-hearted.

This time it’s Gladio who reaches out and holds on to Prompto’s forearm, tugging gently as if to get him to turn and face him. “No it’s not, Prom. No matter what choice I make, someone is going to get hurt. I can’t afford to maintain the zoo. So I have two choices, quit my job and focus on the zoo or — “

“And no one is asking you to, Gladio! We’re your friends, not your charges!” The older man is stunned at the sudden raised voice. Prompto himself is surprised at the volume of his own voice. He swallows hard, as if to ingest any words he may regret expressing. “I-I mean, you can’t live your life living so cautiously that you lose because of inaction. We all make choices and it doesn’t matter what choice we make because either way, we have to accept the consequences that come with them and move on. When you lost Aranea, yes, you lost a wife and the children lost a mother and nothing will ever replace the space she’s left, but you saved— “

“The President,” Gladio says, almost bitterly.

“Well yeah, you saved the President but more importantly, you saved Noct’s dad.” Gladio opens his mouth to retaliate but closes it again when he realises the truth of Prompto’s perspective. He had never considered that side of it before. “Gladio, I won’t pretend to know your pain, because I don’t. But you can’t protect everyone from the choices you make.”

“So what do you suggest I do then? Toss a coin? Draw lots?” There’s a hard edge to Gladio’s voice, challenging him, making Prompto flinch. Prompto hates confrontations. Usually, he would close up at any tone of aggression or a raised voice and give up his argument. But this time he doesn’t, regardless of how much he hates speaking against someone.

“I’m big on going with your gut and heart, but with things like this, maybe it’s best to do it Iggy style and think with your head,” Prompto suggests. “I mean, if you sell the zoo, you get to keep the house,
your fancy job and the money from the zoo will keep your family supported for years to come. But if you quit your job, you throw all your chances on a zoo that you don’t even have any experience in managing or maintaining for. I wouldn’t worry about the rest of us; the ones who stayed behind are a pretty resourceful bunch.” He chuckles again, but it’s a weak attempt at trying to lighten things up.

Gladio’s hand moves down to Prompto’s hand, but the blond refuses to look his way. “It’s not that simple, Prom, I mean, you have a dream for the place. You have a passion that I could never hope to match. I can’t just sell the zoo.”

Prompto pulls his hand away from Gladio’s hold and stands up, taking a few steps away from the couch with his back to him. Gladio tries not to be hurt. “I guess some dreams just aren’t meant to come true. Dreams are distant and passions fade away but what isn’t distant and what’s still here are your children.” A text alert comes from his phone and after reading it, he sighs and tucks it back into his pocket. “Cindy’s outside. You want my advice? Think of your children, it’s certainly what I wanted someone to tell my dad years ago.”

Gladio watches as Prompto leaves the apartment, leaving the door open for him and leaving him with more confusion than he started with.

-----

“Can the two of you go back to sleeping together? I’m sick of the sad, lingering puppy eyes you give each other when you think the other isn’t looking,” Ravus says with a flamboyant whack of his rolled-up magazine. Prompto narrows his eyes at the older man as he gently rubs his head. His intention is to come off threatening, but to Ravus, Prompto merely looks like a chocobo chick trying to act all tough but ends up looking even more adorable instead -- not that Ravus thinks of Prompto as adorable.

“There are no puppy eyes,” Prompto grumbles irritably as he strokes Ruby’s dyed red feathers and grooms her gently with a brush. “And we never slept together.”

“Not in the way that you wanted to.” Prompto resists the urge to throw the feather brush at Ravus’ head. In the week that followed after Prompto and Gladio’s discussion, tensions between them rose, affecting not only their professional and personal relationship, but those around them. “Come now, Argentum, lighten up. I can’t believe I’m saying this but your terrible jokes and unbearably optimistic attitude to life are missed.”

“Wow. The day Ravus Nox Fleuret misses my jokes is a day to be remembered,” he says sarcastically.

“I suppose sarcasm is an acceptable replacement for now.”

“Why are you even here? Don’t you have coeurls to groom or dualhorns to bathe? Or other people to irritate?” Prompto questions, then his face softens. “Ooh, that almost rhymed.”

“I did, but I finished that yesterday.” Ravus points out with another wave of his rolled-up magazine. “And no, there are no others. Ignis and Noctis are on a double date with Nyx and Luna, Cindy’s taken Cid to the clinic on account of his arthritis playing up again, Iris and Talcott are spending the day with Loqi, Gladio’s probably sulking in his house, and you and I know better than to mess with Gentiana.”

“You really must be desperate for company if you’re willing to put up with me. Got tired of the sound of your own voice?”
“Oh good, the petty insults are returning. You’re bouncing back quicker than I thought you would.”

“Would you stop?!?” Prompto exclaims, startling Ruby, causing her to squawk and flap her wings in defence, whacking him in the face.

Ravus snorts in amusement. “You must admit, you deserved that one.” Prompto sighs as he buries his face into Ruby’s feathers, thinking of how he hates that he’s allowed his conversation with Gladio to affect him so much – and that Ruby needs a bath soon. “Why are you doing this to yourself, Prompto? We all knew this day would come. Granted, we all imagined it would come much later but we take what’s been given. Despite it all, there is hope.”

Prompto lifts his head from the feathers and rests his chin on Ruby’s back as he looks across to Ravus. “You? Talk about hope? What have you done with the real Ravus?”

“You’re avoiding the subject.”

“Y-Yeah, I know. Well, I don’t know. I guess, it’s just easier to deal with the loss if I distance myself now, you know? It reduces the risk of emotional fallout when he does sell the zoo,” Prompto explains, though an inner voice tells him it’s far too late for emotional detachment.

Ravus seems to consider it, calmly patting his magazine against the palm of his hand as he goes through his thoughts. “Smart move. It’s certainly what I would do.”

“I don’t think it counts if you’re already emotionally detached from people.”

“You are a paragon of humour, Argentum.”

“Same goes for you with advice, Fleuret,” Prompto throws back. He puts the feather brush down and pats Ruby’s back, allowing her to go and roam the open enclosures with her other chocobos. He moves to stand next to Ravus, the two of them looking out into the open plains where the chocobos roam. “The sooner he sells this place, the sooner I can move on with my life,” he says introspectively, “maybe it’s time to let the dream go.”

-----

“And then, when I turned around, I pointed finger guns at him and said ‘cake, baby!’” Noctis finishes his anecdote with a laugh, a laugh in which everyone joins in on. “I’m pretty sure I still have that front page article about it. You should’ve seen the look on my dad’s face when he heard—”

“I don’t think I’ve seen the President laugh so much before. I genuinely thought he was having a heart attack,” Nyx says with grin. He pulls into a parking space at the zoo, having driven himself, Luna, Noctis, and Ignis back from their double date. They get out of the car and Nyx takes a moment to admire how sweet Lunafreya looks wearing his suit jacket on the account of the unusually chilly May evening.

“I regret my choice of wearing high heels; who decided that a late night stroll through the city after dinner was a good idea?” Luna asks, leaning against the car for support as she removes her heels and hangs the slingbacks on her fingers.

“I believe that was you, princess,” Nyx says, chuckling.

He walks around the car and picks Luna. Instinctively, she wraps her arms around his neck, still holding on to her high heels. “Nyx, as charming and sweet as this is, I’m perfectly capable of walking the short distance to the diner.”
“Princess, you work at a zoo. I don’t trust whatever’s on the ground.”

“He makes a valid point,” Ignis comments. Noctis sidles up to him and slips his hand into Ignis’, resting his head against the side of his shoulder as they walk up to the diner. “And before you ask, Noct, no, I won’t carry you.”

Noctis scowls as he pulls his hand away from him and folds his arms across his chest. “You’re no fun, Specs.”

“I’m one hundred percent positive that’s not what you said last night,” Ignis says casually, a small smirk tugging at corner of his lips. Nyx and Luna stifle their laughter as Noct’s eyes widen and he playfully slaps his arm.

Noctis sighs, shaking his head. “You’re impossible,” he says with a small smile. Just before he has the chance to push the diner door open, a voice calls out to them, catching their attention.

“So did you guys enjoy your date?” They turn and find Gladio walking up to meet them. There’s a smile on his face but his clothes are dishevelled and the bags under his eyes are heavier than usual. These features don’t go unnoticed by the four of them.

“We did, but how’re you doing?” Nyx asks, setting Luna down on the porch of the diner entrance before approaching Gladio, holding his shoulder. “You don’t look great.”

Gladio chuckles as he looks up to Luna. “You got a real charmer here, Lu.”

“He has his moments,” she replies with a soft smile. “Do you want to talk, Gladio?”

“If I’m not bothering anybody, then yeah.” Nyx wants to make a comment how it’s ridiculous for Gladio to even suggest that, to Luna of all people.

“It’s no bother at all. Let’s go in the diner and Ignis can make us some hot cocoa.” Luna offers, opening the diner door, letting everyone inside. Gladio sits himself in a booth, looking out through the window and across dirt road to Prompto’s shack. The lights are still on, indicating that he’s awake. He’s tempted to walk over and invite him but he thinks back to their previous encounters in the past week. He speaks to him only when needed; he walks out of the room when he enters; and he throws all his energies into his work. However, it’s exactly what Gladio has been doing too. And he abhors this distance between himself and Prompto, and can’t bring himself to understand why it affects him so.

“None for Noct and I. We gotta get back to the city,” Nyx calls out to Ignis. He nods as he walks around the counter to the Altissian commercial coffee maker.

Noctis frowns. “We do?”

“Yeah, ’cause you got work in the morning, and so do I.”

“That’s boring.”

“That’s adulthood.”

“Yeah, and it sucks. I don’t think of myself as an adult—”

“We’re all very aware of that fact, dear Noct,” Luna says teasingly, causing Noct to roll his eyes and Ignis and Nyx to snort.
“—But an adult in training.”

“You’ll be twenty five this August,” Nyx points out.

“Urgh, don’t remind me. Dad wants to throw a joint celebration for me and for his last few months in office before the election,” Noctis says with a dismissive wave of his hand. “I mean, I guess I shouldn’t complain too much, he’s planning for Neo Liu and Tu Hua Bing to perform so it can’t be too bad,” he shrugs.

“We really have to go now, Noct,” Nyx says before he kisses Luna gently, earning him an amused scoff from Ignis.

“Rather chaste, are we?”

The older man looks over his shoulder to Ignis. “Well yeah, when you guys are around to look.” Luna giggles and goes up on her toes to press a kiss on Nyx’s cheek. “It’s more than you’re getting at the moment, Ignis.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Noctis says, a smirk pulling up at his lips as he walks around the counter with purpose.

“Noct don’t, I’m handling hot liquids at the moment—“ But his warning is dismissed as Noctis pulls Ignis down into a dipped kiss; one hand supporting his upper back and the other wrapped over his side, resting at the small of his back while Ignis holds Noct’s face in his hands and pulls his leg up.

Luna and Nyx exchange an amused look with each other and after a few long moments pass, Nyx clears his throat. “Alright lovebirds, you can stop.”

They pull away, but remain in their dipped position, with Noctis lifting his head to look at Nyx and Ignis bending his head more to look at him upside down. “So who’s getting more than who again, Nyx?” Noctis asks with a grin.

Nyx rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Come on, or I’m leaving your ass behind again.” He pulls Luna in by her waist and kisses her again. “I’ll call you tomorrow, alright?” Then he leaves the diner.

Noctis kisses Ignis again briefly before pulling him back up to a standing position. “I honestly don’t know what you see in him, Luna,” Noctis says, shaking his head with a smile.

“I could ask Ignis the same question with you,” she replies casually as she takes a seat next to Gladio in the booth.

“Between the zoo and your Secret Service job?” Luna asks and Gladio looks at her as if to ask how she knew. She offers a small smile and a slight nod of her head. “Prompto may have hinted at our pending unemployment. That, and I’ve always known. I’ve seen you with the President when he
visited Tenebrae.” Gladio almost forgets that Lunafreya and Ravus are the children of the former Tenebraen Prime Minister.

“It’s not pending because I haven’t decided. Prompto has it in his head that my choice is already made but it isn’t. I don’t want you all to lose your jobs just because I haven’t got a grip on my own life.” It all comes out more coherently than Gladio expects.

“Perhaps we should have asked Nyx and Noct to stay. They would have a helpful insight into your dilemma,” Ignis says, tapping his chin thoughtfully. But Gladio shakes his head in disagreement.

“No, I don’t want their input. Noct would tell me that I’m overthinking this and Nyx would say to go with my gut.”

“But consider this, perhaps they have a point,” Ignis says. “You say you don’t want us to lose our jobs, but are you more scared of losing the zoo or losing the employees, us, your friends? Because believe me, Gladio, just because we won’t work here anymore, doesn’t mean we won’t stop visiting you and the children.”

“Well, it’s questionable for Cid, however, Ignis speaks the truth for the rest of us. Even Ravus.” Luna agrees.

Gladio looks between Ignis and Luna, holding his mug in hand. “So you’re both telling me to sell the zoo? Not gonna lie, I was expecting something different.”

“You were expecting us to convince you to not sell the zoo?” Ignis questions. “It sounds like you don’t want us to lose and are just looking for a good enough reason to keep the zoo.”

“No! I mean, maybe? I don’t know, that’s why I asked to talk to both of you, to clear my head and not for you to psychoanalyse me, Iggy.”

Ignis raises his hands in defence. “Forgive me, it was not my intention.”

“And we’re not telling you to sell or not sell the zoo, Gladio.” She takes a savouring sip of her hot chocolate and licks her lips lightly. She holds the cup in both her hands as she continues on. “We’re telling you that if you choose this, we will still be here. We’re no longer just your employees, but also your friends.”

“Because that makes my choice easier. I’m basically firing my friends,” Gladio retorts in bitterness. Luna and Ignis hold each others’ gaze before sighing in contemplation. “I don’t mean to make this difficult, but out of all the people I’ve spoken to, I expected you two to understand better than anyone that it’s not an easy choice to make. Even with Loqi’s offer to invest in the zoo.”

“What’s this investment offer?” Luna asks, both in curiosity and confusion. “Prompto didn’t mention this before.”

“I may have forgotten to mention it to him in the middle of our heated argument, but when I was with Loqi at the Maidenwater last week, he offered to invest into the zoo. The only condition is that I put everything I have into it, and I assumed he meant quitting my job and dedicating myself to the zoo.”

Both Ignis and Luna consider this thoughtfully. “It's a generous offer, but it’s putting a lot to chance.” Ignis finally says after a moment.

“Told you that it wasn’t an easy choice.”
“Neither of us are saying that it’s an easy choice, Gladiolus.” Gladio almost flinches at the sound of his full name. Ignis almost sounds like his father. “We’re assuring you that we will understand whatever you choice you make. As much as you want to, you can’t protect us.” There it is again. That pesky word: protect. He remembers Prompto’s indignant declaration of how no one is asking him to protect them. Perhaps he’s spent too long thinking of what could have been, and in effect, his desire to protect those closest to him have led him to be unable to accept of what was.

Gladio looks down at the now-lukewarm liquid in his mug, watching as the light cream swirls with the current of the hot chocolate. “You’re right. Both of you. I guess I just didn’t want to accept it.”

“The things we must accept are often the hardest things to accept,” Luna says wisely. She reaches over and presses a platonic kiss on the side of his head. Gladio smiles at the gesture. “As for Prompto, give him time. He believes that if he distances himself from you and your family, it’ll be easier when the time comes.”

“When the time comes for what?” Gladio asks.

And Luna smiles softly as she reaches out for his hand, squeezing it gently. “When the time comes for you to make your choice.”

-----

Two days later, after dropping the children off at school, instead of going to work, he finds himself in the cemetery, looking down at Aranea’s gravestone. It’s the first time in over five months that he’s visited. The last time had been at her funeral and since then, Gladio has found it too difficult to even be within a mile radius of the place. He sits down cross-legged in front of the grave and sets down a bouquet of sylleblossoms on the grass. “They’re sylleblossoms. I remember you mentioning how pretty you thought they were, and how it was a shame they didn’t grow anywhere else but Tenebrae.” He chuckles lightly at the memory. “My friend Luna planted these in the zoo that I bought. Oh yeah, by the way, we bought a chocobo zoo, that’s a thing that happened.”

He rubs his neck awkwardly. How do people do it in films? They usually have a beautifully spoken speech about how they will always love and remember who they’ve lost but will move on and live so that their memory isn’t in vain. Gladio pulls out two letters from the inner pocket of his jacket: one resignation letter addressed to his father, and one letter addressed to Ardyn Izunia to confirm the selling of the zoo. “I don’t really know what to do, ‘Nea. This is the part where you usually tell me to ‘woman’ up. And in those movies, this is the part where I start crying and then I have a sudden answer, but neither of those things are happening.”

“I miss you, y’know. We didn’t have a perfect life, but damn, did we have some perfect kids.” He laughs lightly, stroking the velvet texture of the sylleblossom petals. “Talcott’s taking after you, I think. And Iris is as hard as nails as ever. I honestly didn’t think anyone else was more stubborn than you. Then again, you’d say that she gets my stubbornness from me so I guess that’s on both of us.” Gladio chuckles again but it fades into a sad sigh. “I think you’d like the people I’ve met. Gentiana, Cindy and Cid are great. And you and Ignis would have met each others’ match in wit. You’d be touched by Luna’s kindness. But I don’t think you and Ravus would get along, not at first at least. And Prompto…” he trails off, not knowing what to say about the blond. “He’s really something, ‘Nea. I don’t know what it is, but he’s something special, and I only wish he knew it.”

He looks up at the gravestone, reading the engraving, ‘Aranea Highwind, beloved sister, mother, and wife,’ and below it, is a phrase she always used in times of strife, ‘quit moping, keep hoping.’ He blinks at the gravestone, disbelieving of the words engraved on it. He rubs his eyes and looks at it again, reading her quote over and over again. “Quit moping, keep hoping.” He murmurs. “It seems that no matter how many times you said that, I still kept forgetting it.” Gladio stands up and walks to
the side of the gravestone. He presses a kiss to his fingertips before touching the top of the gravestone. “Thank you, ‘Nea. Even in death, you always know what to say.”

On his journey to the Rabanastre Real Estate Office, through the congested pedestrian pavements, his phone starts vibrating in his pocket. Answering it, he presses the device to his ear. “Hello?”

“Glad—Noc—Wher—you—ing?”

“Can you speak up? I can’t hear you over the traffic!” Gladio says, raising his voice as he paves his way through the sea of civilians.

“Gladio! It’s Noct! Where are you now?”

“On my way to see Izunia, why?”

“Don’t! At least not yet!” Gladio steps into an alleyway to get away from the noise and congestion.

“Why not?”

“I just received a letter that you’ll want to see.”

“Why?”

“You sure are asking ‘why’ a lot today,” Noctis says, causing Gladio to roll his eyes, not that Noctis can see him. “But you’ll want to see this letter, because it’s from Aranea.” Gladio feels his heart stop in his chest. He doesn’t respond for a few moments, still trying to process his words. “Gladio? You still there, big guy?”

Gladio leans his back against the wall. “Y-Yeah, I’m still here, Noct. What’s the letter about?”

“I think it’s best if you come and read it yourself. The kids’ lunchtime starts in like half an hour, so can you make it here for then?”

Gladio checks his watch. “I should be able to. Also, Noct, aren’t you supposed to be teaching at the moment?”

“Oh yeah, well they’re doing arts and crafts and I’m supposed to be looking for glitter paint in the cupboards.” He hears Noct scoff on the other side of the line. “As if I’ll let them have glitter paint again. I permanently have a pink glittered shirt because of them.”

“You love your job, Noct.”

“That is true, but I don’t appreciate my shirt being glittered.”

“At least they don’t have a bedazzler.”

“Oh they did have one until I convinced the headteacher to ban bedazzlers on account of having every stationary item on my classroom desk to be bedazzled. I’m just glad they didn’t break into my office during that time.” Noct grumbles about it but Gladio can hear the fond, light chuckle in his voice. “Anyways, I’ll see you in half an hour.”

“See you then.”

-----

“So what’s so important about this letter?” Gladio asks as he enters Noct’s office, closing the door
behind him. As Noctis is not only Talcott’s kindergarten teacher, but also the Deputy Headteacher, he has his own office. It’s a fairly sized room with an L-shaped desk by the window with the office armchair by the wall. There are several photographs mounted along one the wall and Gladio spots one featuring himself, Aranea, and Noct when they went on holiday to Cape Caem. On the back wall, his education and History degrees, along with his three Navyth Fishing tournament awards are displayed. To the other side of the room, a small leather couch is positioned against the wall with a glass coffee table separating the couch and the two matching leather armchairs. On the coffee table, there’s a dish of wrapped sweets and candies.

Noctis stands from behind his desk and walks up to Gladio, handing the envelope over to him before shoving both of his hands into his pockets. “You better read it for yourself.”

With both hesitation and curiosity buzzing in his fingertips, Gladio pulls the letter out from the envelope and unfolds it.

To Noctis,

If you’re reading this, then chances are that I’m dead. You know, it’s strange to be alive, but to be writing this as if from beyond the grave. I hoped you would never have to read this, but clearly you are, and I’m sorry for whatever grief and pain I’ve caused – though it is nice to know that I’m missed (or at least, I hope I am). Pretty boy, I’m going to need you to be Gladio’s strength during his grief. It’s only fair since he’s spent his life being yours.

Now, I’m sure you’re wondering why I wrote this letter to you, instead of Gladio or even my estranged brother. I addressed this letter to you because I know Gladio won’t open any letters, even ones from me, after my death. He’ll shut himself away and you can’t allow that to happen. You’re the closest person he has to a brother and because of that, it makes you my brother too. I trust you to always put his and my children’s best interests at heart because they’re your family. In this envelope, I’ve enclosed a deposit box slip containing a large sum of money saved from over the years. I presume by now, you’ve run off and called Gladio so this next part is for him so avert your eyes.

Gladio,

Just because I died doesn’t mean you should lose your will to live. I’m sorry for leaving you so early. I never wanted to. We didn’t have a fairytale beginning, or a fairytale ending, but we did have a fairytale middle. I wish I could say that your love has made me into a whole new person, but it hasn’t. What our life has done for me is made me into a better person. You and our children have blessed my life in immeasurable ways and I can’t thank you enough. Really, I can’t because this pen is starting to run out and I want to get back into bed with you (as I’m writing this while you’re asleep). Tell our children that I love them and that I’m sorry I couldn’t take them on an airship ride like they’ve always wanted to.

My last wish for you is to accept what has happened and then to move on to open yourself to other forms of happiness. Believe it or not, there is someone else out there who can make you just as happy, if not happier, as I did. Stop thinking of what everyone else wants from you. What do you want from you? Figure out what it is you’re really after. Use the money wisely and listen to your heart. You don’t need me to tell you what you already know.

Quit moping and keep hoping, sweetheart,
When he finishes, he reads it over several times more, in case there’s something he’s read wrong. But when the words remain the same, he uses the back his hand to wipe the wetness from his eyes. He swallows hard and he feels Noctis’ hand rest on his shoulder. “You gonna be alright?”

Gladio smiles and pats Noct’s hand on his shoulder. “Yeah, I think I’m gonna be.” He walks over to the couch and sits down, setting the letter down on the table and taking out the deposit slip from inside the envelope. “Sweet Bahamut, it’s two hundred thousand gil, Noct.” He pulls the younger man down to the couch and shakes his shoulders. “You know what this means?”

“That even in death, Aranea’s still saving your ass?”

“Well yeah, but it means something else.” Gladio stands up and takes the two letters from his pocket. He rips one in half and throws it in the recycling basket before turning to Noct, who’s struggling to keep up with the suddenly energised Gladiolus. “I’m going to need you to come over to the house tonight. Oh and call Loqi, tell him to swing by at dinner.” It’s not a request but an order. Gladio is halfway out of the office when Noctis pulls him back by his sleeve.

“No objections here, but do you mind telling me what’s actually going on?”

In response, Gladio grins and holds up the envelope containing Aranea’s letter and the deposit slip. “Aranea is what’s going on. You’ll find out at dinner, okay?” And with that, Gladio leaves Noct’s office, leaving the young teacher to look baffled in his doorway. When he gathers his thoughts, Noctis closes the office door, sits in his chair and takes out his phone and taps on Ignis’ number.

Two rings pass before he picks up. “Hello, love, how are you?” Noctis has to take a moment. Gods how he loves that rich Tenebraen accent; he could swim in it all day if it was ever tangible.

He clears his throat. “I’m alright, Iggy, thanks. Just on my lunch break at the moment. And you?”

“Attempting to cheer Prompto up with his favourite meal. He’s sulking more than usual because today is the day that Gladio gives his answer to either his boss or the real estate agent.”

“Classic Prompto. Listen, can you do me a favour?”

“If it is within my power to do so.”

“Cook up a real fancy meal for dinner. Gladio’s got something big to tell all of us, and if my gut feeling’s right, it’s good news.”

He hears Ignis chuckle over the phone. “I’m sure there’s something I can cook that’s ‘celebration’ worthy.”

“I don’t doubt you at all, Specs. I’ll see you later tonight, okay?”

“I’ll be waiting eagerly.”

Chapter End Notes
Annnnnnnd the angst is over (for now). I hope that was worth the wait? I'm aware that Aranea doesn't sound like Aranea, I just find it difficult to write her in letter form. And Neo Liu and Tu Hua Bing (which Noct briefly mentions) sings 'Calling for Rain' on the Kingsglaive soundtrack and it's the best bop you can listen to when driving.

I'm not sure when I'll update again as my first exam is on the 7th June and my last exam is 22nd, but I only have 4 exams which are spread out so we'll see what happens.

Also, if you want to give me a cheeky follow on my tumblr @ ton-berry please do so. I tend to post any announcements about future updates there so you're not left in the dark too much, and I tag anything to do with the story under wbacz. So yeah, I hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Summary

During the announcement dinner, Gladio and the others receive an unexpected (and unwelcome) guest who comes with news. Prompto tells Gladio the history of Three Valleys Wildlife Park and Conservation.

Chapter Notes

And so my exams have finished and I can finally give you this chapter which is in honour of Episode Prompto which is coming on the 27th!

I have also created a spotify playlist for this fanfic (tbh it's pretty much a promptio playlist) which is [here](link) and I would recommend listening to it as you're reading but if it's not your thing, then that's cool too.

Thank you to everyone who wished me luck on my exams and thank you all for being patient with me! I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

cooking mama: Noct, after work, would you kindly buy some Ulwaat berries from the Tenebraen grocery store on Lockhart Street?
sleepy bean: do you realise how much those cost specs?
sleepy bean: i know i’m the president’s son but i have a teacher’s salary
cooking mama: I’m sure I can think of some way to pay you back justly.
sleepy bean: oh can you now? ;)
i-need-a-hand: Please don’t start sexting on the group chat.
sleepy bean: we’re not sexting
cooking mama: If you were, you’re doing a poor job of it.
sleepy bean: excuse me but who was it who wanted me to buy the expensive ulwaat berries??
cooking mama: Ah, touché.
grease monkey goddess: how tf do you even put that accent on the e
cooking mama: You hold down the ‘e’ and a selection will appear above.
grease monkey goddess: it was a rhetorical question but good to know, I’ll keep that in mind for future reference
sleepy bean: back to the point of this convo, I thought you bought like 4 punnets three weeks ago??
cooking mama: Ask Lunafreya what happened to those punnets.
sleepy bean: luna??
grease monkey goddess: ????
ic queen: Lunafreya…
lady sylleblossom: …It was Ravus’ fault.
i-need-a-hand: No no, you don’t get to implicate me in your crime.
lady sylleblossom: …I may have eaten the 4 punnets… I was hungry.
grease monkey goddess: :O
sleepy bean: LUNA COME ON I’M NOT PAYING FOR YOUR MISTAKES
sleepy bean: iggyyyyyy pls :(((
sleepy bean: she ate them she bought them
cooking mama: Generally yes, but you're already in the city and it would be a waste of fuel for Luna to drive there.
sleepy bean: i’m not happy with this specs
grease monkey goddess: you’re rarely happy you emo child
sleepy bean: IM 24 YEARS OLD
grease monkey goddess: I don’t hear you denying the emo bit tho
grease monkey goddess: #exposed
cooking mama: Noct I'm sorry, I promise I'll make it up to you.
sleepy bean: financially?
cooking mama: Luna can cover financial expenses. I can cover... other expenses.
sleepy bean: ...i’m listening...
ice queen: Not on the group chat.
cooking mama: Private chat, Noct?
sleepy bean: already a step ahead of you specs
grease monkey goddess: ANYWAYS has anyone seen prompto??
lady sylleblossom: The last I saw him, he was taking Ruby out for a ride. Said something about needed to clear his head?
i-need-a-hand: I'm surprised he hasn't spoken on the group chat yet.
ice queen: He left his phone.
grease monkey goddess: ...prompto NEVER leaves his phone
i-need-a-hand: He and Gladio just need to have sex and make up.
lady sylleblossom: Ray, you realise that both Prompto and Gladio are on this group chat, right?
i-need-a-hand: Of course I do, why else would I say it?
grease monkey goddess: boy subtlety doesn't exist for you does it??
i-need-a-hand: Subtlety is for cowards.
grease monkey goddess: nice way to bring a conversation down ravus

---

"Papa? What's going on?" Iris asks, her seatbelt stretching as she leans forward, her hands grabbing hold of the sides of Gladio's seat in front of her. "I heard from Mr Prompto and Luna and the others that you're making a big decision today. So what was the big decision?" In the front seat of the Range Rover (which Aranea hated at first, thinking that Gladio was compensating for something else), Gladio drums his fingers against the steering wheel, casually driving along the Leiden roads.

"Iris, sit back in your seat," he tells her. She huffs and sits back in her seat, arms folded and chin lifted high as she looks to the side. "But you're right, papa made a big decision today. A decision I hope you're both happy with."

"How can we be happy with it when we don't even know what it was?" Talcott asks.

"You'll find out tonight, I promise."

"We're not moving house again, are we? I just got used to hearing the chocobos having their early morning runs," Iris says, almost whining.
Gladio chuckles as he turns into the dirt road leading to the Three Valleys Wildlife Park and Conservation. "No no, we're not moving house again. Now when you guys get out of the car, drop your stuff off in your rooms and get changed, then go to Iggy's diner, alright?"

"Sir, yes sir!" Iris and Talcott giggle, giving a small salute, though Talcott forgets he's holding a plastic cactuar action figure and accidentally hits himself in the eye. Instead of crying, he proceeds to scold the cactuar action figure for hurting him, much to Gladio's amusement. Once he's parked, the kids follow Gladio's instructions and take their bags to the house and get changed, while Gladio turns and makes his way into the diner, the immediate smell of fresh food hitting him like a tidal wave.

"Not that I'm complaining, but I'm pretty sure I said we're having dinner, not a banquet," Gladio says in awed reverence. Ignis stands proudly at the end of the table, a smug, proud smile gracing his face as his arms fold across his chest, over his apron. With help from both Noctis and Ravus, they have pushed several tables together, creating one long table complete with place settings and the works. The napkins are even folded into swans, courtesy of Gentiana and Lunafreya, or so Ignis informs. Gladio's smile grows wider when he sees a stack of Prairie-style skewers, and even more so when he spots the king-sized cup noodles at his plate. He laughs when he sees Noctis keep a plate of Ulwaat tarts close to him. His eyes narrow at some of the dishes, never having seen them before, and gives a low whistle at the effort Ignis has given.

Ignis waves him off modestly. "Oh come now, it's merely a small feast at best. It's no banquet."

Noctis slips his hand into Ignis' casually, unaware of the man's slight blush. "You better be careful, Iggy. If my dad finds out about this, he'll want you catering for my birthday or some Presidential banquet thing. I mean, he already thinks you're a miracle worker because I ate a vegetable that isn't potatoes or sweetcorn."

Ignis clears his throat. "I'm not so sure that vegetable crisps counts as vegetables. They're thinly sliced vegetables which are then baked."

"It says 'vegetables' on the packet so it counts," Noctis says definitively. Ignis decides not to debate the matter further, knowing that Noctis will only find ways to pigeonhole his comments and remarks.

Eventually, Iris, Talcott, most of the staff and close friends - including Nyx Ulric and Loqi Tummelt - are sat around the long table(s) and commence the meal. The only one absent is a certain chocobo keeper by the name of Prompto Argentum. During the dinner, he often glances towards the diner door, hoping that he'll stroll in with a bright smile on his face and crack some joke about being fashionably late or how there was chocobo traffic on the plains and desert. But none of the sort happened.

With a sigh, Gladio decides to proceed with the announcement, knowing full well how anticipated it was. He stands up and taps his glass with his fork, but ends up smashing it accidentally. Everyone's eyes fell to look at the shattered pieces of glass that were now swimming in Gladio's cup noodles. He winces, hoping it's not some sort of sign or omen. He mouths an apology to Ignis who simply shakes his head and gestures for him to continue with his announcement.

"It's no secret that I've been given an ultimatum. To either: keep my job as part of the President's Secret Service and sell the zoo so that I'm able to fully commit myself to the Glaives, or to quit the Glaives and dedicate myself to the management of the zoo and its eventual reopening. I'm not gonna lie to you guys, it wasn't an easy decision. Even today, I had two letters written up. One to go to the Head of the Secret Service to quit, and one written to the real estate agent to sell the zoo. After I visited Aranea's grave, I was going to go to sell the zoo today, and then Noct called me up, telling
me that there was a letter from her. I won’t go into the details of it, but let’s just say that even in death, Aranea’s still saving my ass: funds came through to keep the zoo going. I quit my job and I’m here to stay.”

There’s silence in the following few seconds. And then a cheer and applause. Hugs are shared around the table, and even Ravus removes his prosthetic arm, holding it with his other hand and pumping it in the air, much to the amusement of others (and to the shock of the children, both unaware of his fake arm). “I still want to invest!” Loqi calls out, a bright smile on his face. “I’ll be damned if I let my sister take all the credit.”

As Iris drags Ignis to the kitchen to get ice cream, and while everyone else celebrates and continues their small feast, through the window, Gladio spots a bright, ruby red chocobo standing outside of Prompto’s cabin opposite the diner. Quietly, he slips out of the diner and allows himself to briefly enjoy the cooling summer evening air before he makes his way to the cabin. He greets Ruby, ruffling her feathers gently, just as Prompto had shown him before, and pressed his forehead against her beak. “How’s he doing, girl? You looked after him, right?”

“I don’t know how to break it to you, big guy, but your kwehnese could use some work.” Gladio doesn’t startle easy. But Prompto’s sudden appearance and voice made him come very close to it. There’s a soft smile on his face and his eyes are pink and slightly puffy, as if he had been crying. And his hair’s flat, a result from chocobo riding. Gladio doesn’t point it out. It’s even a miracle that the younger man is even speaking to him. Prompto nods towards the cabin. “You wanna come in?”

He hesitates. Then takes a step forward. “Sure. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

As Prompto goes into the bathroom with a fresh t-shirt in hand, Gladio looks around. The cabin hasn’t changed much from when Gladio had last been inside. And that had been a little under two months ago. Two months doesn’t seem very long at all now that he really thinks about it. Prompto comes out from the bathroom; his hair is styled back to its usual chocobo butt style, and his face looks fresher and cleaner. “I have something to tell you,” Gladio blurts out.

Prompto’s eyebrows rise in curiosity. “And?”

“I quit my job and I’m keeping the zoo.” There’s a silence, much like the one Gladio experienced in the diner, but the reaction is not the same. Instead, Prompto frowns. “You don’t seem very happy about that.”

“Because I expected you to think about your kids, Gladio! You have a stable, secure job, and you’re going to throw it away on a zoo with a bad history because of a whim?”

“So you’re mad with me because I’m not selling the zoo, right? But selling it would have also made you made. You’re not helping me out here, Prom. Either way you’re mad. You remind me of my wife.” Whether it’s because Gladio has compared him as his spouse, or because of the situation generally, Prompto feels his face heat up.

“I know, I just—argh!” Prompto drags a hand down the side of his face, more annoyed at himself than at Gladio. “You... You confuse me!” He accuses, his voice going several octaves higher than usual.

Gladio stares at him incredulously. “I confuse you? And exactly how do I do that?” He challenges, looking down at Prompto. Did he really only just reach his shoulder? Prompto stares back at him, words numbing his tongue. Then there’s a knock at the cabin door. Prompto and Gladio hold their
stare for a moment, before Gladio breaks first and opens the door, revealing Noctis.

Noctis looks past Gladio and straight to Prompto. Where Noctis’ blue eyes had been filled with joy and celebration, all Gladio could see in them now was fear and deep concern. “Besithia is here.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” Prompto curses, surprising Gladio, for Prompto seldom swears. At least, in front of the kids.

“Who’s Besithia?” Gladio asks, looking between the two younger men.

Prompto swallows bitterly as he makes his way out of the cabin, with both Gladio and Noctis hot on his heels. “He’s the national zoo inspector,” he informs, pausing at the diner door, hand resting on the handle. “And he’s my father.” Then he pulls the handle down and pushes the door open, causing everyone to turn and face him, including his father. Gladio and Noctis stand behind Prompto, cautiously watching the scene before them.

“Oh my dear boy Prompto, how long has it been since we last saw each other?” Besithia, as Gladio recalls, is a rather disconcerting man to look at. It’s hard to imagine any resemblance between him and Prompto. He’s a balding man with white hair and a short white beard. His eyes seem slightly sunken into their sockets and deep crevices in his skin outline the constant frowns and creases.

“Not long enough,” Prompto says through gritted teeth.

Besithia tuts and Gladio’s opinion of him rapidly descends. He doesn’t like people who tut. “Now now, Prompto, don’t be rude in front of your friends and colleagues. And tell me, who’s the lucky new owner of this zoo?” The sarcasm and patronising tone in his voice does not go unnoticed.

“You’re looking right at him,” Gladio says confidently, taking several steps forward. He holds his hand out as common courtesy, shaking it when it’s accepted. “Gladiolus Amicitia.” He stares directly into the man’s face with a stone cold expression, letting him know he means business.

“Verstael Besithia. I’m the national zoo inspector.” He drops his hand, wiping it against his clothes before taking out a thin folder from his briefcase and handing it to Gladio. “I heard from a mutual acquaintance of ours that you have quit your job and have decided to take full management of the zoo. So, I took it upon myself to come down and perform a brief inspection of the place.” He taps the folder. “That contains all required health and safety precautions, as well as required anthropometrics of enclosures and storage of stock and perishables. Everything you need to sort out before inspection date which I’ll leave with Gentiana.”

“If only you cared this much about health and safety and how to actually run a zoo ten years ago,” Prompto says sourly, “Three Valleys wouldn’t have been shut down.”

“And if you knew how to run a zoo properly, it wouldn’t be so desperate as to need an inexperienced man to buy it out to save it,” Verstael snaps back. He straightens his jacket, tipping his head slightly to the group. “Well it’s been a pleasure.” Then he turns to Prompto once more. “Keep in touch, Prompto. Don’t be a stranger.”

“I’d rather be a stranger than your son.”

“At least you’ve made your sentiments clear.” Then he leaves, the diner bell rings signalling his departure. Silence drops on them all until Ignis clears his throat and asks everyone to help him clear the table and to bring everything into the kitchen. Gladio taps Prompto on the shoulder and nods towards the porch outside of the diner. He nods in agreement and the two walk out, both leaning on the rail as they look out.
Gladio clears his throat. “So.”

“So.”

“That son of a bitch… he’s your dad.”

“Yup.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Not as if you made him be my dad, y’know?”

“Still…” Gladio trails off. He clears his throat again, hoping it will drive away any awkwardness, though it seems ineffective. “Prompto, what happened between the two of you? You can tell me because I have my own share of father issues. I’ll understand.”

Whether it’s because he’s too tired and emotionally drained to decline, or because of some other reason entirely, Prompto answers with little hesitation, only a very evident degree of regret and sadness. “I came to Lucis as a refugee with my dad when I was a kid. Probably about Iris’ age. I don’t know how we managed it, but thinking about it now, he probably did something illegal, but he became the manager and owner of Three Valleys Wildlife Park. We lived in the city, but I spent my weekends here. I grew up here, y’know? Anyways, flash forward about six years later, I’m fourteen years old and just doing homework in our apartment in the city when the police break the door down and arrest my dad. I don’t really remember much, it… it happened all too fast and all at once. As soon as they had him, they left. Two officers stayed with me and tried to explain the situation but I just couldn’t hear them.

Two days after that, I found out what he was arrested for. He had multiple charges pressed against him: animal experimentation; fraud; embezzlement; drug trafficking… I’m sure there were more but those were the main ones. Turns out, the Three Valleys was just a front. He would take the animals and experiment on them, use them as test subjects for the drugs he was trafficking, and use them in Astrals know what. Then my dad was sent to prison for ten years minimum. The zoo was then shut down for three years before it was reopened, with me as a shareholder. Of course, I was a minor and because I was a refugee, I had no other family or close relatives to take me in so I went into the system. I don’t know what it was but somehow I was adopted six months after I went in. Like, Gladio, you don’t understand, some of those kids in those orphanages have been in there since birth. And I was the lucky bastard that got out six months after going in.” Prompto’s voice shakes with every word. Gladio reaches out and puts a hand on his shoulder, letting him know that he’s not alone.

“The Argentum family took me in. That’s why my name is Prompto Argentum, not Prompto Besithia. They were a good family. I wouldn’t say they loved me, but they certainly cared. They were working a lot, but the times I did get to see them were nice. Then I met Noct and things seemed to be going uphill from there. I got my degree and I went to work for Three Valleys because I wanted to make something good from something bad. To make it the place I thought it was when I was growing up, not the place it turned out to be. Then we started to run out of funds because we didn’t have enough people coming to visit because of the zoo’s history. We had to let a lot of good people go until it came down to the seven of us.”

“I’m… I’m so sorry, Prompto.”

“I appreciate it, big guy, but don’t worry about it. Makes no difference either way. What happened happened. No turning back.” Prompto shrugs nonchalantly but Gladio can feel the tension in his body. “Then a year ago, he got released on parole. Something about good behaviour or some crap
like that. Because of his experience in zookeeping, they decided to make him an inspector.

“The guy experimented on animals, and the police thought it would be a great idea if he was involved in zookeeping again?” Gladio shakes his head.

Surprisingly, Prompto snorts lightly in laughter. “The irony, am I right?” Then his laughter fades to a quieter chuckle. Then he clears his throat. The moonlight rests on them and the two admire the stars that speckle the night blanket. With all the light pollution of the city, it’s difficult to see the stars, even on clear nights, but out in the desert, they seem to be infinite. “Listen, Gladio,” Prompto turns to face the taller man. He hopes it’s dark enough so that Gladio can’t see the flush on his cheeks. “I want to say I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting. It was unfair and selfish. You needed support and advice and instead I projected my own problems and insecurities onto you, and you didn’t deserve that.”

“Hey,” Gladio says softly. He cups Prompto’s cheek and lifts lightly so that they look at each other. “I’m as much to blame as you are. I wasn’t being receptive to the advice you were giving, well, advice that anyone was giving. I’ve spent too much time mourning about what could have been, instead of what is here and now, and you reminded me of that. My natural instinct is to protect everyone, and when I couldn’t protect my wife, I felt inadequate to protect anyone at all, so I tried proving myself wrong by protecting others even more. Does that make any sense?”

Prompto cracks a smile. “Kinda, but you don’t often make sense, Gladdy.” Gladio smiles. It’s nice to hear Prompto’s nickname for him come from his lips again. And not spoken with contempt or bitterness either. But with a kind of affection that Gladio can’t quite label.

“Maybe I don’t. But it’d be nice if we could work out my nonsense together? Besides, the kids miss having you around. They’ve taken quite a liking to you.”

“Well that’s good, because I’ve taken quite a liking with their father.”

Gladio raises an eyebrow. “Oh really?”

Prompto nods casually. “Uh huh. Cool guy, you’d like him I think.”

“Oh reall—“

Someone clears their throat and both Prompto and Gladio turn around to find Ignis looking at them unimpressively. He’s wearing his apron with several cloths sticking out of the front double pockets and his shirt sleeves are rolled up to the elbow. Looking through the window, Prompto and Gladio can see Lunafreya sweeping the floor, with Nyx following after her trail with a mop whilst Ravus uses his prosthetic arm to reach the ceiling to clean where Talcott had squeezed the chocolate sauce bottle a little too hard. “If you two are finished making up or making out, you’re not exempt from cleaning. Come along now,” Ignis ushers the two inside, but the smile remains on both their faces for the rest of the evening.

Chapter End Notes

me: i've written a fluffy happy fanfic
me @ me: you've screwed up a perfectly good fanfic, look at it, it's got angst and anxiety

And there we have it! Episode Prompto will have tonnes of angst and so I thought I
would do the same for this chapter, but at least it ended somewhat happily. Ngl, it was a little bit of a bridge chapter because NOW is when the fun starts to begin. Hopefully it was worth the wait and please don't hesitate to hit me up on my tumblr (ton-berry) and have a chat with me. I'm really nice I swear.
Let Our Hearts, Like Doors, Open Wide

Chapter Summary

Gladio and the children learn how to be zookeepers. Iris educates Gladio and Prompto on dehydration. A mess in the kitchen. Oh, and Prompto can sing.

Chapter Notes

Before I get yelled at for how long this update took, I just want to say that this chapter is all worth the wait, I swear. I struggled through writer's block, illness, increased hours at work for this chapter. It's. All. Worth. It.

Also, quick note, I won't get the chance to update again until September because I'm on holiday for two weeks starting on the 14th and I doubt I'll be able to get another chapter in beforehand because of work and I'm really sorry about the inconsistent updates, trust me, I hate myself for it too, but if you're still reading and enjoying, then thank you so much for your patience and support!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“SON OF A BIIIII—“ Prompto and Luna cover Talcott and Iris’ ears as they watch Gladio run away from the Elder Coeurl who begins to chase him off her territory and out of the enclosure. Ravus' laughter rings throughout the still air, laughing so much so that he begins to cough. As he clutches his stomach, Gladio points accusingly at him. “You set me up, you asshole!” Again, Prompto and Luna cover Talcott and Iris’ ears.

“Set you up?” Ravus repeats, hints of laughter still laced within his words. “Why, I’ve given you precise instructions. You clearly haven’t been paying attention.” Lulu, the Elder Coeurl, wanders back to Ravus, rubbing her head against his open hand before laying by his feet protectively. “To earn Lulu’s respect, you must first show her respect. None of this ‘to beat the alpha, be the alpha’ business that mainstream media would have you believe.”

The day after Verstael paid a visit, Gladio and the children wasted no time in being educated by Prompto, Lunafreya, and Ravus in the science and care of zoology while Cid and Cindy work on improving and expanding the enclosures to fit to the regulations.

The aquatic and semi-aquatic creatures such as the catoblepas and the shieldshears, cared for primarily by Luna, were the first (as Iris insisted on teaching her father how to feed the catoblepas). After many pinches from the shieldshears’ pincers over the course of a couple of days, Gladio had learned how to care for them and learned their schedule for feeding, grooming, and sleeping. Then Ravus and Prompto alternated between the wild and the tamed creatures. Today, Gladio and the children are learning about coeurls.

Ravus sits down next to Lulu, stroking her patterned fur as she chuffs affectionately. The few other coeurls around the enclosure follow their Elder’s lead and sit around Ravus, enclosing him in a protective circle. “Coeurls are proud, majestic creatures, Gladiolus. Insulting their pride is the last
thing you’ll ever do.”

Gladio narrows his eyes at the silver-haired man as he folds his beefy arms over his chest. “No wonder why you get along so great,” he grumbles. As if sensing the negative intonation in his words, Lulu bares her fangs at Gladio, growling at him waringly. He takes a step back and Prompto, Luna, and the children giggle at him.

“What did I just say about coeurls?” Ravus asks, using a tone that a teacher would to a student. Gladio grumbles something intelligible under his breath and Ravus cups his hand around his ear. “Excuse me? What was that? You have a voice, don’t you? Speak up!”

“Coeurls are proud creatures,” Gladio begrudgingly recites, scowling at the other man. Ravus smiles smugly, standing straight with arms folded across his chest as the coeurls circle around him.

“Precisely, so show some manners. Animals they may be but nevertheless, the earth was first and foremost theirs before it was ever ours.” As irritating as Ravus is as a teacher, Gladio can’t help but respect the man’s appreciation towards the creatures he cares for. There was no hierarchy, no superior nor inferior between man and beast, but both were equals. “Approach slowly and bow. Show that you acknowledge her position.”

Swallowing his own pride and determined to succeed, Gladiolus cautiously approaches Lulu with one hand out in front of him. He barely makes it two steps before Ravus groans. “Now what?” He asks, throwing his hands to the sides before placing them on his hips, chest slightly puffed out.

“You’re approaching her as if you’re trying to calm her down,” Ravus tells him. “She’s calm, Gladiolus. Grow a spine. She won’t respect you unless you give her something to respect.”

Now on his third attempt, Gladio essentially strides up to Lulu, posture perfect, each heavy booted step oozing with confidence, before he halts three metres in front of Lulu. Outside of the enclosure, with Talcott sitting on Prompto’s shoulders and Iris clutching Luna’s hand, they watch with anticipation. Then Gladio bows, lowering himself steadily, before standing straight once again.

Lulu looks as if she narrows her feline eyes at Gladio before leaving Ravus’ side and circling around Gladio, inspecting him, hoping to uproot any insecurity she could sense in his aura. Then, after a few minutes of analysis, she begins to chuff approvingly before walking back to Ravus’ side, not without slapping Gladio’s cheek with one of her long whiskers. This earns him a sudden burst of giggles from Prompto, Luna, and the children. There’s a shape intake of breath. “I thought she liked me!”

“Oh she doesn’t like you,” Ravus tells him. He holds his hand out, allowing Lulu to nuzzle her head against it. “She approves of you, she respects you. But she just doesn’t like you. Not yet, at least.”

Gladio runs his hand through his hair and rubs the back of his neck. “And how do I get her to like me?”

“With time, Gladiolus, with time.” Then Ravus reconsiders his answer. “And perhaps drop by a jabberwock sirloin every now and then. She’ll like you a lot faster.”

-----

“And this is Bessie. Old girl here is about nineteen years old and has been with me for a good fifteen years,” Prompto introduces. “She’s no gentle giant, but she does have her soft moments.” Gladio can’t help but stare incredulously at the beast before him, the only thing separating them is the basin enclosure that’s at least a twenty-five foot drop. The behemoth enclosure is the largest one in the zoo, taking up at least three quarters of one of three valleys. Despite the vast amount of foliage and
greenery, Bessie the behemoth sticks out like a sore thumb.

“I thought we rescue animals, care for them, and then send them back to their own habitats afterwards?” Gladio points out. Iris stands on her tip-toes to see better whilst Talcott sits on Gladio’s shoulders. “How come Bessie’s been here for fifteen years?”

The smile on Prompto’s face falters and falls to a trembling line. “Bessie came to us because poachers killed her parents. We raised her, cared for her, and when she was old enough, we released her.” From the blond’s tone, Gladio can tell that this story doesn’t end well. “It was three months later, after her release, that we got a phone call about blind feral behemoth in Duscae. It was Bessie. We dug further into her story and found out that poachers attacked her and blinded her with some sort of acid. It started in one eye, earning her the nickname ‘Deadeye’ with the locals before it spread to both eyes. We brought her in and she’s been with us ever since. Bessie can’t survive alone out there.”

Down in the enclosure, Bessie scratches her face with her paw before rubbing her face against the stone walls. Iris leans forward and bangs the fence with her fist. “Papa, look!” She cries out. “Bessie’s in pain! Her eyes are hurting!”

Gladio grips the metal barrier tightly as he looks down at Bessie, then back to Prompto whose back is turned away from her. It’s as if he couldn’t bear to see someone he’s cared for, for fifteen years, to be in pain. “Isn’t there anything we can do for her? Medicine or anything?”

Prompto is pensively silent, contemplating his answer. He wants to tell Gladio that the best thing for Bessie is to be put down, to put her out of her misery. Well, perhaps, want isn’t the right word for it. It’s more of a need. But seeing the fire in Gladio’s eyes and the desperation in his voice stops Prompto from telling him. How could he? Gladiolus Amicitia is a man that won’t stand to have anyone suffer or die unless there’s a chance he could do something about it. “She needs a doctor.” Prompto finally says. “And the specialist lives in Accordo and it’s gonna be really expensive—“

“Doesn’t matter, I’ll pay whatever. We have the money,” Gladio cuts in.

“Great, uh,” Prompto rubs his arm, still not making eye contact with Gladio, “I’ll have Gentiana make the appointment. Specialist should be here by the end of this week if we’re lucky.” He takes his phone out from one of the pouches on his utility belt and types a quick message to the secretary. “Bessie’s more used to Ravus and me so I don’t want you worrying about feeding her or anything like that, alright?” He says, tucking his phone back in its pouch.

“I want to though,” says Gladio, with both hands on the sides of Prompto’s shoulders. “I’m not gonna half-ass this, Prom, I want to get down and dirty with it. I’m gonna be as dedicated to this as I was to the Glaives. I’m almost there with the coeurls; I can handle a behemoth.”

A small frown pulls at Prompto’s lips and a worried crease forms on his forehead as he turns away, forcing Gladio’s hands to fall back to his sides. “No, you can’t. You’re not ready. A pack of coeurls is one thing, but a behemoth is another thing entirely. And you’ve only been working with the animals for a week. It’s not safe and you could get hurt.”

“Not if I have you with me,” Gladio points out. He lifts Talcott off from his shoulders and sets him down on the ground. The young boy joins his sister at the barrier, tiptoeing to see over the edge but to no avail. Gladio, placing a hand on Prompto’s shoulder again, gently turns him back around to face him. “I’m not gonna go on my own, that’s just plain stupid. But if I come with you when you go to feed her, she’ll slowly become used to me, right?”

Prompto’s face twists in uncertainty and his arms fold over his chest tightly, inhaling piercingly. “I
Gladio’s hand moves slowly to the base of his neck, and then lightly cupping his jaw. “Nothing could go wrong with the best zookeeper at my side, right?”

Prompto gulp. “R-Right. M-Maybe don’t let Ravus hear you say that,” he says, chuckling nervously. He feels himself take a step closer to the taller man so that Gladio’s chin just brushes over his head. The second hand comes up and cups the other side of his face, guiding him towards his lips. Finally, after all those close encounters, those missed chances, those what ifs, the unspoken attraction between them will finally become tangible and real. Their lips barely brush against each other when —

“What’s wrong with Mr Prompto’s face, papa?” Talcott asks curiously, tugging on the bottom of his father’s shirt. The two freeze. Ah yes, perhaps they momentarily forgot that children are around. Gladio pulls his head back but neither of them make a move to step away from each other.

“I think he needs a drink of water,” Iris says, tilting her head at a slight angle, “Mr Noct said that when people’s faces are red like that,” she points at Prompto’s flushed face, “they’re thirsty and need to drink so they’re not de—” Iris purses her lips in contemplation and scratches her head, “de— dehytated? No…” She reconsiders the word again and it’s another few seconds before she claps her hands in sudden realisation. “Dehydrated! Mr Prompto needs to drink so he’s not dehydrated!”

With every word that Iris spoke, another shade of red layers itself on Prompto’s cheeks. However, she’s right. Prompto is certainly thirsty but his dehydration couldn’t be assuaged by a simple beverage. Before his cheeks begin to resemble Ravatogh’s lava, Gladio claps a hand on Prompto’s back, almost making the smaller man double over. “Let’s head over on home and make some of that mango and pineapple smoothie that Iggy taught us, yeah? I think that should help Mr Prompto,” he suggests, trying not to smile too much.

“Yeah!” Talcott and Iris cry out, before racing to Ruby and Sapphire, the two chocobos. Talcott tugs on Sapphire’s reins impatiently. “Come on, hurry up, slow pokes!”

“We’re coming, Tally,” says Gladio, though he doesn’t change the speed of his walk. He looks to the blond man at his side and finds Prompto suddenly looking away. He smiles to himself but says nothing and instead lets the silence be filled by Iris and Talcott’s complaints about their slowness.

They arrive at the house, but Gladio tells Prompto to get cleaned up and changed first before they have dinner. Somewhere along the ride from the behemoth enclosure to the house, Iris has managed to convince Prompto and Gladio having smoothies would be better if they also have dinner too, and really, they couldn’t argue with her logic. It’s another hour and a half before Prompto makes his way back to the Amicitia household. He enters through the kitchen side-door and he’s greeted with a rather eventful sight.

Gladio wears a black apron over a fresh t-shirt and jeans as he’s cooking spaghetti. This seems normal enough until Prompto looks closer and sees the red sauce on his apron, along with bits of tomato and meatball. On the island counter, there’s a tipped over blender, with bits of what Prompto assumes to be mango and pineapple spewed around it, and the thick yellow mix spills over the counter and onto the floor, creating a surprisingly large puddle. There are several strands of broken uncooked spaghetti on the floor which clearly didn’t make it into the boiling pot and there’s several washcloths on the counter near the stove where the spaghetti sauce seemed to have been spilled. Then Prompto finally spots Iris and Talcott screaming at each other as they fight over the garlic bread baguette by the fridge. The whole kitchen is a mess of smoothie mix, spaghetti sauce and screaming and it’s rather overwhelming to walk into.
“Iris, Talcott, if you don’t get your act together by the time Prompto arrives, I swear to the Six that —“ Gladio stops himself when he realises Prompto is standing by the side door. His eyes are wide and he’s suddenly flustered and begins to splutter out. “P-Prompto! Y-You’re here!”

Upon hearing Prompto’s name, both Iris and Talcott gasp and drop the garlic bread and scamper over to him. Iris narrowly avoiding the bright yellow smoothie mix puddle on the tiled floor whilst Talcott walks through it with little thought. They almost make it to him when their father’s voice stops them in their tracks. “Iris, Talcott, go upstairs and get yourselves cleaned up.” Gladio’s not yelling. But the hard edge to his voice is enough to even make Prompto nervous.

They turn around and begin to walk through the kitchen and towards the living room when —“Talcott, wait, don’t walk on the carpet, your feet—“ Gladio growls when Talcott did just that, leaving behind tiny footprints of mango and pineapple smoothie in the off-white carpet of the living room. Talcott looks curiously at his feet, then turns on the spot and looks at the trail he left behind, his mouth forming a perfect ‘O’.

“Oh no, papa!” Talcott says, with genuine concern as he walks back to the first stain he left, not even processing Gladio’s groan as he makes new marks to get back to it. When he realises what he’s done, he looks back to Gladio with wide green eyes and with the look of complete surprise and shock. “Oh no!”

Sweet Astrals, it’s one of the cutest things Prompto has ever seen – and he’s seen a lot of cute things: baby chocobos, baby coeurls and more – and he wants to laugh but manages to stifle it into a cough because Gladio legitimately looks like he’s going to break something. Prompto’s best bet is the wooden spatula he’s holding in his hand. So this is what a family is like, he thinks to himself. It’s time for him to step in.

Prompto walks over to the children, grabbing a stray washcloth along the way, and pulls Talcott into his lap when he crouches down, cleaning his yellow feet. When they’re clean, he pats Talcott’s back. “Go on with your sister, Tally, and get yourself cleaned up, alright?” Talcott nods and Iris takes her little brother’s hand as she helps him up the stairs.

Then he turns his attention to Gladio, who looks like he’s been in the middle of a warzone, what with red and yellow liquids and sauces decorating the once-pristine kitchen. “You go and clean yourself up. I’ll clean up in here and cook the spaghetti.”

“No, I can cook and clean this mess up—“

“Gladio, I’ll do it.” It’s no longer an offer, but simply a statement that can’t be changed.

With a heavy, defeated exhale, Gladio concedes and rubs his face, only to realise that it’s half-covered in spaghetti sauce, beginning to stick to his face and beard. He scowls and throws the spatula into the spaghetti sauce pot, which results in the splattering of more sauce on his person. He sighs again. “It’s rarely this bad,” he tells Prompto. “They—I—We all really wanted to impress you.”

Prompto raises an eyebrow as he grabs the washcloth he used on Talcott and rinses it in the sink. “Why?”

Gladio opens his mouth as if he’s about to answer, but decides against it, holding it back and shaking his head. “Never mind. You don’t have to stay here. Sorry for wasting your time.”

“You’re not wasting my time. I want to be here.” Prompto gestures to the stairs with the wet washcloth, wincing when it sprays over the floor. “You go and talk to your kids, clean yourselves
up. By the time you come down, I swear everything will be clean and dinner will be ready.”

Gladio looks as if he’s about to argue with that but he comes to the conclusion that it’s futile. He takes his apron off and folds it, planning to toss it into the laundry basket on his way up. He smiles at Prompto. “Thank you.”

-----

Two weeks have passed since Verstael’s visit, with five weeks left until the inspection, and six weeks for the planned re-opening of the wildlife park. There have been noticeable changes to the park. The coeurls’ enclosure area was enlarged, the spiracorns’ stables were fitted with a new grooming station, then new barriers were installed for the cockatrices and the chickatrices and finally, there are now two working trucks out of the five they have. Despite the progress Cid and Cindy have made, there’s still plenty to work on before they have a hope of passing Verstael’s inspection.

In those two weeks, Prompto’s presence became a normality for the Amicitia family as he lived on-site while the others had respective homes to return to. He would walk into the kitchen-dining room in the mornings and join the family for breakfast after he tended to the early risers such as the chocobos or the cockatrices. Sometimes he and Iris fight over who gets to have the toy in the cereal box, though Prompto almost always lets her have it (once it was a chocobo figurine and he had to have it). Then he would help Gladio get the kids ready for school by packing their lunches – occasionally slipping in an extra chocolate bar when the kids had been well-behaved and Gladio wasn’t looking – and joining the family on the car ride to Insomnia, where Prompto had complete control of the AUX cord, much to Gladio’s displeasure and the children’s joy. And in that entire time space, neither Gladio nor Prompto brought up the “dehydrated” situation.

“You gotta settle down, princess, it’s your last day of school tomorrow.” Gladio pulls the duvet covers up to Iris’ chin, though it’s in vain as she wriggles out of the covers and sits up.

“But that’s exactly why I can’t settle down! I’m too excited,” she giggles, smiling so wide that Gladio’s sure he can see all twenty of her teeth. “And Mr Prompto said that the chocobo eggs should be hatching soon and when they do, Tally and I can name them!”

“Did he now?” Gladio asks, tucking Iris back into her bed for the nth time.

She nods matter-of-factly. “Uh-huh. So you can understand why I can’t sleep, right?”

“I think you can sleep. You just refuse to.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes it is.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes it is.”

“Iris,” says Gladio warningly, raising an eyebrow at the girl. Iris pouts as she snuggles further into her duvet cocoon. “You gotta sleep, alright, sweetheart? Otherwise, you’d be too tired to see the baby chocobos and you don’t want that, do you?” She shakes her small head and makes a disagreeable noise. “Didn’t think so.” He takes Mr Mog from the foot of her bed and tucks him inside the covers.. “Now, is there anything else before you go to sleep?”
Iris peeks her head out, revealing a cheeky smile. “You’re a lot handsomer than the other dads. Lots of them don’t have hair, so that’s good.”

Gladio laughs lightly as his hand instinctively goes to the back of his head, patting down his feathered hair in reaction. “Thanks, sweetheart, but flattery won’t let you stay up late.”

Her smile drops into a flat-lined pout as she recedes back into the duvet cocoon. “Worth a shot,” she mumbles.

He leans down and presses a kiss to Iris’ temple before resting his forehead gently against hers. “Goodnight and sweet dreams, princess. I love you.”

“I love you too, papa.” Iris wriggles out of the duvet, earning her a Tired Dad™ sigh from Gladio, and throws her arms around his neck and squeezing tight. Gladio is careful not to hug his small-framed daughter too tightly with his ‘beefy behemoth arms’ as Talcott affectionately calls them. Iris buries her head into the crook of his shoulder and his hand lovingly strokes her short hair. “I meant what I said, papa. You are very handsome.”

Gladio smiles before pulling her away and holding her at half-arms length. “And you are very pretty, sweetheart,” he tells her, bopping her nose gently.

Then Iris cocks her head to the side in slight confusion. “Thank you, papa, but can’t girls be handsome too?”

He has to admit that she does a point. “Yeah, you’re right. You’re handsome too.” Gladio ruffles her short hair and she giggles.

“And boys can be pretty too, right? Like Mr Prompto! He’s pretty.” The mention of the blond zookeeper sends an immediate smile to Gladio’s face and there’s a sudden burst of euphoria tickling through his stomach that he can’t quite comprehend. “Don’t you think so, papa?”

“I think Mr Prompto is very pretty.”

Iris grins up at him and then looks past Gladio. Her sudden happy gasp startles him, and when she begins to clap excitedly, he turns around to find Prompto leaning against the doorframe, arms folded over his chest and legs crossed at his ankles. There’s a soft smile on his face making Gladio wonder if he heard his comment about him. “Mr Prompto!” Iris greets, her grin widening when Prompto took a few steps into the bedroom.

“How about this, if Iris goes to bed now, I might let her join me in seeing the chocobos tomorrow morning before school.” There’s no annoyance in his words, but instead playful fondness.

“Only if she sleeps now.” Her eyes widen before she burrows herself within the duvet and squeezes her eyes shut, as if willing herself to sleep. Prompto smiles and pats the covers lightly. “Goodnight, Iris.”

After Gladio and Prompto tiptoe out of her bedroom, they stand in the dim light of the landing – Gladio makes a mental note to buy a new bulb the next time they go out. “You get the kids settled for be quicker than I do, I should have you around more often.”

“I’m already around enough in the mornings,” Prompto laughs lightly. “But I came here because there’s a Clarus on the reception line for you?” That’s a surprise. Gladio hasn’t heard much from his father since he quit his job. But, then again, he’s been out of the city as President Caelum has a final tour of the Lucian provinces. “I told him that he really shouldn’t be calling at this time of night, but
he insisted because he’s family so I transferred the call to your main house line. So is he a brother or—"

“He’s my dad,” Gladio answers with a smile. “It’s nice to hear from him, I’ll be right down—“ Then he rubs the back of his neck and looks towards Talcott’s bedroom. “I still gotta put Talcott to bed—“

“I’ll do it,” Prompto offers. When he’s met with Gladio’s surprised expression, he continues on. “I mean, it’s obvious you want to talk to your dad so you go ahead and do that, and I’ll put Tally down to sleep.”

Gladio raises an eyebrow at him. “You sure? I don’t wanna impose.”

Prompto reaches up and pats Gladio’s cheek. “It’s not imposing if I’m offering. Besides, I love the little dude. He’s one of the very few who appreciates my jokes.”

“Well he is four years old, Prom, he’ll laugh at anything.”

He narrows his violet-blue eyes at the older man. “Oh shut up and just go downstairs and talk to your dad.” Then Prompto gives him a gentle push before turning around and heading into Talcott’s bedroom.

Once inside, he’s greeted with dozens of those glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars on the ceiling, along with a cactuar-shaped nightlight on the bedside time. The dim lighting provides enough for Prompto to see the small boy sat patiently on the bed, playing with his cactuar action figures. When he looks up and sees Prompto, confusion sweeps over his face. “Mr Prom? Where’s papa?”

Prompto perches on the side of Talcott’s bed. “Your papa has to take a very important phone call with his papa, so he’s asked me to put you to bed, is that okay?” He asks, brushing Talcott’s stray locks from his face. Talcott yawns and nods sleepily as he rubs his eye with a closed chubby fist.

Prompto figures it wouldn’t be too much trouble to send the young boy to sleep, as he’s already halfway there.

He places the action figure on the bedside table and tucks in both the cactuar and chocobo plushies with him. After that, Prompto is about to stand up to leave when Talcott’s small, sleep-coated voice stops him. “Can you sing?” He asks. “Mama used to sing, I think. I can’t really remember her, but I remember the singing.” Prompto can’t help the small frown that pulls at his lips. He thinks of how difficult it must be for Talcott to understand grief when he only really remembers the idea of his mother.

“You want me to sing?” Talcott nods, squeezing the cactuar and chocobo plushies closer to him as he nestles cosily into his covers.

Now Prompto doesn’t have much shame in singing, in fact, he does it a lot of the time, especially when he’s working. But there’s something different about singing in front of Talcott. It feels more personal and it’s for that reason that his palms feel slightly clammy. He wipes his hands on his cargo shorts and clears his throat. “We will call this place our home, the dirt in which our roots may grow,” he sings, soft and uncertain, with a blush forming on his cheeks. “Though the storms will push and pull, we will call this place our home.” A soft, dazed smile grows on Talcott’s face but his eyes are more awake than before. He stares up at Prompto, completely entranced and hanging on to each word of the song. “We’ll tell our stories on these walls. Every year, measure how tall. And just like a work of art, we’ll tell our stories on these walls.”

Prompto begins the chorus a little pitchy, but it doesn’t matter to the little boy listening. “Let the years we’re here be kind, be kind. Let our hearts, like doors, open wide, open wide. Settle our bones like
wood over time, over time. Give us bread, give us salt, give us wine.” By the end of the first chorus, Prompto hears the door open and turns to find curious, little Iris, Mr Mog in hand, as she shyly clutches onto the door handle.

“I could hear you singing. It reminds me of when mama sang to me,” she says in such a soft, small voice that Prompto could scarcely hear it. He smiles and beckons for her to join them and she does, climbing up on Talcott’s bed and squeezing inside the covers next to her brother. The children look up at Prompto with bright eyes, waiting for him to continue.

“A little broken, a little new. We are the impact and the glue. Capable of more than we know, we call this fixer upper home. With each year, our colour fades. Slowly, our paint chips away.” Prompto’s voice eventually grows more confident as it builds into the soft crescendo of the following lyric. “But we will find the strength and the nerve it takes, to repaint and repaint and repaint every day.”

By the time Prompto goes into the last chorus, Talcott’s eyes have already fluttered to a close. Yet Iris stares up at him rather… intently, and admittedly, Prompto does find it strange. But she looks so adorable, buried under the duvet cover with her nose peeking out, that he doesn’t find it in him to care all that much.

When he finishes the last verse, Prompto finds that Talcott and Iris have fallen asleep. They’re not quite cuddling. The two face each other, all curled up, with three plush toys squeezed between them. He can’t bear the thought of taking Iris back to her room and separating them. It’s such an endearing sight that Prompto takes out his camera from its pouch from his utility belt and snaps a quick shot. He makes a mental reminder to send that to Gladio later. When he tucks his camera away, he gently brushes their hair from their face and smiles fondly at the two children, before standing up to leave.

It’s then that he sees Gladio leaning against the doorframe with such a soft smile on his face. Gladio brings a finger to his lips, signing for him to be quiet as he walks out of the bedroom. Once the door clicks shut, he beckons for Prompto to follow him downstairs to the kitchen where the children are less likely to hear them talk. Once there, Gladio heads to the fridge as he says to Prompto, “Make yourself comfortable.” And he does. Prompto sits on the island counter instead of the stools provided.

“Good talk with your dad?” Prompto asks, then mumbles a ‘thanks’ when he takes one of the two opened beer bottles from Gladio’s offering hand.

“Yeah. He told me that he’s going to announce his retirement after President Caelum finishes his presidency so he can spend more time with family.” Prompto smiles at the news. “Course, that’s not for another two months but it’s good that he’s finally retiring.”

“So what does he work as?”

Gladio gives him a confused look, not at all the reaction Prompto is expecting. “Wait, you don’t know?”

“No.” Gladio faces Prompto, leaning against the opposite counter with his legs crossed at his ankles, his left hand resting on his right bicep as his right hand holds lazily onto the beer bottle.

“Huh, I figured you’d have recognised him from the papers or around the Citadel whenever you visited Noct back in the day,” says Gladio before taking a swig of his beer bottle. He sighs in pleasure and wipes his damp lips with the back of his hand. “My dad’s Clarus Amicitia, Head of the Secret Service, or the Captain of the Glaives, whichever one works for you.”
Prompto lets out a low, impressed whistle before he takes a sip of his drink. “Like father like son.”

“Yeah,” Gladio replies shortly, not really wanting to talk about his father’s career. At least not now, when he and Prompto are finally alone, no kids to worry about scarring for life, no work that needs doing on the zoo. Just the two of them. Alone. “Listen, thank you for what you just did.” When he’s met with a blank expression, he elaborates. “Singing for Talcott and Iris. I… I couldn’t muster up the courage to sing, not after ‘Nea died. So thank you for bringing music back into our home.”

“It’s nothing really,” Prompto says modestly, chuckling lightly as he picks at the wet label of his beer bottle, slowly tearing it with his thumb. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need, big guy.” He smiles at Gladio, finally meeting at eye level as he’s sitting on the island counter and the other is slouched slightly.

“Thanks, Prom, but I can handle it.”

“I don’t think you can,” he blurs out. Then he swallows hard when he sees Gladio’s face beginning to turn into defensive anger. “I mean, Six, you’re amazing but it’s not easy to raise two kids along with managing a zoo. I think you should let others help you more. I mean, not just listening to us but to actually act on it, y’know?” The anger softens as Gladio listens to him. “It’s great that you’re wanting to learn everything about being a zookeeper, like seriously, your dedication is admirable, but you’re taking on so much all at once. I know Noct would probably like it if you talked to him more, and not just about your problems.” Prompto takes a swig of his beer for confidence and then says, “And… And I want to help too. In whatever way I can.”

To say that silence falls upon them would be wrong. It’s not silent. The sound of crickets can be heard in the open field outside the house; the sound of spiracorns braying in the far distance, and the sound of the electric fly trap buzzing too. Prompto can’t exactly read Gladio’s expression and Gladio’s just trying not to look away (or look too menacing as he has a habit of unintentionally doing).

“Noct I can understand. He’s like the little brother I never had and yeah, maybe I should talk to him more. But you.” Gladio points the neck of his bottle at Prompto, “I don’t understand you. We’ve known each other for what, two, coming onto three months? And yeah, there’s an attraction between us that neither of us have actually acted upon—” Prompto squeaks at that, but Gladio presses on as if he never heard it, “—so why would you want to go that far?”

“Because…” Prompto struggles for the right words. He’s not very good at this and he’s tempted to ruin the moment by throwing in some humour. “Because I think you deserve to be taken care of.” When he realises what he said, Prompto clamps his mouth shut so quickly that his teeth clack together. There’s evident surprise in Gladio’s face and half of Prompto wants to take a picture because in the time he’s known him, he’s never seen him look so… stunned. Then when Gladio takes a step forward, Prompto’s heart starts slamming, beating a lovesick rhythm against his rib cage that it almost physically hurts.

Gladio’s unsure of when he first wanted to kiss Prompto. At first, he thinks it’s when they first met; when Gladio feared for the safety of his children, only to find them playing with Prompto’s chocobos they first came across the zoo. He thinks again and considers the first night he spent at the zoo, when he and Prompto stumble out of Ignis’ diner drunk in laughter, and then consequently shared a bed. Perhaps it’s when Prompto saw Gladio’s tattoos in full, allowing the blond to touch him after months of not being touched intimately at all. Or maybe when Prompto watched Voltron with him and kids and fell asleep in the middle of it. Then it dawns on Gladio that there have been plenty of moments he’s wanted to kiss Prompto. He just hasn’t had the right opportunity until now. Now, so endeared by Prompto sitting on an island counter, his legs swinging gently, telling him that he
deserves to be looked after, he’s blessed with such an opportunity.

Another two steps and Gladio’s hands were on Prompto, one around his waist, pulling him closer, and the other on his neck, slightly cupping his jaw as he brings him down to meet his lips at last. Prompto inhales sharply, and for a moment, Gladio fears he’s read their unspoken signs wrong. Oh Gods, how had he messed this up already—

Then Prompto makes a soft, pleased moan in Gladio’s mouth as he puts arms around his neck, forcing Gladio’s hand to support his back as he wraps his legs around Gladio’s torso, pulling them closer together (if it’s even possible).

The first thing Prompto thinks of is suing the film industry for false portrayals of first kisses. His first kiss with Gladio is not neat and sweet, but if truth be told, it’s somewhat sloppy and unpractised, the way all first kisses are supposed to be, the way all first kisses are. Yet, despite the hungered sloppiness of their kiss, there’s no tongue, there’s no fight for dominance, yet instead, their lips move together and by the Six, it sets Prompto’s body on fire with an intensity he didn’t know he could feel from a kiss.

Their noses brush against each other when they break away, though neither put much more space between them than that. With Prompto’s height boost, he looks down at Gladio’s eyes. Oh Gods, his eyes. Prompto’s never seen them this close before. They look like Tenebraen maple syrup, sweet and rich in colour and perfectly framed by Gladio’s thick lashes. He brings a hand up and gently caresses the scar on Gladio’s cheek before trailing up and teasing his hair, neither saying a word.

Some time passes before Gladio peels himself away from Prompto and nods upwards, gesturing to the bedrooms. “We should probably get to sleep.”

Prompto hops off from the counter and Gladio takes a mental moment to appreciate how freaking adorable that was. “O-Oh, yeah! I’ll just head out then.” He feels so embarrassed that it’s not until he reaches the front door that he realises that Gladio’s calling out for him. When he turns around, Gladio approaches him with a smile on his face. He takes Prompto’s hand in his, intertwining their fingers together. Prompto stares at it for a few moments before looking up at him. “What?”

“Right, I don’t think I was very clear with my intentions, but I was hoping you’d join me.” Gladio looks… he looks hopeful, optimistic even.

He blinks up at him. “O-kay, do you mean sleep or do you mean sleeeeeep?” He questions, though Gladio can’t really tell the difference between the two.

“Just sleep,” he tells him earnestly. “Despite me very much wanting the other ‘sleep’, I think it’s better if we take it slow. See what we want from each other. See where we stand with each other.” Though Gladio knows where he stands with Prompto, he knows what he wants from him. It’s just the matter of if Prompto wants the same things too.

Prompto nods, almost too eagerly. “Yeah! G-Great idea. So uh- what do you want?”

Gladio chuckles and is again, endeared by the blond before him. “Just to sleep. I like your company.” It takes Prompto another few moments before it clicks in: Gladio doesn’t like sleeping alone.

In response, Prompto simply nods and wears a stupid smile on his lips as he allows himself to be led up the dimly lit staircase and into Gladio’s bedroom.

Chapter End Notes
me @ you: see, I told you it's worth the wait ;)
also me: [banging pots and pans together] THEY FINALLY KISSED THEY FINALLY KISSED THEY FINALLY KISSED THEY FINALLY KISSED THEY FINALLY KIS--

For those of you who are wondering what song Prompto is singing, it's called "North" by Sleeping At Last. I just completely melted when I wrote the children interactions between Gladio and Prompto, from the messy kitchen scene to the sweet lullaby scene and I hope you all enjoyed it too!

[youtuber voice] and that's the end of that chapter, please don't hesitate to comment or hit the subscribe button, or follow me on my other social media (ton-berry) and have a chat with me ;)

A Walk Down Another's Memory Lane

Chapter Summary

Prompto discovers a little more about Gladio’s past. Gladio takes him out on a date. Lulu escapes the enclosure.

Chapter Notes

me: i need to update
also me: bitch you got no inspiration
me: i can't keep using that excuse for months
also me: watch me bitch

So I'm really REALLY sorry for the long awaited update... I don't really have a good excuse other than lack of inspiration. To everyone who has commented and checked up on me during the break, I love and appreciate each and every one of you♡

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Prompto wakes in the morning, he can sense that something is wrong. Well, not wrong, per say. More of, something is out of place. With eyes still closed, he stretches out his arms around him, hoping to eventually come across a unique mass of muscles and warmth that can only belong to Gladio. When his hands tread the empty air and the cool-to-the-touch sheets, a sudden confusion haze his mind. Prompto lies on his back, with his hands reaching up to his face, rubbing the morning glory out of his eyes. He drags his hands down his cheeks tiredly as his violet-blues open. He turns his head to the side where Gladio had slept and spots a note atop the bedside table. It’s folded like a tent, allowing it to stand on its own. His name is written on one side. Prompto pushes himself a little across the bed and reaches his hand across, pinching the note with his nimble fingers before opening it up.

Gladio’s handwriting suits him very well, is what Prompto first thinks. The boldness of writing in uppercase letters is countered by its small size, as if suppressing the weight of its words.

Prompto,

I didn’t want to disturb your beauty sleep (not that you need it, like I told Iris last night, I think you’re very pretty). Just took the kids to school but I’ll be back soon to cook you some breakfast.

Warmth flushes on Prompto’s face when he reads the first half of the note and he has to bite the inside of his cheek from smiling too much.

Hopefully I’ll be back before you even wake up, but knowing you, I doubt it. Also don’t worry about your morning rounds, I asked Luna if she could cover for you. Make yourself at home, well, more at home than before.
Prompto’s fingers lightly brush over the inked word. Yours. He very much likes the sound of that.

He sets the folded note back on the bedside table and sits up on the bed, running a hand through his no-doubt messy blond hair. He’s grateful for the note Gladio left, Astrals only know how panicked Prompto would have been if he awoke to an empty house with no explanation. Though, the man could have just as easily left him a text message.

Prompto pulls himself out of the king-sized bed, shivering at the cool morning air that kisses his bare skin. He isn’t naked, but having dressed down to only his boxer shorts and the vest undergarment is enough to warrant the formation of a thin layer of goosebumps. He pulls on his trousers, then he blindly grabs a shirt from the floor, only realising it was Gladio’s once he had put it on. Because the man is much taller and larger than Prompto is, his shirt makes him look as if he were a child – Talcott even – playing dress up with his parent’s clothes. Very unflattering indeed, but Prompto is both too lazy and too warm to change into his own clothes which had been haphazardly tossed around the room sometime last night.

After washing his face and fixing his hair – which, he admits to himself, does look like a chocobo butt, but only in the mornings – Prompto heads downstairs and plops down comfortably on the cream-beige sofa. He glances at the screen of the phone in his hand, pressing the home button lightly, and frowning a little at the lack of messages. In specific, lack of messages from Gladio.

There’s one from Ravus, telling him that he needed to feed the coeurls, whilst he went for his monthly appointment for his arm, later in the day. One from Ignis, who reminds him to eat breakfast – something the older man fell into the habit of doing when he discovered the fact that Prompto often skipped breakfast, not because he wanted to, but because he has so much to do, he forgets. And a text from Luna, also reminding him to eat breakfast. She discovered his bad habit shortly after Ignis did, though Prompto is still adamant that he was a blabbermouth who told her. A blabbermouth who cares deeply for his friends, so Prompto figures he couldn’t be too annoyed at him for being concerned about his health.

Still, Prompto isn’t sure how to occupy his time until Gladio comes back. Sure, he could cook breakfast himself, but Gladio had offered and the last thing Prompto wants is for him to come home to… well, no home by burning the place down. And he could go and do his usual morning rounds in the zoo, but Gladio had Luna take care of that for him. So he’s reduced to taking himself on a tour around the living room. Prompto has been to the Amicitia household often enough to be aware of Gladio’s love of literature which is so unabashedly displayed in the large, wooden square shelving unit on one side of the living room. But until now, Prompto never quite knew what Gladio’s preferences are, as the man waves off the question with an, “a bit of everything” whenever Prompto asked him. Now, he can quite clearly see that Gladio really meant ‘a bit of everything’. Upon closer inspection, he notices that each square shelf section is dedicated to a different genre. His fingers gently brush along the spines of the books, taking note of how well they were kept. He reaches the non-fiction shelf, where educational books and volumes on Eos history sit comfortably. Prompto smiles when he sees that Gladio owns several works written by his favourite professor, Sania Yeager, the Head of Biological Sciences at his alma mater, the University of Insomnia. He makes a mental note to tell Gladio about her later.

Prompto continues to explore the impressive collection but in his clumsiness, he accidentally knocks off a thick, leather-bound binder, which opens as it lies flat against the floor, revealing itself as a photo album. Under any other circumstance, Prompto would never have snooped into personal things. But the photos which greet him catch his interest. He plops down on the carpet, legs crossed,
and flips the pages so that he starts from the beginning. Prompto isn’t quite sure what to expect, but a photo of a butt-naked baby in a bathtub, makes him laugh. There’s no mistaking that the baby is Gladio. It’s the huge amber eyes and the thick, dark patch of hair on his head that gives it away.

“That’s adorable,” Prompto says, smiling fondly to himself as he turns to the next page.

As he goes through the first couple of years of Gladio’s life, Prompto recognises Clarus Amicitia, sporting a full head of hair. He’s never met the man personally, but he’s seen him around the Citadel whenever he visited Noct back in high school. He heavily resembles Gladio, or rather, Gladio resembles him, but Clarus’ features are rounder, almost softer, and his skin is paler than his son’s. In fact, Iris resembles him more than Gladio does. The way Clarus looks as he so clearly loves his baby boy tugs at Prompto’s heartstrings and pulls his lips into a light frown. He wonders if his own father ever loved him like that.

He also spots a younger, happier looking Regis Caelum with his pregnant wife Aulea, and Prompto’s heart grows heavy in his chest. He’s never seen a photo of Noctis’ mother and he scarcely talks about her. To see her, in photo form, with a warm smile immortalised on her face, is a little harrowing to Prompto. A few photos on, he sees a newborn Noctis in Regis’ arms, swaddled in a cream blanket, with a recovering Aulea on one side, and a happy-looking Clarus and Gladio on the other. It’s the only photo that has both Noctis and Aulea in it before she passed on, at least in this album.

When Gladio looks to be about five years old, there appears to be a new addition to the Amicitia family. It’s a baby girl, if one is to assume from the pink blanket wrapped around her. There’s a large, proud grin on Gladio’s face as he holds his baby sister, supported by his father who clearly looked apprehensive at allowing Gladio to hold such a tiny creature. Then there were a lot of photos of Gladio and this unnamed baby sister in the following three years. Playing with her. Helping her take her first steps. Watching movies. Reading books. Falling asleep together on the sofa, small limbs all tangled up. Occasionally, a young Noctis was featured joining in. It’s apparent to Prompto that Gladio loved this younger sister very much and he wonders why Gladio never mentioned her.

Then when Prompto turns the next page, he stills as a small gasp tumbles out of his open mouth. What happened? Gladio looks so much older in this photo than in the last. With eyes squinting and brows knitting together, Prompto goes back to the previous page, switching back and forth, as if it would help him understand the drastic change. He hasn’t skipped any pages and there were no missing pages either. Gladio’s life had been so well documented up to this point, Prompto studies the photo more carefully. It’s gone. The bright smile that Gladio wore in essentially every photo before had vanished. He looks so serious for someone so young – no more than eight years old. He begins flipping through more and more pages, hoping that he would find an answer to why Gladio stopped smiling. He wonders where Gladio’s younger sister was, given that she no longer featured in the rest of the– oh. Oh. Prompto swallows hard and closes the album for a few moments to collect his thoughts.

He opens the album again and notices that the consistency of Gladio’s life documentation begin to stagnate, and the later photos, Prompto could tell, were taken by a different person. He stares hard at a photo of Gladio at his high school graduation where Regis and Noctis were in attendance. Gladio’s not scowling, but he looked indifferent, and with the way Noct looked at him, it was obvious that he had said something sarcastic at his father who must have been holding the camera. Wait. Clarus was holding the camera. Prompto flips back to the front of the album, searching through the earlier photos. Clarus seemed to feature in every other photo, either holding Gladio, or in the background with Regis whilst Gladio and Noct took the attention of the camera. So who was holding the camera?
Prompto sighs. It’s not his business to know; and while he may have been innocently touring around before, now he was snooping into personal affairs. He goes to shut the binder when a loose photograph falls out, landing face-down on his lap. Prompto picks it up with the intention of slipping it back into the album, then stills at the image in his hand. It’s a family photo which had been torn in half, then put together again by fixing tape to it. On one half, there’s a young Gladio – no more than eight years old – sat happily next to his father Clarus, who wore a proud smile on his face. On the other half, a woman sat close to Gladio with his three-year old baby sister on her lap. She looked at the camera with the same confidence that the present Gladio emanates; a half-smirk grazed her lips but her eyes were full of love. His mother. It couldn’t be anyone else.

They’re a beautiful family, Prompto thinks to himself. Charming is another good word for them too. The mother has – well, had – olive skin and wavy dark hair with a braid behind her left ear, hinting at what Prompto can only assume to be her Galahidian heritage. Her green eyes stood out against the others, as Gladio and his little sister seemed to have inherited their father’s amber colour. Prompto glances at the photo once more, at Gladio’s innocent yet proud smile, before tucking it back into the album, then pushing it back into its place in the shelf. It’s none of his business and no matter what he and Gladio could become, he would wait until the man was ready to tell him. If there’s one thing he’s learnt about Gladio, is that pushing and prying into his private affairs will only anger and upset him.

Prompto’s ears perk up at the sound of footsteps gradually approaching and he scrambles to his feet. He grabs a newspaper from the coffee table before throwing himself onto the sofa, just as the lock clicks and the front door opens. Gladio hangs his keys on a decorative key hook that Talcott had handcrafted for him in school – cactuar themed, of course – before shrugging off his thin jacket and removing his shoes, lightly kicking them to the side.

Partway through reading an article about the presidential candidates and how their campaigns were progressing, Prompto flusters at the sudden kiss on his cheek before he feels Gladio sitting with him, throwing an arm around his shoulders loosely. It’s oddly casual, as if such displays of affection had always been the norm. Prompto isn’t opposed to this new development. He grabs the paper and sets it back on the coffee table before turning his attention back to Gladio. It’s not as if he was entirely invested into the article anyway.

Realising that their faces were close enough to share breathing space, Prompto smiles bashfully, much like a schoolgirl talking to her crush, and it takes everything Prompto has to not twirl a loose lock of blond hair around his finger. “Hiya,” he says, somewhat lamely. He’s not sure whether he should kiss Gladio or play coy.

“Hey,” Gladio says, his tone lower and gruffer. He starts to gently tease the blond’s soft hair with his hand and to Prompto’s own surprise, it helps to settle his nerves. “So I was thinking,” he begins, “that we go out today. I know I said I’d cook you breakfast but I want to take you out on a date– Wait, is that my shirt?” Gladio lightly pinches the sleeve, pulling it up to inspect it, then he laughs at the beetroot red flush on Prompto’s cheeks as the younger man tries to stammer out an excuse. “No no, I like it on you,” he assures him, but that only causes the heat in his cheeks to deepen.

“S-Sorry! I was going to change but I was lazy and your shirt was so comfortable and it smelled like you and–and–” Prompto runs out of things to say and decides to bury his face in his hands as his knees come up, curling himself into a small ball on the sofa. “Sorry,” he says, his voice muffled by his own skin.

Astrals, he’s adorable.

Too adorable for his own good, Gladio thinks. And he thinks it’s strange that he’s developed an
indescribable attachment to someone like Prompto. The blond doesn’t fit his ‘type’ at all, or more correctly, he’s not at all like Gladio’s previous significant others. Not that there have been many, but anyone merely looking at Prompto and Aranea can see the difference between them. Where Aranea hid her heart of gold beneath her steeled exterior, Prompto wore his freely and openly on his sleeve. Where Aranea paved the way forward with pride in each earth-shattering step, Prompto would be the one who followed behind in quiet, humble confidence. Where Aranea grinned and smirked at everyone, but only smiled for a worthy handful of people, Prompto offered his bright smile to any and all who cross his path. Yes, they’re two very different people, and perhaps, it’s because of the reasons the two contrast each other, that Gladio finds himself entranced by both.

Gladio swivels Prompto’s balled-up body around to face him, before he carefully peels his hands away from his face. When Prompto attempts to bury his still-flushed face further into his knees, Gladio gently cups his face. The largeness of his hands almost swallows the lower half of his face as he tilts him up to face him, violet-blue eyes meeting amber. Gladio draws closer, and as he does, he searches Prompto’s eyes that would tell him to stop. When he sees nothing but a desire and fondness mirroring his own, he captures Prompto’s lips in a kiss.

It doesn’t last long, only a mere three seconds. Yet those three seconds, as cliché as it sounds, seem to stretch on into a small infinity. Prompto’s lips are just as soft now as they were last night, perhaps even more so. One hand slides down his neck, holding him in place firmly but softly, and Gladio is tentative, not wanting to mar this sweet moment with something as primeval as lust. He wants to give in… he wants it badly, but before he can break his resolve, he breaks their kiss instead, pulling away and letting his hands fall into his lap.

There’s a brief moment of shared eye contact between them. The violet-blue irises bloom into life, looking like an endless sylleblossom garden in the spring, a garden that Gladio would happily spend the end of his days exploring. And amber-brown eyes seem to be cavity-inducing with the way sticky, sweet honey mixed and melted with the richness of cinnamon, and Prompto wants to savour each taste.

Prompto’s knees press deeply on the sofa cushion as he kneels in front of Gladio, pushing himself up a little to gain extra height. The younger blond’s hands reach out, resting his forearms around Gladio’s neck as his nimble fingers intertwine with his thick chocolate brown hair. He tugs, not lustfully but to guide Gladio into doing what he wants. When the older man follows his lead, lifting his chin slightly, Prompto leans down, kissing him once again. This time is not as chaste nor as sweet as the first and second times they kissed. The heated desire that had crept up on them in the last few months is coming to fruition and both men are eager to indulge themselves. His fingers tighten in Gladio’s hair, tugging harder than before, earning him a soft, pleasing moan that’s lost within their impassioned kiss. Prompto smiles against his mouth.

Oh no he doesn’t, Gladio thinks challengingly to himself, though, it’s the only coherent thought he has as the rest of him is trying to keep up with each new discovery he makes of Prompto. A low growl rumbles in his throat as he wraps one arm around Prompto’s waist before pulling him into his lap, causing the blond to straddle him, never once breaking the kiss. As Prompto’s hands tease and play with Gladio’s hair, Gladio’s hands wander south, gripping the blond’s hips, pulling them closer together – if that’s even possible – before his hands settle on Prompto’s ass. It’s periker and plumper than Gladio expected, having thought that countless hours spent on a chocobo saddle would have flattened his posterior, even by a little. There’s a polite knock on the front door, but when Gladio squeezes his ass, Prompto gasps, and taking advantage of the opening, slips his tongue inside the blond’s mouth, forgetting all about the door.

Generally speaking, Gladio considers himself to have a respectable degree of self-control. However, right here, right now, as he savours Prompto’s taste, he can’t help the moan that slips out. He’s
refreshing. The mellowed spice of the spearmint toothpaste mingles with that of his own, giving the sensation that kissing Prompto encourages the start of a brand new day. And Prompto is just that. A brand new day full of opportunity. A new start, a new beginning in life. A new story to invest himself in.

Then Prompto silently demands to take the lead and Gladio doesn’t oppose to it, his grip on the blond loosening, allowing him to do as he wishes. Prompto moves his mouth to Gladio’s jaw, down to his neck. His not-so-chaste kisses against the sensitive skin causes an involuntary shudder down the larger man’s spine, making him arch against Prompto. With an effortless tug, Prompto pulls the hair-tie out, resulting in Gladio’s thick, long hair to fall and frame his face – or at least, it would frame his face, had Prompto not pulled at his hair again. Gladio tilts his head back in wanton abandon, light gasps and soft moans spilling shamelessly from his mouth as performs wonders on his skin. Who would have thought that sweet, sunshine Prompto Argentum could kiss like that? Perhaps it has just been too long since he’s been remotely intimate with anyone. Or perhaps Prompto is really just that talented. Maybe it’s a mix of both, Gladio can’t quite decide with the sensory overload he’s experiencing now. When Prompto bites into the curve where his neck and shoulder met, his breath hitches.

Misinterpreting the sound, Prompto tries to pull back, beginning to peel himself from Gladio’s body as an apology starts to spill from his pink lips. Then Gladio, frustrated that Prompto stopped what he started, growls lowly before deciding to shut the blond up by capturing his lips in another heated kiss. They pull apart when they both become lightheaded from oxygen deprivation. Gladio rests his head against the back of the sofa whilst Prompto remains in his straddling position, shoulders dropping in exhaustion. Both are breathless. Prompto can’t help but smile a little at the sight before him. Gladio’s gorgeous brown hair: all tangled and mussed by his own hands; his full lips, which before had been slightly chapped, but now moistened and softened by his own tongue; face flushed with heat and panting from pleasure; and those rich, amber eyes glazed over with an acute degree of lust. Prompto is sure that Gladio is far more experienced that he is, but the man sure did please easy.

After a long moment of recovery, Gladio lifts his head to look at the not-so-innocent-as-he-looks blond with a lopsided grin. “So about that date I mentioned…”

-----

FRI 09:47

cooking mama: Warning, do not go anywhere near the Amicitia household at any time this morning.
cooking mama: Possibly this afternoon too, though that’s pending.
grease monkey goddess: how come?? what’s happened??
cooking mama: I believe a certain owner and a certain zookeeper are entertaining themselves, so to speak.
grease monkey goddess: OMG RAVUS AND GLADIO?!!? always knew that the silverhead had a thing for men with tattoos ;)
i-need-a-hand: I beg your pardon?
grease monkey goddess: oi ray-ray what’re you doing on this group chat
grease monkey goddess: shouldn’t ya be busy uhhh
grease monkey goddess: doing someone else?? ;)
lady sylleblossom: Brother dear, you never told me about your crush on Gladiolus. I feel a little betrayed :
sleepy bean: ray you should’ve told me, i could’ve set you up with him
sleepy bean: we could have gone a triple date, you and gladio, iggy and me, luna and nyx
cooking mama: **Iggy and I, you’re a teacher, Noct, I fear what grammar you’re teaching the children.
sleepy bean: wow i get SO hot when you talk grammar and literary devices specs, tell me more
grease monkey goddess: i really hope you’re being sarcastic noct because otherwise, im questioning your kinks
sleepy bean: my kink is to have a happy, fulfilling relationship
i-need-a-hand: Your kink is unrealistic. Stick to bondage like everyone else.
lady sylleblossom: Ooh brother, I’m learning many new things about you. By chance, are you performing such… bondage on Gladio?
grease monkey goddess: or is gladdy daddy the one tying you up because you’ve been a ‘bad boy’?? ;)
i-need-a-hand: BY THE SIX.
i-need-a-hand: I need to rinse my eyes from reading this filth. How dare you.
cooking mama: He doesn’t seem to have realised that we were all teasing him.
grease monkey goddess: speak for yourself four-eyes, ray’s got a stick so far up his ass that getting him laid would do him some good
grease monkey goddess: ngl i was hoping you’d be the one to finally bone him and get that stick out of his ass (or in his ass) but noOoOo
grease monkey goddess: ya just had to go and bone the president’s son instead
grease monkey goddess: who… is better tbh, yeah, you got the better bargain
cooking mama: Thank you?
sleepy bean: ;)
lady sylleblossom: Oh dear, Ravus has come to my office to sulk and vent.
lady sylleblossom: Oh. He told me not to tell you that. Whoops.
lady sylleblossom: Now he’s left to find somewhere else because he’s been ‘betrayed’.

FRI 10:03

ice queen: He’s come to my reception to sulk. You all owe me.

FRI 10:26

grease monkey goddess: THEY’RE ON A DATE. I REPEAT, THEY’RE ON A DATE
sleepy bean: who????
grease monkey goddess: who do you think genius?? prompto and gladio!!!!
cooking mama: It’s true. Cindy and I saw the two of them holding hands and getting into the Range Rover before driving off.
sleepy bean: i called it, iggy you owe me 20 gil
cooking mama: Actually, I bet that they would go on a date before the summer holidays.
lady sylleblossom: Oooohh :O
cooking mama: The summer holiday begins when you clock out of work and Iris and Talcott are home.
sleepy bean: …FUCK
ice queen: Such crude language, do you kiss Ignis with that mouth?
sleepy bean: yes and he has a dirtier mouth than i do when he’s not got a stick up his ass
sleepy bean: well, that’s wrong, i mean when he does have a ‘stick’ up his ass
cooking mama: NOCTIS
chocobutt hair: do you guys not have any work to do?? or anything besides gossiping on an OPEN group chat??
grease monkey goddess: work schmirk, love and sex is more important
Grease Monkey Goddess: we’ve discovered new things about each other
Grease Monkey Goddess: Ravus likes bondage, Ignis has a dirty mouth during sex
Grease Monkey Goddess: *and you’re on a date with Gladio*
Chocobutt hair: i did say OPEN group chat right??
Chocobutt hair: as in, EVERYONE can see it, including me and Gladio
Chocobutt hair: **Gladio and I, before you go and correct me iggy**
Cooking Mama: Thank you.
i-need-a-hand: I send my condolences to you, Gladio.
Chocobutt hair: hey :(
Lady Sylleblossom: Have you stopped being childish now, Ravus?
i-need-a-hand: I was never childish to begin with.
Ice Queen: Debateable.

Cooking Mama changed the group conversation name to New Recipeh: Sautéed Ravus

Lady Sylleblossom took a screenshot of the chat
Lady Sylleblossom: I’m sending this to our mother :)
i-need-a-hand: Lunafreya don’t you dare
Lady Sylleblossom: :
Grease Monkey Goddess: IM SCREECHING
Grease Monkey Goddess: SERIOUSLY, PAW-PAW IS TELLING ME TO SHUT UP
Chocobutt hair: JSGHFSJGFHBSDKGHBR
Chocobutt hair: GLADIO SNORTED

Chocobutt hair sent a photo attachment

Grease Monkey Goddess: we can’t see it
Chocobutt hair: damn it, the signal out here’s being shitty
Chocobutt hair: JUST TRUST ME, IT WAS A GOOD REACTION PHOTO
i-need-a-hand: How. Dare. You.
Sleepy Bean: I JUST SCREAMED A LITTLE BIT
Sleepy Bean: the kids are looking at me in concern and Talcott just asked me if i saw a spider
Sleepy Bean: which i did, but that’s not why i screamed
i-need-a-hand: I hope that spider grows to a monstrous size and swallows each and every one of you whole.
Cooking Mama: Surely it would be more painful if we weren’t swallowed whole?
Lady Sylleblossom: Furthermore, we’re too big, even if it grows to a monstrous size. The spider would have to secrete enzymes to breakdown our bodily tissues.
Cooking Mama: Too right. Or even, the spider may just pierce us with its fangs, injecting a soporific, and save us for a later meal. Like in the third instalment of The Lord of the Rings.

i-need-a-hand left the group chat

-----

Gladio wrinkles his nose when the spicy aroma of Prompto’s green soup curry arrives at the table, hitting his nose. “Not a fan of spicy food?” Prompto asks, sitting on the other side of the table with a warm smile on his face. He’s holding a spoon suspended in mid-air, blowing gently to cool it down,
The larger man shrugs and sits back in his seat, allowing for space for the waiter to lay down his dish of fried bulette, then nods in thanks as he walks away. Gladio moves forward, taking his cutlery in hand. “I grew up eating Galahdian food, so it’s not spicy food I’m not a fan of, it’s the curry. I’m not a huge fan on curry.” He shrugs again.

Their initial plans were to have breakfast in a quaint little café by a park that Gladio often frequented in his adolescent years. But the long drive to central Insomnia, as well as refuelling and finding a parking space, consumed much of the morning hours, giving them no choice but to have lunch. They settle for a diner that’s in walking distance to the Citadel. When Gladio still worked as a Glaive, he and several others in the squadron would walk over for lunch when they could spare the time, though they usually took the food to-go. And it’s not just Glaives who frequent the diner. Many citadel employees liked to spend their lunch there too, so even now, Gladio can recognise several familiar faces.

“You did?” Prompto says, sounding surprised. “I thought you’re from Cavanaugh?” Most people nowadays scarcely say Cavanaugh, as the capital city of Insomnia takes up over half of the Lucian region.

“I am, I was born here and so was my father, but my mother is Galahdian,” Gladio explains, absently wiping the corner of his mouth clean of barbecue sauce. He tries to act as casually as he can and not as if the very mention of his mother causes his chest to constrict and painful memories to flash through his mind. “She’s gone now. Left when I was a kid.”

Prompto’s face twists in discomfort. “I’m sorry,” he says, his bottom lip sticking out a little in a small pout. “If it helps, my mother left me too. I was too young at the time to remember her now though.” He shrugs absently. Then he straightens his posture and smiles brightly at Gladio. “Anyways, we shouldn’t be talking about these kinds of things on a beautiful day like this.” Prompto waves his spoon at the window to their side, and then gasps when bits of green soup curry splatter on the clear surface. Gladio laughs while the blond hastily cleans the window with a napkin before a waiter could come over to scold them for their behaviour. But Prompto is right. Outside, the weather is absolutely beautiful, and it’s a shame that this diner doesn’t have an outdoor seating area; otherwise they would have sat exposed to the sunshine and the gentle early summer breeze. “That was meant to be smoother than it was,” says Prompto, a pink heat flushed to his cheeks.

“Sure, I believe you,” Gladio teases with a wink.

“I swear!” It comes out almost as a squeak.

“Uh huh,” Gladio murmurs as he takes a drink of his water. Hearing himself now, he can see where Iris and Talcott get their ‘uh huh’ and ‘nuh uh’ from, not that he will ever admit it aloud. Gladio sets the glass to the side, the insides of his palms feeling slightly clammy. He has to talk to Prompto about where they stand with each other, what they want from each other, before they become too attached to the other – though a small voice in the back of Gladio’s head tells him that that’s too late. The last thing he wants is to hurt his children by introducing someone whom they could come to accept and trust as another parent, only then to have that person leave. Gladio could take the heartbreak, bitingly yes, but he can take it. But Iris and Talcott’s hearts wouldn’t be able to withstand it.

Gladio has no qualms about what it means to be a single father. It’s lonely and isolating. The symptoms he experiences now, he witnessed in his father as he grew up. Clarus did date, but Gladio remembers very clearly that he never brought a date home. Not even for coffee. Now that he thinks about it, perhaps his father was protecting him from becoming too attached to someone who would eventually leave once he told them that he was a single father. After all, who would want to raise
someone else’s kid? So Gladio was prepared to live a solitary life with his children. He was prepared to accept the lonely nights and the heartaches. Then along came Prompto who adored his children the moment he clapped eyes on them; Prompto who badly wanted to have a family of his own but lacked the social hours to meet someone; Prompto who accepted Gladio and his family, as little and broken as they are. It sparks a light of hope in Gladio, and he only hopes that he can control it long enough to be certain of Prompto’s feelings for him, or risk burning down.

He can do this, right? He can talk to Prompto. They’re both adults and it’s perfectly normal – and mature, Gladio can almost hear Ignis adding – to talk about his concerns and worries about pursuing this new relationship. And yet, he feels like a schoolboy on Sunday evenings, dreading the cruel reality that Monday brings, rather than looking bravely to its plethora of opportunities. Gladio swallows hard, fists closed with his thumb rubbing the side of his hand. Ignis once called him out on it, telling him that it was a psychological sign of someone holding back frustration or sadness, so they result to comforting themselves even by the smallest of touches.

Gladio doesn’t even realise he’s shut his eyes until he feels a gentle hand on top of his own, which is followed by an equally gentle, “Gladdy? Gladio? What’s wrong?”

His eyes open and the first thing he sees is a concerned expression painted all over Prompto’s face, matching his tone of voice. Gladio chuckles weakly, but does nothing to remove his hand from Prompto’s comforting touch. “I need to ask you something,” he swallows hard again, forcing bile to stay down and forcing words to come up. “I need to ask where we stand. If it were just me, I’d take my time in getting to know you. But you know it’s not just me. I’m a package deal; I come with two kids who I love more than anything in the world, and I can’t be with someone who doesn’t respect or understand that.” In other words, Gladio will always love his kids more than whoever becomes his significant other. He will always put them first because it’s their wellbeing and happiness that comes before his. And whoever will come to love him will have to accept that. “Iris and Talcott… they come first. Always. And if we pursue this, I want to make sure you know that you won’t just be dating me, you’re dating my family – that sounds a little weird…” Gladio trails off, chuckling nervously before reconnecting his eye contact with Prompto. “If something goes wrong between us… I can handle the heartbreak. But my kids won’t be able to. And they’re already so attached to you, so I don’t wanna imagine what’ll happen if our relationship turns sour. So I’m asking you now, if this– me– us is even worth pursuing for you. I’d rather know sooner than later.”

There’s a long, pregnant moment of silence wherein Prompto considers his answer, looking out towards the city scene through the window thoughtfully.

Gladio’s other free hand fumbles with the napkin nervously beneath the table.

“If I knew what I was getting myself into when we first met,” Prompto finally answers, looking back at Gladio with violet-blue eyes filled with… is that love? Affection? “I knew then that I had met a man who would do anything for his children; a man who would defend and protect them against a stranger, a man who would buy a zoo if only to see them smile again.” Prompto tilts his head at Gladio knowingly, a small smile twitching at his lips. “A man who would risk everything – his career, his security, his pride – just to make them happy. That’s the man I met and that’s the man sat in front of me now. I wouldn’t be sitting here if I wanted some casual fling or if I thought it’s going to be easy. It’s not going to be easy, it’s going to be really hard, but despite that, I… I still want this. And not just you, but those two amazing kids of yours. I want the whole package. I want to be with you, if you’ll have me.”

It takes everything for Gladio to not reach over the table and pull Prompto’s face towards his in a kiss. Instead, his body relaxes, shoulders dropping, and his head dips in a brief nod. “Yes,” he answers. But his voice breaks slightly over the small word and he looks out the window to hold his
nerve. "You also need to understand that… that I still love ‘Nea and a part of me will always love her. But trust that my heart is big enough that one day, I will eventually come to love you too, though I think I’m halfway there already." The last part comes out in a hushed whisper and Prompto’s small smile grows at the confession.

Prompto draws his hand up, affectionately framing Gladio’s strong, defined jawline, and guiding him to face him once again. His thumb gently strokes his cheek, brushing against the stubble which isn’t as rough as it looks. “I think I’m halfway there too,” he admits.

Yes, it would be very easy to love Prompto.

Gladio can’t wait for that day to come.

-----

“…There goes the baker with his tray like always! The same old bread and rolls to sell!” Prompto sings along, complete with arm gestures and theatrics. In the backseat, Iris and Talcott giggle and sing along with him. After their lunch date, they collected the children from school, finishing an hour earlier than usual given that it was the last day before their summer holidays. They had offered to give Noctis a lift, either back to his city apartment or back to the conservation park, but backed away when they were met by Ignis, who was taking the younger man out for the evening. Now, the Amicitias are driving back to Leide, blasting Disney music, much to the demands of Iris and Talcott (and Prompto, though he was more subtle about it). “Every morning just the same, since the morning that we came, to this poor provincial town-”

“Good morning, Belle!” Talcott cuts in with a grin.

“Good morning, meeshur!” Iris giggles, innocently butchering the French language in the cutest way possible.

“And where are you off to today?” Prompto sings, turning around in his seat to face the two kids in the back.

“The bookshop! I’ve just finished the most wonderful story about a beanstalk and an ogre and a-“ Talcott cuts Iris off. “That’s nice.” Then the young boy looks at Prompto expectantly; the blond man nods and together they sing, “Marie! The baguettes! Hurry up!”

Iris and Talcott continue singing the rest of the song whilst Prompto sighs fondly, relaxing into the passenger seat of the car. Absentmindedly, his hand reaches out and holds onto the hand Gladio uses to shift the gear. Gladio smiles at this chaste display of affection. “I’m a hundred percent sure that you were more invested in that song than the children were.”

Prompto scoffs. “Of course. I’m not an uncultured swine like some people.”

“Well this so-called uncultured swine needs to concentrate on driving,” Gladio retorts.

“It’s funny how I say ‘uncultured swine’ and you immediately think I’m talking about you,” teases the blond. Gladio allows himself a moment to turn his attention away from the road just to send a narrowed glare at Prompto, before promptly refocusing on the road before him. The younger man beside him takes out his phone from his pocket, scrolling through the notifications and messages. His thumb stills at a message he reads from Luna.

FRI 14:51
lady sylleblossom: Emergency, I repeat, EMERGENCY. Lulu has escaped from her enclosure. The other coeurls are secured but Lulu is missing.

His other hand begins to tap Gladio’s hand to catch his attention; unaware that the car has come to a halt and that the volume of the music is significantly lower than before. Even Iris and Talcott are quiet and observing. “Gladdy, Gladdy, Gladio, we got a situ…ation…” Prompto’s voice slows as his eyes follow the sight of a very familiar coeurl walking along the driver’s side of the car. Lulu looks to be rather inquisitive. She’s neither attacking, nor defending, and her long whiskers flail around her to help her discover more about her new environment. It’s not as if they’re in the city, but they’re only several miles out of Hammerhead. “Holy m—“ oh right, there’s children present. “—ackerel. Holy mackerel.”

“Call Luna and Ravus,” Gladio says calmly. “Now.” With a nod and wordlessly tapping a few buttons, Prompto presses his phone to his ear, the droning tone of the ring only adds to the tense atmosphere.

“I told you that you needed to feed the coeurls in the afternoon!” Ravus hisses, both in frustration directed towards Prompto and also in discomfort of his prosthetic arm, given that he was forced to leave his physiotherapist appointment early, due to this unique emergency. The two are running through an open wilderness of Leide that the locals call ‘The Wenverwilds.’ It’s impossible to lose such a creature when there’s very little to hide behind, and yet they succeeded in just that. “Lulu!” Ravus calls out, cupping his hands around his mouth to amplify his voice – not that it’s very effective in the vast openness of the wilderness.

“Shit! I already said I’m sorry!” Prompto yelps. He and Ravus are searching the east of the Wenverwilds, not that they could tell how far the region actually extends to. Prompto cries in frustration at his phone. “Ignis isn’t picking up his phone! Or I can’t get a signal! Basically, Iggy doesn’t know what’s happening!”

“The south and west areas are clear, let’s all converge on the north, over,” Gladio speaks through the walkie-talkie.

“Copy that, over,” Prompto replies. He and Ravus change direction, heading north in the hopes of cutting Lulu off.

“Luna, is there anything we can do to cover this up? Over.” Gladio’s voice is frantic and breathless, though Prompto alludes that to the current running they’re all doing now.

“I can call Gentiana and see what can be done but it’ll probably be expensive! Over!”

“Do it!” Gladio demands. “We can’t handle the publicity of an escape, it’ll ruin us! Over and out.” Fortunately, the area where Lulu has escaped to is relatively barren and unpopulated, but it still can’t be risked. “Little Amicitia One, Little Amicitia Two, do you copy?” Gladio switches the channel on his walkie-talkie. His kids are currently in the car, off road, waiting at the perimeter with Cid.

“We copy, papa!” They chorus. And Gladio smiles.

“You see anything on your end?”

“Nope! But Cid is telling you guys to get a move on!” Iris says. Gladio rolls his eyes. Of course old man Cid would say that.

“We’re getting there. I’ll call back in a bit, alright?”
“Okay, papa!” Then he switches the channel again, sharing the same frequency as the others who are scouting with him. The dry heat of Leide hits him hard and Gladio is struggling to breathe after running for so long. His heart is pounding hard against his ribcage and he swallows, though with his throat so dry and dehydrated, it’s a painful act. He stops and bends over to catch his breath, his hands resting on his knees as he collects himself. Gladio pants, desperate for a drink of water and cursing himself for not bringing the one he keeps in the car — wait no, he had given that to Prompto before they separated, damn it.

There’s a change in atmosphere and Gladio can feel goosebumps forming on his skin, making the little hairs stand on end. He holds his breath and when he hears a gruff pant, he stills. Hands loose at his side, Gladio slowly turns around, now in the presence of a coeurl, a coeurl named Lulu. Except, she doesn’t seem to take much notice of him; she’s too busy rolling around the desert dirt and scratching the large rocks as if they were scratch-posts. She looks… free. Or that’s what Gladio observes. He takes a step back, and winces at the sudden snap! of a twig beneath his foot. Lulu perks up, feline eyes alert and suspicious. He follows her line of sight and realises she’s staring at the tranquiliser gun slung around him. Ah.

Gladio unclips the strap and tosses the tranquiliser gun behind him.

An unwise move, perhaps.

What did Ravus teach him again?

“Coeurls are proud, majestic creatures, Gladiolus. Insulting their pride is the last thing you’ll ever do.”

“…Grow a spine. She won’t respect you unless you give her something to respect.”

Right. That’s it. Give her something to respect. Hiding behind that tranquiliser gun is a coward’s way out. Gladio straightens his posture, holds his chin high, and puffs his chest out with a clear sense of dignity. Lulu watches him curiously, her long whiskers flowing along the gentle, desert breeze. Gladio takes a step of confidence towards her. And then another. And another. Until finally, he’s standing a mere foot in front of her. It’s the closest she’s ever allowed him to come without her approaching him first. Then Lulu circles around Gladio, her tail brushing around his legs, as if wondering if he’ll break his resolve. When she stands in front of him again, he reaches a hand out to her and waits for her to make the next move. The coeurl stares hard at his hand with a low, rumbling sound – either a soft growl or a loud purr, Gladio doesn’t quite know the difference – before gently pressing her head against his hand. His eyes widen at the touch of soft, silky fur, only dirtied by the desert sand.

Then she cries loudly, causing Gladio to stagger backwards. Lulu falls on her hind legs, and then rolls into her fall before stilling into unconsciousness.

Gladio wildly looks around and spots Luna, Cindy, Ravus, and Prompto waving at him and running to join him. Whilst Cindy calls for Cid to come and pick them up, Luna and Prompto tend to Lulu, checking her vitals and seeing if she had injured herself during her excursion. Ravus stands next to Gladio, resting the tranquiliser gun on his shoulder.

“Congratulations, Gladiolus,” he says, “you finally earned Lulu’s respect.”

Chapter End Notes
Oh yes, I definitely hinted at potential for future angst ;)

I don't know when I'll be able to update next, but I do have the rest of the chapter outlines planned out so hopefully soon. But I was wondering, would you prefer more frequent but shorter chapters (roughly 2000-3000 words), or less frequent but longer chapters (5000-8000 words)? I could have easily torn this chapter in half but I figured with the long break, you guys deserved a long chapter.

Thanks for sticking with me so far♡

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!