Oh, You Wondrous Creature

by Ginia

Summary

Ignis Scientia had learned at a young age to perform his duties quietly and flawlessly. He learned not to draw undue attention to himself, as attention had often lead to pain and humiliation at the hands of those who considered themselves to be his betters.

He has no idea what to do when the attentions of one Gladiolus Amicitia are directed at him. He expects harshness and cruelty, but is met with something quite the opposite.

Notes

I suck at summaries, I am so sorry.

Welcome to whatever this is going to be! (Just kidding, there's a plan, and it's a very fluffy, sweet, gooey, Gladnis plan)
Regis Lucis Caelum looked down at the small boy, curled up and asleep in his arms. By the age of five most little boys lose that cherubic quality that clings to them as babes, but not his Noctis. His features were still soft and round, swimming in baby fat beneath a mop of feathery black hair. The young Prince was the very image of innocence. Too innocent, Regis thought. Undeserving of this fate. Would that this were my burden to bear and not his.

When his beloved and never-forgotten Aulea had borne him his firstborn son and heir he had dreamt of a great reign for his child and his people. He dreamt of peaceful days in which Noctis would be praised for his justice and wisdom. He dreamt of a golden age for Lucis in which the arts and sciences thrived, ushering the kingdom into new realms of self-actualization and prosperity. He dreamt of a grown Noctis with snow white hair seated upon his throne and surrounded by the love of his future Queen and their many healthy children and grandchildren.

Then the Crystal had anointed his heart, his world, his Noctis as its chosen king. That enigmatic rock that was both blessing and curse had stolen those dreams from Noctis before the Prince was old enough to even imagine them himself.

Regis then began to fantasize about an unremarkable reign for his son, full of mundane deeds performed by a very average man. He sorely regretted his lofty hopes and aspirations. Perhaps this was the Astrals’ way of enacting penance upon him for his folly in daring to wish so much for his son.

From the moment that the Crystal had first chosen Noctis, Regis had vowed to do all in his power to ensure that Noctis grew up healthy, happy, and most of all, loved. Despite the great destiny set before him, Regis swore that above all else he would raise Noctis as his beloved son and not the Crown Prince, or sacrificial lamb in-waiting.

One of the first tasks that Regis set himself as part of his new life’s mission was to ensure that Noctis would grow up surrounded by the right people, who could support him when the day eventually came for him to fulfill his destiny. He would need retainers, advisors, and bodyguards. It had always been important to Regis that those people be competent, but suddenly it was also imperative that they be bonded to Noctis not only by duty and obligation, but love and loyalty.

Noctis had a good start already, with his future Shield. Traditionally the sons of the Amicitia line defended the sons of the line of Lucis. His own Shield, Clarus Amicitia, had an eight-year-old son who held every promise of making a fine Shield one day. Gladiolus was already big and strong for his age, and he spent hour upon hour each day training – he was likely to grow into a behemoth of a man some day. Gladiolus had also inherited (from his mother, he liked to remind Clarus) an infectious personality. The kid was a people person, no two ways about it. Friendly, bright and charming, there wasn’t a sole within the Citadel’s walls who didn’t consider the young Amicitia to be their personal friend. Regis had every confidence that such a boy would grow up to have as strong of a bond with Noctis as he himself did with Clarus.

Ensuring that Noctis had an Advisor who was up to the task of being his son’s loyal and steady right hand during the trying times to come would prove to be a unique challenge, however. Historically, the Kings of Lucis had many means of acquiring advisors and retainers. A King who ascended at an early age often inherited his father’s staff. Those who were fortunate to ascend later in life might draw upon their own experiences and observations amongst the nobles and council members of the day, bringing the best of the best into their personal service. Regis feared that Noct’s ascension would be an early one, but he was loathe to see Noctis inheriting his own
advisors. He wanted his son to have someone by his side who he would be loyal to Noctis not because of his station, but because they were bound by trust and friendship before duty. He wanted his only child to have someone who could be akin to a sibling.

Within weeks of Noctis being chosen Regis set the wheels in motion for a most irregular search for a chamberlain for his son. It would be an unorthodox process to find an advisor for a most unique future King.

Word was spread throughout Insomnia and beyond that His Majesty was in search of a child between the ages of seven and ten, to be brought to the Citadel to be raised alongside His Highness, to be groomed for the young Prince’s service. There would be a multi-stage selection process consisting of various tests, interviews, and background checks. All children within the desired age range were permitted to apply, regardless of birthplace or social status. They need only prove his or herself worthy, and their family must be willing to turn their child over to the care of the Crown. They must also be willing and able to take on varied duties, many of which traditionally fell outside of an Advisor’s responsibilities, and the child would begin working in some capacity immediately. Their time would belong exclusively to the Crown. It was a great deal to ask from one person, particularly a child, but it was a position of significant honor which in itself should be its own reward.

There was an overwhelming response from the people, particularly from the commoners and members of lesser aristocratic families. These families saw the competition as a chance to provide a better life for their child, even if it meant seeing them raised at a distance, by others within different social circles. The Citadel staff had a massive undertaking on their hands as they had to sift through the preliminary applications and test results.

It took several weeks but eventually a dozen children were singled out for additional testing and interviews. They all had flawless background checks, and had performed remarkably well on the written examination that had been distributed to schools and government offices throughout Lucis. The twelve finalists were brought to Insomnia to sit a day-long series of written examinations under the strict supervision of Palace authorities. They were then interviewed by members of the King’s household. Should any of the candidates meet the high standards set forth by His Majesty, they would be granted an audience with the royal family to serve as a final test – ensuring that the young Prince actually liked the child and was willing to be attached to him or her.

When all was said and done, one child emerged the clear victor, and as hoped, the young Prince was quite taken by the soft-spoken bespectacled boy presented to him.

When the process of finding an Advisor for Noctis began, notifications were sent to government offices and primary schools throughout the realm so that the populace at large would have access to the necessary forms and applications. Information packets were also provided to all Citadel staff members in the event that they knew of a suitable child already. One such staff member was Alsius Scientia, himself an advisor and attendant to the current King.

Alsius flipped through the pages of the application form, hazel eyes dancing in amusement. The entire booklet was an inch thick, with at least half of it consisting of an initial screening aptitude test. He shook his head and chuckled wryly. He knew that the Council had wanted to make the process daunting, to deter people from applying on a whim, when they knew that their child was too unremarkable to realistically stand a chance, but this was excessive. “Bureaucracy at its finest,” he mused aloud to himself.
Alsius had a nephew whom he was fairly certain was within the required age range. He had never met the lad, but he exchanged cards and letters with his brother and his family several times a year. He’d received several letters written by young Ignis over the years, and he recalled that the little boy’s writings had always struck him as being surprisingly erudite for one so young. His brow furrowed then, and he wondered if he had perhaps recalled the boy’s age incorrectly, he may be older than ten already.

The elder Scientia strode through his apartment, over to his desk. In the bottom drawer, tucked neatly into wooden box, was a packet of letters and cards. He untied the bit of ribbon that held the little pile together and began sifting through them. He didn’t know precisely what he was looking for – anything that would confirm Ignis’s age would do. He eventually landed on a family photograph showcasing his brother and his wife each with an arm around the other, and a little sandy-haired boy between them, grinning up at the camera from beneath a pair of too-large spectacles. On the back, in his brother’s neat writing there was listed their names, and next to Ignis’s in parentheses it said age four. There was a date as well, and he didn’t require his masters degree in mathematics and economics to perform the simple arithmetic. Based on the photograph, Ignis would have turned seven earlier in the year.

Alsius found himself cocking a brow as he began sifting through the various cards and letters, picking out those that were written in his nephew’s childish hand. There was a surprising number of them, some going back to when he was only a toddler. “And his grammar and spelling was already better than half the admin staff here.” He chuckled to himself.

Carefully replacing the precious bundle of letters, he retrieved his copy of the information packet and set about drafting an unscheduled correspondence to his brother. Word of the competition would likely reach their remote village to the north of Tenebrae – eventually – but who knew if it would arrive in time for the Scientias to get their application back to the capital before the deadline? Alsius pursed his lips then, noting with some bitterness that the two-week window of opportunity was likely a deliberate attempt to exclude those in the outlying territories. For all their talk of being a civilized and righteous society, people there could be extremely closed-minded when it came to outsiders. He himself had suffered many the suspicious glare when interacting with civilians, who recognized his accent as foreign, but did not recognize his face as one of many attendants to His Majesty. He saw the mistrust in the peoples’ eyes, their skepticism, their fear of the unknown and different.

He paused in the midst of addressing the envelope. Was he doing the right thing by bringing this to his family’s attention? He knew that they would carefully review the information and would weigh the pros and cons of the situation carefully. He was by no means making this decision for them, merely ensuring that should they decide that they did wish to apply, that the paperwork would get to them in time to actually do so. He planned to utilize a courier to get the information to them within two days.

Alsius knew that the packet provided information detailing the terms of the position, the requirement for the child – and only the child – to be housed within the Citadel and brought up alongside His Highness. It outlined the enhanced educational programme, the details of the compensation that the child and their family would receive, and any number of other logistical items.

What it did not explain, however, was the deep fear and mistrust that Insomnians bore towards outsiders. Nor did it explain the resentment members of the aristocracy were likely to feel should a commoner, and a commoner from beyond the Wall no less, be accepted. Alsius had experienced that himself to a certain extent. He hoped that, as an innocent child, Ignis would be shown more compassion and be more sheltered, but nothing was ever guaranteed, particularly not in the world
After deliberating for a few long minutes he heaved a sigh and finished addressing and sealing the envelope. It was fine. His brother and sister-in-law were intelligent people. They didn’t need him to explain the layers of racism and prejudice wound within their culture. It was well-known and something they would consider even without his input.

This was in the end a good opportunity for young Ignis, who based on his letters did appear to be rather gifted. His brother’s family did well enough for themselves, considering their remote setting, but for a gifted child like Ignis there would only ever be so far that he could go, so much he could learn in his one-room schoolhouse. The fact that Ignis was literate at such a young age was likely due to the fact that it was Alsius’s brother who was in fact the village schoolmaster. The family lived above the schoolhouse, and he could see in his mind’s eye his brother teaching a tiny Ignis – barely out of diapers – his letters as they sat around the dinner table. The mental image made him smile fondly. He often wished that his brother had followed him to Insomnia – he missed him – but he had such a tender heart and a gentle spirit, perhaps the big city would have smothered that.

Alsius still felt doubts niggling at his brain even after entrusting the package to the courier. He consoled himself with the knowledge that even with his obvious brilliance there was no guarantees that Ignis would be selected, and that was assuming his parents even decided to submit the paperwork. If by some small chance Ignis was named the Prince’s Advisor, well, surely it was meant to be.

Neither Regis Lucis Caelum nor Alsius Scientia could have known what their respective actions would set in motion, or the heavy price that a young Ignis Scientia would be forced to pay. Noctis’s happiness would be bought and paid for with Ignis’s suffering. It would take a full decade before the young chamberlain’s wounds could begin healing.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Just an average day for our resident put-upon royal advisor.

The thin bedsheets slid to the floor as Ignis jolted upright. His shallow, panicked breaths echoed with startling clarity in his small bedroom. He sat there for several long minutes, trying to sweep up the shattered pieces of his sanity and piece himself back together again. He felt remarkably like an upended jigsaw puzzle, one of those terrible ones of an afternoon sky where all of the pieces look the same and it takes far too long to figure it out.

Just a dream, it was just a dream, he told himself repeatedly. You're fine.

He concentrated on counting his breaths, each inhalation and exhalation, until the sensation of his heaving chest was all that he knew, until it was enough to shove those other feelings deep into the recesses of his subconscious where they belonged. He sat there for several long minutes and just allowed himself to breathe, allowed his heart rate to subside to something approaching normal rhythm. Once the trembling stopped he knew that he was okay, that the worst of it was over.

He ran a hand through his sweaty bangs, shoving the limp hair away from his eyes. He felt disgusting and sticky, as he always did after a night terror. Squinting at his alarm clock, he read the time by the omnipresent light of his desk lamp. Half past three. Bloody hell. He would have to try to get more sleep, he’d only lain down two hours ago.

He huffed and bent over to retrieve his sheet, pointedly ignoring the way blood rushed to his head, making the room seem to tilt and spin on its axis. Arranging his bedding once more, he curled up and tried to coax a few more hours of sleep out of the merciless night. He stared up at the ceiling, at the soft patterns of golden light playing across it from the lamp. He reminded himself over and over again that he’s safe, he’s okay, no one is going to drag him out of his bed in the middle of the night - but for all of his dutiful chanting, all of his careful reminders, when he closed his eyes he could swear that he could feel bony fingers wrapped too tightly around his arm, his bare heels skimming across the floor as he’s dragged off to –

With a frustrated cry he kicked the sheets off again. By now Ignis had come to know his own mind well enough to know that sleep would be an elusive and cruel mistress that night. He would be best served by resigning himself to another exhausting day, sustained more by coffee than sleep. If he wasn’t going to get any more rest, he may as well get up and get a headstart on the day.

It always struck Ignis as funny how, no matter how early he started his day, he could never seem to get ahead. Logically one would reason that if he awoke two hours early, he would finish two hours early. Yet he just knew that when midnight next rolled around, he would still be awake, mending Noct’s clothing, working on his current thesis, or summarizing a report or twenty. There was always something.

Shoulders slumped beneath the crushing weight of never-ending work, Ignis padded to his kitchen to fetch his first of many coffees for the day.

After downing a bowl of oatmeal and a cup of coffee - out of a massive novelty mug that Noctis
had found hilarious but Ignis found practical - Ignis turned his attention to his schedule for the day. Tired eyes skimmed blandly over the list of meetings and appointments, until he came to his 1:45 appointment and his eyes narrowed with displeasure. Lovely, his meeting with Gladiolus was today. Few things could sour Ignis’s mood quite like a trip to the training centre. He went to great pains to schedule his own Crownguard training sessions for late evenings, when that horrid place would be empty and quiet. By day it was full of men and women who thought that one’s biceps were the most important muscle in the human body, and they had nothing better to do with their time than mill about, being too loud and rowdy for Ignis’s tastes. Cor Leonis sometimes met up with him to spar or to critique his form, and Ignis was grateful. He liked the Marshal very much, appreciating the man’s quiet stoicism.

Ignis tapped on his smartphone, calling up the email linked to the appointment. His scowl only deepened. Ignis didn’t know what he found more irksome: the fact that Gladiolus once again wanted to adjust Noct’s training schedule, or the carefree manner in which he’d told Ignis that his only appointments for the entire week were his three training sessions with Noctis, a meeting with Cor on Thursday, and he needed to take his sister to a dance recital on Friday. He knew, of course, that the Prince’s Shield still devoted several hours a day to working out and training but he had the leisure to set his own schedule, work at the directive of his own whims, and even after all of that he still had an abundance of free time. Had he woken up in the middle of the night and struggled to fall asleep again, he would have the luxury of staying in bed until noon if he so desired. Ahh, the idle nobility, must be nice, Ignis could feel the bitterness lacing itself around his thoughts and he shook his head at himself.

With a weary sigh he put his phone aside and continued with his morning routine. He made a mental note to fill a thermos of coffee for himself at some point, he suspected that he would need it.

The heels of his dress shoes clicked against the stone tiles in the training centre’s courtyard, but the sound was swallowed beneath the clanging of steel against steel and loud voices that seemed to echo from every corner of the facility. The cacophony did nothing for the tension headache that he had been nursing most of the day. Clutching his briefcase to his side, he made his way beneath an archway and into the interior corridors of the centre. A few twists and turns brought him to the administrative hallway where the highest-ranking officials had small offices. Smack in the middle of the corridor was Gladiolus’s door.

As he approached he heard the low rumble of voices from within the man’s office. Frowning, he lifted his wrist to peer at his watch. He was still five minutes early, which in his opinion meant that he was barely on time, but he knew that not everyone shared his exalted views on punctuality. The young Advisor moved to stand against the wall a few feet down the corridor, allowing himself the brief respite of actually leaning against the stone tiles. He wanted desperately to turn around and press his forehead to the cool stone and let the cold seep into his aching head, but that would be taking matters a step too far.

Eventually the office door banged open, and Ignis resisted the temptation to check his watch to see precisely how many minutes past 1:45 it was. More than a few, that much was certain. He tried to swallow back his irritation. Meetings and appointments sometimes ran long or began late, it was a fact of life and often nobody was truly at fault. Still, he had been hoping to find a few minutes after this meeting to grab a quick bite – his morning oatmeal was a distant memory by that point. As it was he would need to rush to make his next two appointments if he had any hope of being on time to pick Noctis up from school.
Cool teal eyes watched a group of young Crownsguard – all men – exiting Gladiolus’s office. He fought back the urge to roll his eyes at the way several of them bumped shoulders and jostled elbows as they seemingly tried to all squeeze through the narrow doorway at once. When the group turned to proceed in his direction, he instinctively moved to press himself more firmly against the wall, making himself as small and inconspicuous as possible. It was a noble but ultimately wasted effort. The men were like a herd of rampaging garulas and Ignis had to suppress a yelp when more than one heavily booted foot stamped onto his.

He would almost be able to write it off as a painful but innocent accident, if something like this didn’t happen every single time he came to the training centre by day. The way the Crownsguards smirked at each other and bumped knuckles didn’t help, either. When he was younger they at least tried to act as if they were sorry when he was knocked over or stepped on. At seventeen he was no longer afforded that small courtesy. He idly wondered what it had been this time, what had motivated their casual cruelty. Sometimes it was a high-born who envied his position, sometimes it was a fellow commoner with an irrational disdain for anyone not Insomnian-born.

In the end it didn’t really matter, he could not change the circumstances of his birth, nor would he ever dream of casting aside his role and duties to the Prince. He loved Noctis, like the annoying little brother that he’d never had but had secretly wished for when he was small. One could not grow up alongside the sweet, energetic little Prince without having their heart held in thrall by him. Even when the effervescent young boy eventually grew into a moody teenager.

Once the rowdy Crownsguard men had rounded a corner and were out of sight Ignis grimaced and made his way to the younger Amicitia’s open door. He rapped his knuckles politely on the doorframe and waited to be invited in before making his way, carefully moderating his steps so as not to limp. Ignis loathed showing signs of weakness, particularly with someone like Gladiolus Amicitia – strong, popular, and well-born. Everything that Ignis himself wasn’t.

“Gladiolus,” Ignis nodded politely before taking a seat. The office was small and rather spartan, containing a desk with several filing cabinets tucked in behind it, and a pair of folding chairs for guests. A sad little plant stood in a corner, the only decoration in a room that was rarely used.

The Shield rolled his eyes at the use of his full name but didn’t say anything about it, merely returning the greeting with a matching nod and “Ignis.”

The younger man tucked his briefcase beneath his seat and pulled a small notebook and pencil out of the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket before casting an expectant gaze at Gladiolus. If they hurried and he had the audacity to run, he might just be able to snatch a sandwich or something from the kitchens before he had to drive to the tailor’s to pick up a suit of Noct’s that was being re-hemmed.

“Thanks for making time,” the Shield nodded politely. He leaned back, the metal legs of his chair creaking in protest. “I was wanting to talk to you about Noct’s training schedule.”

“So your email said, yes.” Ignis knew that his words were rather clipped, even by his own rather brusque standards, but between his headache, exhaustion, gnawing hunger and the throbbing in his trampled-upon feet, his patience was at an all-time low.

“Always a pleasure seeing you, Ignis,” Gladiolus sighed, as if Ignis were the raindrops spoiling his picnic. Ignis frowned but made no other response, so the elder pressed on. “Anyway yes, I wanted to see about moving Noct from three sessions a week to four. Maybe Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday – give the kid Wednesdays off or something.”

Ignis pursed his lips. This wasn’t the first time that Gladiolus had approached him about expanding
Noct’s training schedule from their current Monday, Wednesday, Friday setup. He’d always politely but firmly rebuffed the suggestion, citing how busy Noctis was now that he had begun high school. He relied upon those two afternoons a week to spend time with Prompto. Relegating him to only one afternoon a week in which he could go to the arcade with his best friend seemed cruel, and contrary to Ignis’s primary directive which was to ensure Noct’s happiness. His Majesty had always been firm with Ignis that his first priority was to ensure that his son was safe and content. Learning his royal duties came second, and never at the expense of the Prince’s happiness. It was a slow process, grooming him for ascension in such a manner, but Ignis was making slow but steady progress.

“As I’ve indicated before, Gladiolus, I do not believe that is wise at this time. Noctis already has a great deal on his plate, and I fear that any attempt to add to his schedule now wouldn’t be received well.”

The Shield scrubbed his hands across his face, as if a mere five minutes of conversation with Ignis was just exhausting him. “It’s only another hour out of his week, Ignis. I’m sure he can find the time for one more session. Maybe he can read a few less comics or cut his naps short.”

“Actually,” Ignis pointed out in a deliberately airy tone, “with His Highness moving out last month, once you factor in the time it takes to shower and change, plus his new commute, it would take closer to two hours. And that is in addition to the extra time that he already spends commuting to the Palace for training and other duties.”

The Shield snorted. “He’s pretty much only ever at the Citadel to train. You attend all of his meetings for him.”

“Well he is in school all day. His education is important. As are his leisure hours. His Majesty wants His Highness to lead as normal a life as possible, and spending time with his friends, or reading comics instead of reports is part of that.”

“I get that,” Gladiolus began, expression hardening like armor. He was clearly prepared to do battle over this point today. “But eventually he’s going to be King, and by then it will be too late for me to instill these lessons in him. He needs to learn this stuff, Ignis, and sooner rather than later.”

“I appreciate that you have a job to do, responsibilities to the Crown to fulfill.” Ignis closed his eyes briefly before locking cool teal with warm amber. “I will speak with His Highness regarding this, see if he may be amenable to the idea of training four days a week. If he isn’t, would you be satisfied with perhaps extending the length of his existing sessions?”

Gladiolus furrowed his brow thoughtfully. “I mean, I’ll take what I can get, but an extra twenty or thirty minutes on top of his current sessions isn’t nearly as beneficial as training another day. You make up his schedule for him, can’t you just update it and tell him what’s up?”

“No, I certainly can and will not.” Ignis sniffed delicately. “I serve His Highness, not the other way around. I am hardly in a position to order him about. Besides,” he paused a moment, expression softening slightly. “he will take on more responsibility in his own time, when he is ready. If now is the time for him to step up his training regimen, he will agree to the suggestion. If, as I suspect, now is not the time, he will decline, and we will accept his judgement.”

“You know, if you keep letting him take on his duties at his own pace, he’ll be eighty before he even knows how to sign his name on a royal decree.”

“Yes well forcing him to do something that he does not want to do only results in him either skipping the appointment, or putting forth only minimal effort. You won’t get very much out of His
Highness if he does not truly wish to be there.”

“If he didn’t want to wipe his ass would you do it for him, too?”

Ignis felt angry colour burning in his cheeks. “Being needlessly crude does you no favours here, my lord Amicitia.” Ignis knew that dragging out the other man’s title was as good as throwing down a gauntlet, but Ignis didn’t know how much more of this pointless back and forth he could take. He had already agreed to discuss this with the Prince and had even offered a viable backup proposal should the first be shot down. Really he was being more than cooperative, but the other man just kept pushing and needling at him, and by the Six did his head hurt, and his feet…

“I’m just trying to prepare him for the real world. I don’t know about you but I want my future King to be the best that he can be.”

“Learning how to swing a sword well is no less important than knowing how to forge friendships and real connections with people. His leisure time is important for that.”

Gladiolus actually looked affronted. “He learns way more than how to swing a sword, Ifrit’s flaming nuts. It’s about discipline, respect, perseverance. Picking yourself up when you’ve been knocked down and trying harder the next time.”

Ignis nodded his understanding. “I appreciate that and will bear it in mind when I address this with the Prince. Just, again, please keep in mind that with his new living arrangements and commute, he may not be agreeable. Please prepare yourself for a likely refusal.”

Gladiolus rolled his eyes at that. “Do you even hear yourself sometimes? You coddle the kid way too much. I’m surprised you don’t carry him everywhere he goes so his precious royal legs don’t get tired.”

Ignis could feel his fingers beginning to tremble with the anger he was fighting to contain. This man knew nothing of his duty, nothing of the way the King had looked at him with such parental concern when he’d asked Ignis to take care of Noctis, asking not as a monarch but as a loving father. He desperately needed to end this meeting before matters between them could further escalate. The last thing that he wanted was for the Palace gossips to start wagging their tongues about how the Prince’s Advisor and Shield were at odds again.

“My own duties notwithstanding, was there anything else you wanted to address?” His headache was only escalating, the pain branching out from behind his eyes to assault his temples, too.

The Shield shook his head, disgust clearly written across his sculpted features. “No. Looking at you is just pissing me off. I’m going to go a few rounds with a training dummy.” So saying he pushed his chair back, legs scraping against the stonework. Ignis did the same, though he had the manners to tuck his chair back neatly against the desk where he’d found it.

“Thank you for your time then, Gladiolus. I do wish you a good day. I shall inform you of His Highness’s decision as soon as possible. I will address the matter with him this evening.”

“Oh, you do that.”

Ignis waited for the other man’s nod of dismissal before turning on his heel and exiting the room, too irritated at the other man to bother with masking his limp.

Both men breathed a sigh of relief once a respectable and safe distance lay between them.
A somewhat disgruntled Gladio found himself striding through the Citadel’s corridors at a far later hour than was his custom.

His ten-year-old little sister had been getting ready for bed and he had been on the verge of settling into an armchair for a few hours with a new book – he loved that new book smell, there was nothing quite like cracking a new volume open – when Iris had come scampering into his room. She’d been a pretty adorable sight if he was being honest with himself; toothbrush dangling out of her mouth, toothpaste dribbling down her chin while she babbled frantically about some bookbag that she’d left at the Citadel after her music lessons and only just realized now that she’d forgotten it there. Apparently it was of dire importance that she had the bag in time for school the next morning. Iris claimed she had a homework assignment in it, Gladio suspected her favourite brand of sparkly pink lip gloss was in it. Either way, someone was going to have to go back to the Citadel to fetch the thing for her.

Their father had already retired to his study for the evening with a glass of brandy. Gladio was loathe to burden the elder Shield with this, not when his days were so much longer and more stressful than Gladio’s. They could have solicited their butler, Jared, who would do damn near anything for Iris, but the hour was late and Gladio would have felt awfully guilty if he allowed the elderly man to go out in the night on some stupid errand for his sister.

So there he was, stalking through the Citadel just after ten in the evening, on his way to the music room. Ordinarily he wouldn’t mind. He loved his little sister more than his own life and would do anything for her. Retrieving a bookbag was a small thing on the grand scale of things he would do for that kid. But that particular night he’d just wanted to curl up in his oldest, rattiest, and therefore most comfortable jammies with a cup of tea and his book. He’d had an unusually lousy day and had desperately wanted to relax.

The day had started out not badly. It had ended not too badly, too. Jared had made his favourite prime rib for supper, which was a nice change since the man usually catered to Iris’s tastes, which generally involved copious amounts of sickeningly sweet sauces on everything. The one glaring sore spot that had stuck with him all day had been his meeting with Noct’s advisor. Dear Six but that man knew how to push all of his buttons, even finding buttons he didn’t know he had. It had
taken a significant chunk of his self-control to not shove that stupid notebook of his so far up the other man’s ass that his tongue would get a paper cut.

He’d received an email from Ignis just a few hours ago, advising him that Noctis had agreed to lengthening his existing training sessions by twenty minutes instead of moving to training four afternoons a week. Ignis’s melodically accented voice was usually neutral, bordering on cold indifference, but somehow when he’d read “I regret to inform you that His Highness has rejected your proposal that an additional training session be added to his schedule.” he could practically hear the words in a taunting sing-song voice.

There was just something about Ignis that annoyed him. Sometimes he thought that it was the way he presented such a polished, unflappable exterior with his neatly pressed suits and perfect manners, despite the flashes of anger or bemusement that he sometimes glimpsed behind the guy’s eyes. At other times, such as that day, it was the fact that they so often seemed to be working at cross-purposes to each other. Ignis was only ever concerned with Noctis being happy and comfortable, not even considering what his coddling could mean for someone like Gladio. He was expected to throw himself into the path of any danger, any attack on Noctis. He was meant to be an actual human shield, sacrificing his flesh for his Prince’s. He really, really wanted the man that he took those hits for to be worthy of his sacrifice. Sometimes he envied his father for having such a noble, strong and capable King to serve. He only wanted to be so fortunate, and by the Six he wasn’t going to let that bespectacled Scientia kid get in the way of that.

He stepped out of the elevator and proceeded down the hall. This part of the Citadel was usually quiet at night. It was a wing that catered to the children of the royal line and the nobility all of whom would be at home and likely in bed by this hour. There were several classrooms and practice rooms, along with a small children’s library. This space was typically used by nobles who did not want their children to be educated outside of the Citadel and instead opted to bring in private tutors to instruct them. This was where Noctis had studied when he was quite young, before His Majesty had enrolled him rather shockingly in public school. It was also where Ignis would have received his specialized education. Most importantly to Gladio, it was where Iris had her flute lessons twice a week. Clarus loved his daughter fiercely, but even he had to admit that at this stage she was a terrible flutist and it was cruel to subject Jared and Gladio to her rehearsals at home, so they arranged for her tutor to meet her here.

Gladio slowed his steps as he drew nearer to his destination. Much to his surprise he could hear the gentle melody of a stringed instrument – a violin most likely – calling to him like a siren’s song. The notes were low and drawn-out, a beautiful but mournful refrain that tugged viciously at his heart, stirring up vague feelings of sadness and grief. He knew not for what or whom he grieved, it was as if the violinist’s own sorrows ran so deep that the feelings leapt from the player’s hands and into the bow, to the strings and then straight to the listener’s soul.

Unable to help himself he let his feet carry him towards the slightly ajar music room door. He told himself that he wasn’t spying really, he had been heading to this music room anyway to retrieve Iris’s bag, it wasn’t like he had known that some mysterious soul would be in there, pouring their heart out into the violin strings in such a hauntingly beautiful manner. It was their own fault for not properly closing the door, too.

The Shield paused outside the door. It was open a few inches, just wide enough to afford Gladio a clear view of half of the room. To his never-ending surprise he realized that the room was dark. The only light permeating the space was the ethereal glow of the moonlight cascading in through tall arched windows lining the far wall. Before the centre-most window stood his mystery soloist, his back turned to the rest of the room and therefore to Gladio as well. Gladio was fairly certain it was a he at any rate, the performer cut a striking silhouette: he was tall, with broad shoulders that
tapered to an elegantly narrow waist, long lean legs braced slightly apart, and a head of short hair that shone silvery in the moonlight, tipped gracefully to one side as he played.

There was something mesmerizing about him, both the heartbreaking tune and the exquisite image that he presented. There was just something about him, the way he seemed to coax the bow across the strings without the guide of sheet music, as if the notes were the language of his heart expressed in the only medium in which they could be articulated. There was something tragic in the way he stood in the dark, in the lonely spotlight of the moon, with the night sky above him as his only audience. It made Gladio think rather romantically that this man was a fallen star, doomed to be ever-separated from his celestial brethren, playing to them in the language of the night sky in the hopes that they might hear him down here on Eos and remember him, mourn for him.

The violinist continued to guide his bow across the strings with graceful motions of his arm, swaying in place as if dancing with himself. A wild, reckless desire seized Gladio as he covertly watched. Oh how he wanted to take the man’s hand, bow over it in respect and admiration for his talents and request the honor of just one dance. Even if the man couldn’t play to accompany them while dancing, Gladio would offer to hum. Anything to transform this lonely star’s song from one of despair to one of joy.

Gladio blinked hard a few times and shook his head at himself. He’d been reading way too much poetry recently, and fantasy romance before that. He thought, rather ruefully, that it might be wise if he picked up a good thriller or maybe a comedy. Clearly all of the prose that he had consumed recently had gone to his head. Who could blame him, though, when confronted by this sad, starlit prince of music?

It wasn’t often that Gladio was at a loss for what to do. He was a man of instinct and action; his father had drilled into him the importance of being decisive. “Your indecision could cost your King his life, and then what will you be? A Shield without a King is no Shield at all.” Yet he stood there now, torn between the demands of his heart and his brain. His heart begged him to stay, to wallow in masochism, allowing the violin’s sad song to envelop him. He wanted to wait until there was a lull in his sweet music in which he might offer his applause and praise. His brain cautioned him that he should slip away quietly, begged him to give his sad starlit prince the peace and privacy he so obviously came here to find. He could always come back later for Iris’s bag. Or even first thing in the morning.

Gladio remained where he was, framed within a few inches of open doorway, gazing in wonderment as the violinist swayed gently in place. He was slowly building up the resolution and composure needed to leave, to let this evening become a charming memory and the violinist’s identity a mystery he might never solve. He felt somehow that he owed this man that, owed him his solitude in which he could commune with the night sky in peace, owed him the illusion that no one had violated his sacred privacy.

Quietly as he could, Gladio crept away from the door. He stepped lightly, so as not to cause so much as a stir in air to alert the musician of his presence. Once he reached the relative safety of the elevators he finally released the breath that he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding in. He pressed the button to recall the lift to his current floor and resolved himself to setting an early alarm so that he could come back to fetch Iris’s bag before breakfast.

The following morning Gladio smothered a yawn behind his hand as he crept downstairs. The morning sun streamed in through tall windows, casting a soft rose gold haze over the foyer. He squinted against the onslaught of light, a scowl twisting his features. Gladio fancied himself a
morning person, but even he had his limits and preparing to be out the door before six was it. Especially when he had found sleep to be so elusive the night before. He couldn’t get his starlit prince – as he insisted upon christening him – out of his head, and had spent half the night tossing and turning, mind doing cartwheels as he tried to work out who he could possibly have been and what on Eos could inspire such tortured music from him.

He wouldn’t have even noticed Jared standing there, had the elderly butler not greeted him with his usual “Good morning, Master Gladiolus.”

The Shield lifted a hand in silent greeting – as his mouth was otherwise engaged in the act of yawning again – and was about to turn to the door when a flash of violently pink fabric caught his eye. Arching his brows until they disappeared beneath his mop of untidy bed hair, he stopped yawning long enough to ask: “Is that Iris’s bookbag?”

“Yes Sir, it is. It seems the young miss left it at the Citadel yesterday. Fortunately, it has her name inside, and the young man who found it was kind enough to drop it off here.”

Yeah, I know, and it’s thanks to her that some nameless faceless man has been haunting my dreams in the most spectacular way all night is what he wanted to say. He was on the cusp of actually saying something about how he’d been about to leave to fetch that same bag just then, when a new thought, terrifying and delicious, struck him. Could that man have been the one to return it? Surely no one else would have had cause to visit the music room between late last night and now?

“Hey, um, Jared?” Gladio coughed and did his best to appear casual. The fact that he looked half-asleep helped. “Who was it that dropped it off? I should thank them when I get a chance, right?”

The old man smiled fondly. “Very thoughtful of you, but regrettably I didn’t know the young man myself, and he declined to leave his name, though I did ask and offered him the house’s hospitality.”

The little flicker of hope that had been kindled in Gladio’s heart began to flutter dangerously close to death at those words. “Oh. That’s odd.” A new thought struck him. “What did he look like? If he works at the Citadel I probably know him. Any distinguishing features?”

Jared frowned, adding new wrinkles to his already lined face. “I’d say he was close to your age with brown hair. He wore glasses if that helps.”

Gladio deflated. That could describe at least a third of the admin staff, and even a good number of the Guard. All of the lads who wore glasses had contacts for work, but it wasn’t unheard of to spot an off-duty Crownsguard wearing a pair of glasses. Still, this bit of intel was better than nothing, and anyway there was still a chance that this person hadn’t even been the violinist – the music room was available to a great many people and it was possible that someone else had found the bag. Still, though, the thought of the man whom he had spent half the night romanticising being so chivalrous as to return his sister’s bag in the wee hours of the morning made his heart skip a bit. The very idea that if Gladio had gotten downstairs a few minutes earlier, or the mystery man stopped by a few minutes later, he might have had the good fortune to greet him at the door instead of Jared. The thought left a surprisingly bitter taste in his mouth, and a dull ache in his heart.

Gladio knew that most people who met him underestimated his intelligence. It was a reasonably safe assumption to be fair, that anyone who clearly spent as much time working out as Gladio did wouldn’t have much time nor inclination to spare for academic pursuits. He would be the first to
admit that he wasn’t a genius, but he was also no slouch. He had attended the finest private school in Insomnia, and had access to the tutors and libraries at the Palace. It would be a disgrace for the man who would one day be omnipresent at the King’s side to be a fool.

So why on Eos was he doing something so astronomically foolish?

Every night for the past fortnight he had returned to the Citadel after dark – after moonrise specifically – and crept to the corridor outside of the music room. He had even begun taking the precaution of taking off his shoes, tying the laces together and draping them over his shoulders so that he could move about more softly in his socked feet.

More often than not his quest went unrewarded; he would find the Education wing silent as a tomb. Yet there had been a cherished handful of evenings when the elevator doors would part like a red velvet curtain being drawn aside at the theatre and he would hear it – sweet notes drifting in the night air to caress his ear, to whisper to him a tale of anguish ensconced in beauty.

Gladio would tiptoe upon socked feet down the corridor, careful not to skid on the polished marble. Fearful of being seen, being caught in his voyeurism, he would stop at the end of the hall, still around the corner from music room. Even from this distance the notes came to him clear and pure. He could slide himself down and sit with his back against the wall, savouring each note. He would sit and listen, letting the music evoke countless fantasies in him and stir up old, bittersweet memories. Gladio’s eyes would close and a soft smile would become etched across his features.

When he was there, on those sweet evenings he was finally able to stop worrying about his daily troubles. The younger Amicitia didn’t worry about what would happen to Iris if he or their father were injured or worse in line of duty. He didn’t worry about how they would steer Iris through her teenage years without their mother’s guidance. For once he also didn’t worry about Noctis, about how the kid would never learn to be a strong ruler with someone like Ignis there who he could walk all over and have perform his royal duties for him. For a few blessed evenings he didn’t have to worry about how determined Noctis was to shun the privilege and safety of the Citadel, instead immersing himself in the excessively dangerous world of the common people, deaf to Gladio’s admonishments to be careful. It was easy for Noctis to be so carefree about his exploits, when it was Gladio who would be expected to jump between Noctis and whatever trouble he inevitably stirred up.

With great reluctance he always forced himself to retreat before his private serenade ended, ever fearful that if he waited until the man stopped playing he would dally too long in the corridor and be caught.

It was so comforting, to sit there propped up against the marble wall, long legs stretched into the empty corridor. With his eyes closed and the melancholy tune wrapped around him, he could almost let himself fall asleep, coaxed into sweet dreams about falling stars and lonely celestial princes.

And so he did, and so it was that after a fortnight of performing unknowingly to a captive audience of one, Ignis Scientia stumbled upon Gladiolus Amicitia, fast asleep against the wall in a normally vacant hallway, his sneakers inexplicably tied together at the laces and draped around the Shield’s shoulders.
Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies for how long this update took. I really should have added a note at the end of the last chapter advising that this one may be delayed. I don't know if I was overcome by a fit of youthful optimism or if I just forgot to. Either way, I am so sorry. Between Canada Day, having house guests, and then my birthday, I haven't really had the free time and privacy to write much. This chapter didn't get much revision, so please feel free to criticize me! I deserve it for being so slow and choosing to publish rather than spend a few days editing!

I also find the Ignis chapters so difficult to write in this fic. That should change a few chapters from now, once Certain Things Happen or whatever. Bleh. This is gonna get somewhere, I swear. I have an outline and everything. Like an adult.

Finally, I am so very grateful for your feedback so far. You guys are beyond kind. Thank you. I'm excited to write more Gladio POV now. :)

Ignis stared down at the unconscious form of Gladiolus Amicitia in bewilderment. Despite his rather considerable intellect he could not for the life of him fathom why he was here, in a usually deserted corridor, fast asleep with his running shoes around his neck. The young strategist leaned forward and squinted a bit to be certain and – yes that was indeed drool trailing out of the corner of the young Shield’s mouth. Charming.

He wanted nothing more than to continue strolling towards the lift, leaving the idiot on the floor for the morning cleaning staff to find. He couldn’t imagine anything that could sour the remainder of his evening more than inserting himself in the other man’s affairs. Ignis stood there, looming over the soundly sleeping Amicitia, desperately trying to talk himself out of what he was about to do.

With a little resigned sigh, he nudged one of Gladio’s muscular thighs with the toe of his shoe. When the action didn’t elicit any form of reaction he nudged him again a bit more firmly – okay he kicked him, and not too gently.

The Shield’s eyes snapped open as a startled grunt left his lips. The older man looked side to side as he tried to blink away the sleep clouding his vision. It seemed to take him a moment to register Ignis’s presence over him.

“What the-? Ow, Shiva’s tits, why does my leg hurt? Hell’s going on, Ignis?” There was a sullen edge to the man’s voice that set Ignis’s jaw clenching.

“I can honestly say that I haven’t the foggiest idea what is going on here, and I would prefer to keep it that way.” He answered mildly, hands clasped primly in front of himself. It was taking all of Ignis’s willpower and the memory of years worth of conditioning to keep himself from scowling down at the other man.

Gladio seemed to wake more fully, becoming in possession of more of his mental faculties. “Crap, I wasn’t supposed to fall asleep.” The Shield cocked his head to one side, as if listening for
something. His expression fell at whatever it was that he heard – or didn’t hear.

Ignis was just on the verge of backing up and excusing himself when the Shield addressed him. “Hey Ignis?”

The young chamberlain forced his features into the neutral mask that he usually wore during the execution of his various duties, hiding the irritation and contempt simmering just beneath the surface. “Yes, Gladiolus?”

Amber eyes darted side to side searchingly. “You didn’t see anyone else around here, did you?”

Ignis huffed with amusement. “No, I’m afraid not. This part of the Citadel is usually unoccupied at this time of night.”

He watched as Gladio’s golden eyes flickered to his watch, and then as a frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Huh, that’s odd. I wasn’t asleep long. I’m surprised you didn’t cross paths. Oh well.” He let out a sigh that seemed to make his entire being deflate.

“Meeting someone?” The question had tumbled from his lips before he could swallow it back.

“Yeah … well no, not exactly.” Gladio raked his fingers through his mane of unruly brown hair. “It’s complicated I guess.”

Ignis couldn’t help the wince that momentarily twisted his features before it dissolved into a neutral mask again. It sounded as if the Shield were participating in some sort of a tryst. That would be in keeping with what he knew about the man – handsome, popular and wealthy, he never wanted for admirers or company. It would be just like him to use this space – Ignis’s sacred space, though he bore no true claim to it – for an indecent rendezvous. The very thought of the other man defiling any of these rooms with his escapades made bile rise in his throat and he had to swallow painfully against it. Clearing his throat, he tried to scrape his composure back together again.

“My apologies, Gladiolus. It’s none of my business. Will you be alright?”

A sheepish grin overtook the Shield’s features. “Yeah, I’m good, honestly. Thanks for waking me up. That could’ve been embarrassing.”

The larger man scrambled to his feet and began retreating down the corridor. With an exasperated huff Ignis reminded him, “Your footwear, Gladiolus.”

“Oh! Right!” The Shield spun in place, the running shoes swinging wildly from around his neck. Ignis only narrowly avoided taking a rubber sole to the face by quickly arching his back to lean out of its path. “Woah, sorry about that!” Gladio grimaced as he took a few steps back before carefully moving to slip into his shoes.

Ignis shoved his spectacles up his nose with one finger and regarded Gladio primly through his lenses. “No harm done. I’ll bid you good evening then, Gladiolus.”

“Yeah, ‘night Ignis.”

Ignis spun neatly upon his heel and proceeded towards the nearest stairwell, eschewing the lifts for the time being. The last thing that he wanted to do was potentially share an elevator ride with Amicitia. His self-control was at a remarkably low point at the moment and he would rather not be confined to a tiny elevator car with that man.

For years now music had been the one way in which Ignis could express his innermost thoughts
without fear of reprisal. No one called him a dirty outlander, unworthy scum or filth when he let the violin’s bow skate across the strings in a sharp, angry melody. No one lashed out at him with an angry hand or vindictive strap when he enticed his violin to sing out in misery and loneliness. For a decade, his music had been his little secret, his private trick on the Palace staff who had always fallen upon him with righteous fury when he had dared to show a negative emotion, or express anything even resembling a personal want or desire. They never knew the secret words wrought into the music.

“I miss my village and my family so much.”

“No matter what I do, it will never be enough, they always want more.”

“I miss sweets so much.”

“Why does Nanny have to hurt me? Am I not good?”

“None of this is fair.”

He had always been careful, though. When he was in the company of others he had always limited himself to established compositions. He just happened to pluck up sheet music for a melancholy tune when he himself was feeling sad, or an up tempo, feverish song when he felt anger prickling in his nerves. He pretended that he was simply playing whatever song he had found, and if anyone ever complained that the song was depressing, he would obligingly select a new piece of sheet music and play something more cheerful to appease them – always appease them.

No one had ever been meant to know that behind the stoic mask that he’d worn since childhood there still lurked those forbidden feelings and desires. No one had ever been meant to know that the songs he happened to play were as a mirror to his soul. And he had always, always reserved his freeform, stream of consciousness playing for times of complete solitude. It was why he prowled the music room in the dead of night, when he no longer even lived at the Palace.

The thought that Gladiolus Amicitia – or anyone for that matter – might have overheard him felt like a hundred little spikes driven into his heart. The very idea that members of the Crownsguard or the gentry were using that part of the Palace for their tawdry little affairs made him feel physically ill. It felt like such a violation, such an invasion. And for what? A few steamy minutes in a supply room or empty classroom to fulfill their carnal desires when they could easily do so anywhere? Who else had he unwittingly played for, unknowingly bared his soul to? And if those people only knew what his music meant, if they understood the unspoken words behind each note – Astrals what would they think of him, what would they do to him? Ignis shuddered and smoothed his palms across his brow as if trying to erase the horrific thoughts.

He had only intended to climb down a few flights of stairs and then take the elevator to the parking garage once he felt confident that Gladiolus was long gone. Somehow, though, he found himself pounding down endless flights of stairs, his footsteps echoing in the stairwell, an erratic rhythm that melted into a soothing white noise to absorb his thoughts. Before he knew it, he was staring at a door marked “P2” which was the level of the garage where his car was parked. He blinked owlishly at the bright red figures painted across the metal door in disbelief and slowly, mechanically, pushed it open and proceeded to his car, leaving behind the Citadel and the bitter disappointment of knowing that he may need to forsake his musical escapades for a time, until he could be sure that it was once again safe.
For weeks Ignis steered well clear of the music room and the educational wing as a whole. He instead threw himself more relentlessly into his work to fill those scattered hours of free time. He worked until he had no choice but to stumble home, starving and exhausted.

Fortunately, Noct’s semester exams were approaching, providing Ignis with a convenient outlet for his efforts. One of his greatest joys in life was seeing the young prince developing slowly, carefully, into an exemplary young man who would someday make a fine king. The young advisor would gleefully spend hours upon hours carefully constructing lesson plans and study guides if it meant giving Noct even a marginally better understanding of a topic.

Thus, as exams approached, most of Ignis’s afternoons and evenings were spent with the prince. They would spend hours with Noctis seated on his couch, textbooks and notebooks spread across the coffee table, while Ignis crouched to one side, lecturing, patiently answering questions, and watching over Noct’s shoulder as he worked through any exercises. Ignis would then prepare the prince his dinner and tend to any housework while the prince completed any reading assignments. Ignis would then take his leave for the evening, returning to his own apartment to eat something himself before spending yet more long hours reviewing Noct’s homework assignments from the past semester, identifying any areas in which some extra focus and attention may be in order. He would then draft a lesson plan for the following day before collapsing, exhausted, into bed to catch a few scant hours of sleep before beginning the cycle again the next day.

It was Friday now, though, with the sweet promise and temptation of the weekend tugging on the prince’s concentration. Sensing a losing battle Ignis conceded defeat before any blows were exchanged, and he allowed Noctis to take the evening off, clearing his schedule so that he could invite Prompto over to play some new videogame that came out earlier that week and was still in its original packaging. Ignis dropped the prince off at his apartment after his training session with Gladio, with the promise of returning within the hour, after making a quick trip to the grocery store to ensure that His Highness didn’t die of starvation.

“I’ll text Prom and tell him to c’mon over. Oh, and don’t try to smuggle any more broccoli into this apartment, Specs. I’m serious this time.”

“As you say, Highness. I’ll ensure that the broccoli is clearly visible so as to avoid being labelled a smuggler.”

Noct’s exasperated groan was the last thing he heard before the apartment door clicked into place behind him and he was off to the market.

He returned within the hour as promised, arms laden with grocery bags, their brown paper crinkling cheerfully as he shifted them to one arm so that he could swipe his security card and open the door. Several stalks of celery and the tops of some carrots were sticking rather noticeably out of one of the bags. He had considered broccoli, but knew better than to test Noct’s patience during exam season.

“It’s just me, Noct.” Ignis called, his voice only marginally louder than his normal speaking voice. Shouting was a vulgar trait in one who serves, or so he’d been informed on multiple occasions. He toed his way out of his dress shoes before padding in his sock feet into the kitchen where he could finally unburden himself of his shopping. He deposited the bags on the counter. Noticing a smudge in the granite finish, he made a mental note to ensure that he scrubbed at it as soon as the groceries were put away.
“Cool, we’re in here!” the prince called from the living room, his voice ringing out over the sounds of explosions and other special effects.

Ignis rounded the corner, expecting to see Noct and Prompto on the edge of the couch, hunched over their game controllers. Instead, much to his shock and utter dismay he found the prince seated next to his Shield, who sat sprawled out, one arm draped lazily across the back of the sofa, feet up on the coffee table as if he owned the place. A muscle in Ignis’s jaw twitched when he spied the textbook sitting perilously close to Gladio’s feet, in mortal peril of being knocked to the floor.

“Ha! Nice one, Noct! Too bad you can’t pull off sick moves like that in training, huh?” The younger Amicitia was grinning as he nudged the prince playfully with the corner of his controller.

“Yeah whatever, dude. Less sass, more alien murdering. We have a planet to defend.”

“Gotcha, Highness. My eye’s on the prize!” Warm amber eyes flicked to the side, finally deigning to take note of Ignis where he stood in the kitchen. “Evening, Ignis.”

“Hello, Gladiolus,” Ignis paused to nod politely before resuming his task of putting away the prince’s groceries. “Is Prompto coming over as well?” he asked the room at large, not caring whether Noct or Gladio answered.

“Nah,” Noct sighed. He spoke without looking at Ignis, eyes never leaving the television, fingers never ceasing to tap the controller’s buttons. “His parents are home for once, so they’re gonna, you know, do family stuff. I invited him over tomorrow, though.” Then as if it weren’t rather obvious he added, “Gladio’s gonna be my player two for the evening.”

“So I see.” Outwardly he maintained his pleasant demeanor, but inwardly a little bitty Ignis was screaming and pounding his fists against the counters. The memory of coming across Gladio outside of the music room was still fresh and raw as a scraped knee, and just as painful. He felt vulnerable before him, his brown eyes on him felt like a renewed violation. It didn’t matter that Gladio likely hadn’t known who had been playing that violin. It didn’t even matter that maybe, just possibly the Astrals had finally pitied him and Gladio hadn’t somehow overheard him playing. Ignis wanted to avoid the other man entirely, until the memory of a few weeks ago finally dissolved and merged with the tapestry of unpleasant memories that were woven through his soul, until the pain dulled down along with the rest.

“Always here when you need me, Noct. Especially if it involved blowing up aliens with laser cannons.” Gladio gave a little mock salute.

Ignis crouched down to reach the vegetable crisper – where good intentions usually went to die in this apartment – and laid out the carrots and celery he had procured. “Will you be staying for supper then, Gladiolus?”

“I’m not really fussy, but yeah, I do. Can’t go wrong with any kind of meat, really.”

“Very good, then.” A faint smile touched his lips. Noctis and Gladiolus were rather alike in many respects, including their culinary preferences. It was little wonder that they got along so well, while
simultaneously getting on each others nerves. *Like brothers*, Ignis thought fondly.

Ignis began preparing dinner while the other two continued with their game, the sounds of explosions and aliens shrieking in agony before evaporating filled the apartment, mingling with the sounds of Ignis chopping a stalk of celery into teeny tiny pieces that he hoped the prince would overlook in his rice. And although it seemed that the other two were content to ignore him in favour of their game, Ignis kept feeling the hairs on the back of his neck prickle when his back was turned, as if he were being watched. When he’d turn around he could swear that he’d catch Gladio’s gaze on him for a split-second before it returned to the television screen. He tried to ignore it.

Before long the prince’s small kitchen was full of fragrant steam, wafting from an assortment of pots and pans. His sharp teal gaze swept the area, checking that everything was in order: the chickatrice meat was roasting, the rice was in the cooker, celery, garlic, and assorted herbs were simmering on the stovetop. He was cooking larger portions than was his custom, both out of consideration for how ravenous Noct could get after a long week, and Gladio’s bulk. Gladio was probably one of those people who were perpetually hungry.

He didn’t need to summon the pair to the table when their food was ready – they followed their happily twitching noses and rumbling bellies, arriving right on time to have heaping plates of chickatrice and rice laid before them, delicately spiced steam wafting up to tickle their senses.

“Thanks, Specs.” Noct offered, before shoving a forkful of meat into his mouth. Ignis merely hummed in polite acceptance of the praise and moved to retrieve the water pitcher that was chilling in the refrigerator, filling the prince’s glass followed by his Shield’s.

“Yeah, thanks, this is great! The seasoning is so good, I didn’t know rice could taste like this!” Gladio was a more enthusiastic – if less refined – diner. A few pieces of rice were stuck to his chin.

“My pleasure,” Ignis bowed, mostly to hide the hint of a blush sweeping across his cheekbones. Cooking was merely one of his many duties, nothing that he took particular pleasure in, and nothing that he considered to be worthy of such effusive praise. Not to mention the fact that Gladio’s attention made him so uncomfortable these days, even if the man was trying to be kind. Ignis would prefer to be invisible. *Please, just let me blend into the background. Stop noticing me.*

He turned back towards the kitchen, busying himself with gathering the dirty pots, pan and utensils, taking care to not clatter them together as he stacked them neatly by the sink to be washed. He then grabbed a damp cloth and began wiping down the kitchen surfaces, careful to keep one eye and both ears trained on the duo at the table, should either of them require anything – a refill, another serving, an entire package of napkins in Gladio’s case.

“Hey Ignis,” Gladio spoke up just then and Ignis instantly dropped the rag onto the counter and spun about to face him. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

Noctis snorted into his rice. Ignis pretended not to notice such an uncouth gesture.

“I’ll have something when I return home for the evening,” Ignis smiled politely and turned back to his washing up.

“Don’t bother,” Noctis interjected, when it seemed as if Gladio might press the matter. “Specs never eats with me. He’s weird like that.”

“What, you think he’s got even better stuff that he keeps all to himself?” Gladio turned his attention back to Ignis in the kitchen. “Yo, princely fare not good enough for you or something,
Ignis?

A vein began pulsing in the young advisor’s forehead. “Other way around,” he said in a voice so soft that it was a wonder that anyone heard him. Perhaps they didn’t, as neither Gladio nor Noct said anything, and neither of them revived the subject of Ignis joining them at the table.

When they had finished eating, Ignis swooped in to clear their dishes away, bringing them to the sink to join the cookware for cleaning. He had filled the sink with hot, soapy water and planned to let the dishes soak for a bit while he served dessert.

The others had returned to the living room and their game, so it was onto the coffee table that Ignis set two fresh glasses of water and a plate of pastries – his most recent attempt at recreating the tart that Noctis had sampled once upon a time in Tenebrae. He had received so many conflicting sets of instructions from the prince regarding the dessert that he knew it would be impossible to recreate the dish, but that wouldn’t stop him. This little gesture of Ignis’s seemed to make him so happy, he would bake a thousand variations of the treat if it pleased Noct for him to continue his efforts.

He was always careful to be unobtrusive. He took the long way around to avoid passing in front of the television and blocking their view – he’d made that mistake once, been immediately blamed for Noct’s character’s death, and had a game case hurled at his head in retribution. Despite his efforts at going unnoticed, Gladio’s eyes tracked his progress around the apartment. Ignis carefully averted his gaze, staring at the carpet even when Gladio offered his thanks for the dessert. He merely nodded and offered one of his usual platitudes about how he’s just happy to be of assistance.

He waited until his charge had the game’s menu pulled up before speaking. “Highness, if there’s nothing else you need this evening, I’ll take my leave.”

Noctis stopped scrolling through his inventory of alien-destroying gear. “Oh. Uh, actually, I was hoping you’d be able to drive Gladio home when we’re done.”

“My car’s in the shop,” the older man grumbled. “Crowe dropped me off, since it was mostly on her way home.” His eyes slid back to Ignis, who was standing patiently with his hands folded primly before him. “I can always run home, though. S’no big deal. I don’t want to keep you on my account.”

Ignis’s mouth drew into a thin line. He was really hungry and his stomach had begun to ache with need, and there was a container of potato and leek soup at home just begging to be reheated. Still, as passively and coyly as Noct had worded it, Ignis took his feeble suggestion that he might drive Gladio home as an order. Despite Gladio’s insistence that he could get himself home, and despite his own reluctance to spend a moment longer in the man’s presence, Ignis felt that he had no choice but to press a gentle smile to his feature and respond. “Of course, I’d be happy to chauffeur Gladio home when you two are finished for the evening. I’ll occupy myself until then. Do call if you require anything.”

Jaw clenched, he retreated to the kitchen to find something to clean in an attempt to distract himself. He didn’t know whether he longed for or dreaded the moment when the two would lay down their controllers for the evening. He was hungry, having skipped lunch again due to a Council session that had run long, and badly wanted to go home. However, it appeared that a car ride alone with Gladiolus Amicitia would be the price he would have to pay for that luxury. The man had been remarkably polite all evening – complimentary even – but Ignis was so accustomed to his interactions with the Shield being excruciatingly painful, he couldn’t see how this pleasant atmosphere could continue for long. Civility currently shrouded them in a diaphanous veil, one that was apt to flutter away on the breeze at the slightest provocation.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Much appreciation and happy thoughts to everyone still reading this. I appreciate you so much. Any feedback, good or bad, is always welcome.

And hooray for getting an update out on time!

When Gladio had received a text from the prince asking him if he’d like to hang out for the evening to play the latest Alien Execution Squad Delta game he had been most pleasantly surprised. Sure, he was well aware that he was merely a stand-in for Prompto, but he’d take what he could get. He’d fired off an affirmative response within seconds.

The young Shield saw the way that his father interacted with the King; the depths of their comradery, the threads of mutual trust and respect that bound Regis to his closest advisors and protectors. Gladio knew that in order to be a true Shield, in order to best serve and protect Noctis, they would have to work hard to forge similar bonds. It hadn’t been an easy process to date. Most of their interactions had revolved around Noct’s combat training and his security wherein Gladio was forced to take on the role of a hard-ass for Noct’s own good. He also felt that he needed to ride Noct harder in order to make up for Ignis’s pampering. Noctis would grow to become a strong, self-disciplined ruler, and Scientia could go hang with his mollycoddling.

Gladio had jumped at the chance to just hang out for an evening, like actual friends would. To the point where he’d begged a ride home from Crowe to get all the way to Noct’s place. Crowe always insisted that favours she granted were repaid tenfold. He’d probably be cleaning her training gear for the next six months or something in exchange.

It hadn’t even occurred to him that Ignis would be there.

Gladio hadn’t spoken with the young strategist since their rather awkward meeting in the education wing where Ignis had found him asleep in a puddle of his own drool. Nor, he was forced to admit, had he seen or heard from his sweet starlit prince since then, despite returning to that hallway nearly every evening since then.

It had occurred to him, of course, that Ignis and the mysterious soloist might be one and the same. It seemed to be a bit of a coincidence that he happened to be in that area of the Citadel, and that the musician had vanished as soon as Ignis had discovered Gladio. Ignis certainly fit Jared’s rather vague description of the young man who had returned Iris’s wayward backpack. He had dismissed it as an extremely remote possibility, however. There had been such sincere, heartfelt passion simmering beneath the angst-filled notes, it seemed impossible for someone as stuffy and dreadfully dull as Ignis eat-your-vegetables Scientia to be capable of creating such a stirring scene. It seemed much more plausible that during the ten whole minutes in which he’d been asleep on the floor the starlit prince had left, bypassing Ignis entirely. He only hoped that the man’s absence wasn’t a direct result of Gladio’s presence. The thought of his starlit prince finding him there and choosing to flee made Gladio’s heart positively ache with remorse.

Despite the gross unlikelihood of Ignis being his mystery musician, he’d found his attentions drawn to the guy all evening. Gladio couldn’t help but stare as Ignis bustled about the kitchen,
tracing the sleek lines of his back when the Advisor reached into a cupboard to fetch a jar of spices, comparing the shape of him to the elegant silhouette of the violinist against the moonlit window. Gladio watched the way the overhead lights reflected in the neat swoop of Ignis’s bangs, and he couldn’t help thinking that his hair would indeed look like spun silver by starlight.

Gladio tried to shift his gaze away whenever Ignis looked at him, but he knew that he’d been too swept up in his own daydreams to always react swiftly enough. That probably explained why Ignis looked so uncomfortable when his duties forced him to interact with Gladio, or so he reasoned.

As the evening wore on Gladio began to feel more and more as if he were being torn down the middle. Two tiny pairs of hands were clutching at his heart, both tugging it in opposing directions. On the one side was Noctis, his prince, who was finally coming to see Gladio as someone he wanted to be around and had value outside of the training centre. Noctis, who simply wanted Gladio to hang out for an evening, eat some snacks, and play some videogames – it really wasn’t asking for much. His sapphire eyes were alight with a joy that was so raw and so honest that it melted Gladio’s heart a little and made the Shield more determined than ever to forge that sacred bond of fraternity mingled with fealty with him.

On the other side was Ignis.

Gladio punched a few buttons on the gamepad, queuing up a missile strike that should take out more than a few alien invaders. Instead of watching the flashy animation, though, he swept his gaze towards the other side of the living room, where Noct’s advisor was crouched down with a rag and a spray bottle, dusting and cleaning the baseboards.

The Shield felt genuine remorse that his presence and his presence alone was forcing Ignis to stay there, like a cruel ball and chain in some primitive dungeon. Surely after a long week of Council duties, shepherding Noct, and his own educational pursuits, Ignis had something else he would rather be doing on a Friday night. Gladio didn’t exactly know what Ignis did for fun - it probably involved silent film festivals or going to an eccentric coffee house to listen to poetry in foreign languages. Gladio was quite certain that it did not involve crawling about on his hands and knees, polishing the woodwork. Plus, such menial drudgery seemed like such a waste for someone like Ignis. The guy had one of the finest minds of their generation. He could be putting his substantial intellect towards some noble purpose such as the refugee crisis or something. Not doing Noct’s scrubbing, which wasn’t even his fucking job.

And then when Gladio remembered that the selfless idiot wasn’t even going to eat anything until he went home – and Shiva’s fucking tits it was already after nine – his gut clenched and the side of his heart that Ignis was tugging on gave an almighty lurch.

“What the hell, dude? Way to go from hero to friggin’ zero!”

Noct’s furious exclamation snapped Gladio from his thoughts and he quickly jerked his attention back to the prince and their game.

“What? Oh, crap, sorry Noct.” Gladio grimaced, realizing too late that he’d been so caught up in fretting over how much Ignis probably hated his guts just then that he’d completely stopped paying attention to the game. Judging by the carnage on the television screen it looked like the aliens who had survived the missile strike had swarmed Gladio’s character and were in the process of doing unspeakable things to him with a long probe, things that definitely didn’t have anything to do with science.

“It’s cool. You wanna try that map again?” The prince reached for the last of the pastries that Ignis had baked, inhaling half of it in one bite.
Gladio rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, the bristles of his neatly trimmed beard scraping his fingers. “Nah. You and Prom should probably finish this off tomorrow. I must be getting tired, the screen’s making my eyes sore.” The lie came more easily than he might have thought possible.

Noctis tsked. “Getting old. Do we need to get you a pair of specs now too?”

“Oh shut up, you. I was just up early to train. Did you know there’s a whole world that goes on out there before noon?”

A bony elbow jabbed Gladio neatly in the ribs for that comment. They both laughed, and Noctis checked to make sure their progress was saved before powering down the console. Gladio felt some of the guilty tension ebb out of him. He may be cutting their evening a tad short out of consideration for Ignis, but it seemed that Noctis didn’t mind, and he could almost feel their bonds growing stronger already.

“You heading home then, big guy?” Noct asked around a mouthful of pastry crumbs.

The Shield made a bit of a show of stretching his arms over his head, back flexing until it cracked in that wonderfully satisfying way. “Yeah. I think I’ll turn in a bit early. I got another early start tomorrow.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. He could get up early to go train if he wanted to.

Gladio was just wondering if they ought to call for Ignis who had disappeared into the depths of the apartment when the man himself slipped quietly back into the living room. The strategist wordlessly gathered their empty glasses and plates from the coffee table, and spirited them away to the kitchen.

“Can you give the big guy a ride home?” Noct called lazily, as if he’d forgotten that he’d already essentially ordered Ignis to chauffeur Gladio home.

The brunette dabbed at his wet hands with a tea towel. “Certainly, Highness.” Placid green eyes sought the Shield. “Were you wanting to leave now, Gladiolus?”

Gladio nodded and heaved himself off of the couch with a groan. “Yeah. Thanks, Ignis.” Once again Gladio felt himself caught off-guard at Ignis’s reaction. The man was usually smooth and direct, adopting a polite but no-nonsense demeanor at the Citadel. Yet here he was, sharp gaze averted, looking distinctly uncomfortable at – what? Gladio having the good manners to thank him? A frown yanked the corners of his mouth down. He could live a hundred lifetimes and not understand the kid, honestly.

Silently they made their way to the entryway to slip into their shoes. Ignis retrieved his briefcase from the side table while Gladio shrugged into his hoodie. They each bid Noctis goodnight, receiving a lazy wave from the vicinity of the couch.

Their journey to the underground parking garage was a study in awkwardness. When the elevator arrived at their floor and the brass doors slid apart they both stood in the hallway, waiting for the other to board first. When neither man moved and the elevator seemed in danger of being recalled to a different floor they then both stepped forward, shoulders knocking into each other. Gladio laughed because it was pretty frigging funny, but Ignis merely stared at the glossy leather of his dress shoes. The Shield heaved a little sigh and resigned himself to watching the floor numbers tick downwards until with a happy little chime the elevator deposited them in the garage.

Ignis lead the way, fishing his keys out of his jacket pocket. When he clicked the remote starter Gladio was unsurprised to see the lights on a sleek black sedan blink to life. Of course Ignis would drive a crown-issued vehicle. It gleamed there with its glossy black paint and sparkling chrome
Despite being a year older, Gladio still hadn’t been formally confirmed as Noct’s sworn Shield, but Ignis had been sworn in as Noct’s advisor a few months ago. He wouldn’t be sworn in until the King’s Shield – his own father – deemed him ready and brought him forth for the King’s and Prince’s approval. Clarus was being oddly stubborn about the matter in Gladio’s opinion. Everyone knew that it was a mere formality, he was Noct’s Shield in every way that mattered and had been for years– but it did mean that he wasn’t entitled to a crown-issued vehicle yet, nor did he have the keys to the quarters of the Prince’s Shield. None of that really mattered, of course. The Amicitias were an old line of nobility, dating back as far as the Caelums. They could all shrug off their duty and live a life of quiet luxury subsisting off of their own wealth if they wanted to. It wasn’t about the perks for Gladio or Clarus. It was the honor of doing one’s duty and serving a higher calling.

It still rankled that Ignis apparently had proven himself and jumped through all of the necessary hoops first, though.

He tried to shake off the bitterness tainting his thoughts. Focusing on the present, he made a beeline for the front passenger seat of Ignis’s car, before the guy could do something stupidly obsequious, like open the backseat door for him. He noted with a little jolt of amusement that Ignis did seem to adjust his trajectory somewhat, as if he had in fact meant to do just that and had to suddenly veer off towards the driver’s side. Gladio rolled his eyes.

They sat in silence for the first few minutes, the soft purring of the car’s engine the only noise until they hit the chaos of the Insomnian streets on a Friday night. Gladio watched as Ignis effortlessly weaved between lanes, neon lights highlighting his placid features in a myriad of ever-changing hues.

“Do you know the way, Ignis?” He asked, just to be certain.

“Yes. Thank you, though.”

“Must be nice,” Gladio tried for a light, conversational tone, “getting a crown car. If yours breaks down you can just get another from the motor pool.”

Ignis hummed softly in agreement. “Indeed. I’m grateful for the convenience.”

“Pretty sweet deal,” The Shield plunged ahead, unaware of the sensitivity of the topic. “Getting to grow up in the Palace like a little princeling then getting all this.” He gestured at the plush leather interior of the car. He smiled over at Ignis’s profile, expecting to have cheered him up by reminding him of all of the perks that came with his job which should make up for having to ferry Gladio about. He was surprised to see the rigid set to Ignis’s jaw, the way his mouth shrank to a thin pale line. Leather driving gloves creaked as the young Advisor clenched the steering wheel harder than necessary. For a split-second Gladio almost thought that he saw the other man’s hands tremble.

“I am hardly a princeling.” Ignis’s voice was soft and impossibly calm, a sharp contradiction to the obvious distress wrought in his body language. *Shit, that backfired.* “But yes, I am appreciative of all that I have.”

Gladio scowled. This was classic fucking Ignis and a perfect example of why the guy drove him nuts, even when he wasn’t making his job more difficult by coddling Noctis. If Ignis was pissed off or offended he should just say so, not sit there trying to act all prim and proper. The Shield closed his eyes and slowly counted to ten. He reminded himself that Ignis was probably cranky at
having his evening hijacked, and he was probably starving, too. He could give the guy a pass this once.

When he opened his eyes both men had regained their composure. Ignis no longer held the steering wheel in a death grip, and Gladio no longer wanted to drag Ignis out of the car to have a good old-fashioned shouting match.

“Thanks,” the Shield offered, trying for a more direct approach. “I really do appreciate you driving me home. Don’t let Noct take too much advantage of you, though.”

“You’re welcome. It was no trouble, though.” Ignis offered him one of those weak smiles of his that never seemed to reach his eyes. “It was a good chance for me to catch up on my chores.”

“You mean Noct’s chores, Ignis. It’s not your job to clean up after him.” When Ignis opened his mouth to counter the point Gladio pressed onwards. “I was there for the meetings, too. I remember what the King said.” That shut Ignis down pretty quickly.

He was referring to the countless meetings that the Crownsuard had with His Majesty, Noctis and Ignis regarding Noct’s wish to move out. Noctis had been moody and sullen about the proposed security measures which had included plainclothes Crownsuard members patrolling the building and keeping watch over the apartment. Noctis had complained loudly that the entire point of moving out of the Palace was to get a measure of privacy, some room to breathe, and a sense of normalcy. He couldn’t get that if the Crownsuard were constantly breathing down his neck.

His Majesty had agreed in the end but had very bluntly informed Noctis that if he didn’t want security personnel intruding on his privacy, he also shouldn’t expect any of the Palace’s cleaning staff to intrude on him, either. It would be up to Noctis to take care of himself, and if Regis ever found out that he couldn’t, he would be dragged back to the Palace kicking and screaming if need be. Noctis had shrugged, looked utterly bored, and insisted that obviously he could take care of himself just fine without the Palace getting involved. Gladio honestly didn’t know if Noctis had good intentions from the beginning and really had meant to do his own cooking and cleaning, or if he had been counting on how doggedly loyal Ignis was, but in the end it hadn’t taken more than a week for the apartment to go to shit and for Ignis to assume the roles of personal chef, maid, and butler to the prince. It was probably the worst kept secret in the Citadel.

As the lights of the city flickered past the car windows Gladio was struck by a bolt of inspiration. Seeing a familiar green and yellow sign in the distance, he cleared his throat to get Ignis’s attention. “Hey. There’s a Crow’s Nest up the road. You mind going through the drive-thru for me?”

"My pleasure,” came the measured response and Ignis promptly signalled his intent and merged into the right lane.

Gladio’s eyes lit up when Ignis pulled in. A huge billboard happily announced that the prime rib sandwich was back on the menu for a limited time. Literally everyone loved that sandwich. It usually made the news whenever it was back on the menu. Half of the Crownsuard went into mourning the last time it was taken away. Gladio cheerfully ordered a prime rib sandwich combo with fries. When the static-y voice asked him what he wanted to drink he frowned, unsure. It was probably too late to be chugging soft drinks, so he asked for a lemonade. He handed Ignis a small wad of bills to pay for the meal and told the smiling blonde girl in the window to keep the change.

They drove the rest of the way to the Amicitia mansion in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. Gravel crunched beneath the wheels when Ignis finally pulled into the driveway, the sound rousing Gladio from his private reflections.
“Thanks again, Ignis. You have a good night.” He pushed the passenger door open and swung his legs out, grateful for the chance to stretch his long limbs.

“You as well, Gladiolus.” Ignis nodded, then frowned. “Don’t forget your food.” The younger man made a motion as if to hand the take-out bag to Gladio. The Shield held up his hands, stepping quickly back from the idling car.

“Nope. That’s for you.”

Bright green eyes blinked at him in confusion. “Pardon, what?”

Gladio shrugged his broad shoulders, feeling slightly embarrassed. “Figured I’d save you from having to wait for something to cook or heat up. You must be starving. Now you can eat as soon as you get home.” He scuffed his boots against the gravel. “Hope I picked something okay.”

“I- but-… yes. Thank you.” Ignis shook his head, his bewildered expression giving way to a smile – a real smile, that made his eyes adorably squinty and coaxed a faint dusting of a pink blush to his cheeks. Gladio realized with a painful twist in his gut that it was probably the first genuine smile he’d seen on Ignis before.

“You’re welcome.” Gladio waved and hastened up the driveway and into the house, before Ignis could catch sight of his own pink cheeks.

Later that night, Gladio lay sprawled across his bed, absently kicking at the footboard. The events of the past evening were replaying in his mind, like an old film reel being wound back, offering scattered glimpses of distorted images: Noctis looking at him with such familiar affection – the look of defeat on Ignis’s face when Noct asked him to wait around for Gladio – the strain in Ignis’s features when Gladio teased him about being a little princeling himself – the unexpected splendor of Ignis Scientia giving him a genuinely happy smile at the end of the night.

And behind it all, Gladio could practically hear the low, mournful refrain of a violin.

Fuck it, he thought. I need to settle this before I drive myself crazy.

Pulling his phone out of his pants pocket, he swiped his thumbprint across the sensor and pulled up his contacts. He paused for only a few moments to consider how to word this to avoid arousing suspicion.

10:22pm Gladio: Hey Noct. Question I forgot to ask ya earlier.

10:23pm Gladio: Iris is doing real well with the flute, looking to maybe add something new. You took piano, right? Any other instruments?

He waited a bit before typing the next line, hoping to give the impression that it was an afterthought and not the entire point.

10:26pm Gladio: What about Ignis? He play anything?

He set the phone in his lap, staring at the words on the screen, trying to see them from Noct’s perspective. It should seem innocent enough.

He snatched the phone up when it vibrated a few minutes later, almost dropping it in his eagerness
to read Noct’s response.

10:34pm Noctis: Yeah I just took piano lessons. I sucked at it. They knew better than to try to make me take any other music lessons, lol.

Gladio chuckled at that, the laughter abruptly dying in the face of Noct’s follow-up message.

10:34pm Noctis: Iggy did the violin.

Gladio mechanically typed out a response to Noctis to thank him before setting the phone down on the mattress beside him, his gaze fixed unseeingly on the pattern of his quilt. He didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh at his own ignorance and stupidity, or cry over the shattered remains of his silly romantic fantasy.

Because it was silly, right?

Right?

Gladio lay back on his bed with a groan, throwing his arm across his eyes to block out the light of his bedside lamp.

No.

Rolling over, he turned off his lamp and tried to go to sleep, hopeful that his scrambled feelings would make more sense in the morning.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a few weeks since Ignis had driven Gladio home from Noct’s. A few weeks since the older man had surprised him with his thoughtfulness and consideration. A few weeks since he’d been so caught off-guard that he’d hardly managed to stammer out a thank you. Ignis wished he had been more effusive with his gratitude, he worried that Gladio had expected some grand display of appreciation on Ignis’s part, had been offended by the young Advisor’s simple thanks.

Gladio certainly didn’t seem irritated with him, though. Quite the opposite.

While the Advisor and Shield to the prince hadn’t strictly interacted with each other again since that evening, Ignis had still seen rather a lot of Gladio. The man just always seemed to be there, lurking in the periphery of Ignis’s world, those sharp amber eyes fixed on him. Occasionally Ignis would dare to meet his gaze and Gladio would simply smile and wave, his expression open and friendly.

Gladio was even helping Ignis to take care of Noctis. Several times now he had received texts from the prince, letting him know that Gladio would be over for the evening and that Ignis could take the night off. Gladio’s car was back from the shop so he could drive himself and Prompto home, and the Shield would even bring takeout for them to eat so that Ignis didn’t have to go over and cook. Ignis permitted this, provided that their meals were not deep fried. He always insisted on receipts and photographic evidence to be certain.

On this particular evening Noctis was having dinner with his father and would be given a ride home by one of the Crownguard officers, probably the Marshal. Ignis was looking forward to a quiet night at home. He had a small amount of paperwork to attend to, a proposal he wanted to finalize for the urban planning committee, but then he would be free to curl up on the couch with a lap full of knitting and the classic movie channel. He just needed to retrieve a copy of an old census report first.

Ignis strode down the corridor, his footsteps clicking against marble tiles. The hour was late, the sun already cresting just above the horizon to bathe the world in a rich golden glow. It was neither a time nor place where he expected to have company. There had been a mass exodus at five when most of the support staff finished their workday, and another exodus at seven when an auxiliary Council meeting had concluded.

The young advisor was exceedingly surprised, therefore, when he saw two figures emerge from around the corner ahead of him. His sharp gaze immediately noted that one of the approaching figures wore the telltale robes of a Council member. Without conscious thought Ignis stepped to one side, pressed so close to the right-hand wall that his shoulder skimmed the onyx marble panelling as he walked.

As the pair approached and their features shifted into better focus, Ignis recognized the Council member as Lord Flavinius, the ancient patriarch of a noble house of only middling wealth and influence. Really, he should have recognized the man even at a distance - few men had bald heads so shiny that they posed a genuine safety risk when the sun was high. Ignis also recognized the younger man with him as his page, though he did not know his name.

As Ignis approached, the pair stopped in the middle of the corridor, heads inclined to each other as
if in quiet, private discourse. Careful to maintain his respectful distance, still hugging the far wall, Ignis attempted to pass them without intruding. It ought to have been a simple matter. The corridor was sufficiently wide, so even with the pair inconsiderately standing in the middle of the way that still left several feet to either side for someone to slip by.

Despite this Ignis was surprised when somehow, inexplicably, something was thrust into his path. As he tumbled to the floor he just caught sight of Flavinius’s boot retreating beneath the billows of his robes.

Ignis landed painfully onto all fours, quite certain that his knees at least would be bruised from the impact. His briefcase remained mercifully latched, though it did manage to skid several feet across the floor before coming to a stop against the far wall. He was grateful that it hadn’t burst open, scattering his papers everywhere. That always made encounters like this so much worse, so much more humiliating. Thank the Goddess for small mercies.

“What the-? Stupid boy! Filthy outland urchin! How clumsy are you?” The Councillor’s high, reedy voice scraped across Ignis’s ears. He positively loathed this man and always had. He was a relic, a legacy from the days of King Mors. One of the few nobles who not only stubbornly clung to their prejudices against outsiders, but also couldn’t be bothered to hide them better. He had long been a thorn in Ignis’s side, questioning him every time he spoke up in Council meetings, constantly casting doubts on Ignis’s abilities and competencies for his position.

“Apologies, my Lord.” Ignis let out a long breath through his nose. Typically, with Flavinius and his ilk if he bowed and scraped for a few minutes they would be satisfied and let Ignis be on his way. A few moments of fun, a brief chance to flex their aristocratic might, and it would be over with. Once they were reassured that Ignis was aware that he was lower than the dirt beneath their feet, they were satisfied. “I must have misjudged the width of the corridor.” I didn’t realize how far you could extend your claws, you old bastard.

Ignis planted his palms against the cool marble tiles, meaning to push himself to his feet again, hopeful that a modest bow and another brief apology would suffice to satisfy the ancient Lord’s vanity. Unfortunately, Lord Flavinius had other ideas. There was a swish of robes to his side and then a sudden sharp pain lanced through his left hand. Shifting his furious gaze down Ignis saw Flavinius’s well-heeled boot pressed into the back of his hand, pinning it between the hard leather of his sole and the floor.

“Not so fast, you bit of filth.” There was an edge of frost in the elderly man’s voice that went straight to Ignis’s heart, chilling him despite the many layers of his suit. Behind him the page snickered again, this time not bothering to muffle the sound. His amusement and enjoyment at Ignis’s expense rang out clear as day.

“My Lord, I apologize, truly. I-“ Ignis cut himself off then as Flavinius shifted more of his weight forward onto Ignis’s trapped hand, grinding his boot down cruelly. Bolts of pain raced through his hand and he had to bite back a cry.

“I can’t believe His Highness has to put up with such a stupid, clumsy advisor. What Gods-forsaken ditch did they drag you out of again, boy?” Flavinius sneered down at him. Ignis knew that it was a rhetorical question and didn’t deign to respond, choosing to wait the man out and hopefully escape with his remaining appendages intact, along with the remnants of his dignity. He couldn’t help the angry rush of colour that leapt to his cheeks, however. They had no idea where he came from, how his parents had been poor but kind, and so blazingly intelligent. His father was ten times the man this so-called noble was.

“My Lord, look, there’s a scuff on your boot now. I think he left some of his outlands filth on you.”
The page finally spoke and his voice was as nasal and repulsive as his master’s.

Lord Flavinius twisted his boot atop Ignis’s hand, letting the light reflect this way and that against the polish – the perfectly unmarred, pristine polish. Ignis’s hand contorted excruciatingly with the movement.

“Why yes I believe he has. Perhaps if he begs prettily enough I may allow him to clean it for me.”

“With his tongue,” the page snickered again, this time ending in an undignified snort. Ignis dubbed him Piggy at that moment, and even if he somehow learned his name at a later date, he would forever be Piggy to Ignis. It was an unkind thought to have but damnit his hand hurt, his knees ached. And it had been years since anyone had the audacity to be this overtly unkind to him, he was finding himself far less emotionally numb to the ordeal than he might have as a child.

Lord Flavinius laughed. His voice was so wizened with age that it came out as something akin to a giggle. “Well then, boy? I haven’t got all day here.”

Nausea roiled in Ignis’s gut. He hadn’t endured such a degradation in years. The occasional snide remark, a tone of voice that toed the line between brusque and disrespectful, - sure. But it had been years since anyone had seriously hurt him, or sought to actively humble or humiliate him. He was at a loss. He would hate himself if he begged this man’s forgiveness for a crime he hadn’t committed. He wouldn’t be able to look at himself in the mirror if he actually lowered himself to licking this fool’s boot. But he was helplessly pinned and while neither man was close to a match for him, he was outnumbered and outranked. If he didn’t appease them, didn’t find a diplomatic means of escape, they could easily hurl any number of accusations at him, and it would be his word against theirs.

Before he could speak, before he had a chance to do something that would endanger his self-respect, Piggy suddenly hissed and grabbed Flavinius’s arm. “My Lord! Company!”

Instantly the pressure on his abused hand eased and vanished as the Councillor stepped back, though stabbing pains remained. Taking Piggy by the arm the Councillor threw one last disdainful look down at Ignis before marching imperiously down the hall, away from Ignis and away from whatever blessed soul had arrived in the nick of time to spoil the noble’s fun.

Still numb with the shock of the unexpected cruelty of the elder Councillor’s behavior, Ignis braced himself with his good hand and pushed himself to his feet. He paused to brush the dust from his knees with his good hand. It was only once he stood straight again that he let his gaze drift down the hall and he realized who it was that had unwittingly come to his rescue.

Gladiolus Amicitia stalked down the length of the corridor with a face like thunder. Ramuh himself would have balked at the righteous fury radiating from the prince’s Shield.

Someday Ignis would look back on this moment and realize his folly. Gladiolus had never in their long history of disagreements and mutual irritation been physically hurtful or threatening to him. The Shield had never so much as invaded Ignis’s personal space, never gotten in his face during an argument, and certainly never raised a hand to him. While some of his comments could be abrasive and insensitive, he had also never crossed that line into the degradation territory. Yet in the moment Ignis felt like he was seven years old again, in a world where it seemed like everyone save Noctis and His Majesty were intent upon keeping him as miserable and downtrodden as possible. He expected the assault to continue, either verbally or physically, the baton merely passing from one noble to another.

Ignis pressed his back against the nearest wall, shoulders hunched, as if he could shrink himself
into oblivion and escape Gladio’s attention through the force of his own will. When the larger man stopped a few feet away Ignis flinched, emerald eyes shut tight, bracing himself for he knew not what.

“Ignis?” Gladio’s powerful baritone was uncharacteristically soft and subdued.

Ignis forced himself to crack one eye open to squint up at the other young man. “Mmm?” He didn’t trust himself to speak, too many emotions were jockeying for dominance in him – embarrassment and fear chief among them, both of which could lead Ignis to tears when the adrenaline faded. *You will not fucking cry in front of Amicitia of all people, Scientia. Gods damn it.*

Ignis’s distress was obvious and Gladio did his best to soothe the Advisor. “I’m not going to hurt you. Okay?” The larger man held both hands up, palms out, in peaceful supplication.

Ignis swallowed past the lump in his throat and nodded. A blush rode high in his cheeks, embarrassed by his irrational and utterly cowardly reaction to Gladio. Of course Gladio wasn’t going to hurt him. What had Ignis been thinking?

“Are you okay?” Worry lines carved themselves between the Shield’s brows as his gaze swept up and down Ignis’s form. Noting the manner in which the smaller man was cradling his hand protectively to his body Gladio hissed softly. “You’re not okay. Fuck.”

Piece by scattered piece Ignis was collecting the shards of his composure. He shook his head at Gladio and managed to mumble weakly, “I’m fine. You needn’t concern yourself.” A deep, shuddering breath passed his lips when he realized how okay he might not have been had it not been for Gladio’s timely appearance. “Thank you, though.”

Amber eyes flashed angrily, kindling the embers of fear in Ignis’s gut once more. “Piss off with that bullshit, okay? You’re not fine. So here’s what going to happen.” Gladio began ticking items off on his fingers “First, you’re going to come with me and we’ll get your hand taken care of, and anything else that hurts. Second, you need a damn drink– it can be herbal tea if you don’t want booze, but my Dad has the good shit in his office, I’m just saying.” Ignis cracked the barest of smiles at that. “Third, once I’ve taken care of you, I’m going to take care of Flavor Anus and his little cohort.”

Ordinarily such crude humour would fall flat against the walls of Ignis’s propriety, but he was still too vulnerable and a bit shattered after his encounter with the cruel noble and he allowed himself to laugh at Gladio’s twisting of Flavinius’s name. Ignis shook his head slightly, however. “No. Please. I can look after myself, I doubt there’s any permanent damage.” Bones did mend over time, after all. “And Goddess no, Gladiolus. Please don’t say or do anything to him. Nothing good can come of it, I assure you.” He was proud of himself for keeping his voice as steady as he had. Gladiolus could have a surprisingly calming effect, despite his own obvious ire simmering just beneath the surface. Ignis found himself recovering his composure far more rapidly than he would have thought possible.

Gladio scoffed as he strode over to where Ignis’s briefcase still lay on the floor. Picking it up, he cast a doubtful look over at Ignis. “Come on, I’m sure this is the kind of shit that can get him kicked off of the Council. He’s an ass, Ignis, he deserves it. Deserves a lot worse. And I’m willing to go there.” Pure disgust twisted Gladio’s features as he evidently contemplated all of the horrid things that he would like to do to Flavinius and Piggy.

Ignis shook his head slowly and sighed. “I know that. His Majesty does as well. But it’s not so easy to have someone of his pedigree removed from office. The paperwork is obscene.” He twitched another half smile. “Yes, His Majesty has looked into it, and concluded that he’s just as well off
waiting for the old man to die. Of natural causes.” Ignis felt the need to clarify that last but as the Shield was still looking decidedly murderous. “And besides, it’s their word against ours. They could argue that you were too far away to see anything, and my word is but a whisper compared to a scream against them. It would be a wasted effort.”

“Fine. I won’t go after them. But if you change your mind, Ignis, I’ll back you up. Anytime.” A shiver raced down Ignis’ s spine as he beheld Gladio in that moment. For the first time he beheld him as the Shield that he had been destined to be. The older man looked fierce and proud, and positively hungry to do battle to, what, defend Ignis’s honor? It was difficult to believe that such righteous indignation and bravado were being made manifest on his behalf.

“Thank you again, Gladiolus.” Ignis bowed his head and tentatively reached out with his good hand for his briefcase, which the Shield grudgingly relinquished.

“Anytime. Now come with me. No arguments.” Somehow Gladio managed to smile while still looking stern, an expression that demanded compliance without instilling fear.

Feeling a bit dazed, overwhelmed by the flurry of emotions currently battering at his heart, Ignis fell into step with Gladio with surprising ease. It was simpler to relent, to allow himself to be lead about for the moment, now that he had the other man’s assurance that he wouldn’t meddle with Flavinius and make matters worse. Plus, he really should have his hand tended to. It would interfere with his duties if he could only use his right.

Gladio lead Ignis towards the nearest set of elevators, with one hand held lightly at the small of Ignis’s back. At first the touch was so careful, so delicate, that Gladio’s fingertips barely brushed the back of Ignis’s vest. It was just enough to reassure him, to ground him, a physical reminder that you are not alone. Although Ignis wasn’t typically one for casual touches, he didn’t find Gladio’s presence disagreeable. In fact he found himself unconsciously leaning back, allowing the other man’s palm to cradle him more securely. He vaguely recalled that this was what it felt like to be cared for by someone else. He himself offered a similar gesture to Noct when they were out, for both the prince’s security and comfort.

They were silent as they travelled the quiet Citadel halls. Ignis eventually recognized that they were heading for the section of the Citadel devoted to the highest-ranking officers of the Crownsguard. He expected Gladio to lead him to his own office or perhaps one of the medic stations, but instead surprised the young Advisor by continuing on to the end of the hallway where a set of ornate double doors marked the entrance to Clarus’s office.

Ignis balked at the threshold as Gladio punched in a code on the electronic keypad and pushed the doors open. “Gladio, what are you doing? We can’t go in here!”

“Sure we can.” Gladio shrugged his massive shoulders. “My Dad gave me the code, it’s fine. Get over here.” He gestured to the small two-seater leather couch at the side of the room.

Ignis frowned, but it wasn’t in his nature to disobey or argue, unless the stakes warranted it, which usually meant only if it were in Noct’s best interests. In this particular case Ignis acquiesced after the briefest moment’s hesitation, taking a seat on one end of the couch, laying his briefcase on the floor at his side. His hand still ached something fierce, and it was taking more and more of his willpower to maintain this illusion of composure.

Ignis watched, curiosity piqued, as Gladio entered another code in a metal cabinet across the room. The Shield’s bulk blocked Ignis’s view of what he was doing, but it was a mere matter of seconds before he turned around again, a box in hand. Gladio crossed the room in a few strides, dragging a chair from in front of Clarus’s desk with him. The Shield positioned the chair directly in front of
Ignis and promptly seated himself, setting the box down on the floor at his feet. Its contents clinked rather suspiciously.

"Gladiolus, I appreciate it, but I’m not old enough to drink-"

Gladio barked a laugh and shook his head, one large hand held up to stay Ignis’s protests. “This isn’t my old man’s stash of brandy. Geeze. I told you, first order of business it making sure that hand’s okay.” He nudged the box with the toe of his boot. “It’s curatives. Potions and elixirs.”

Teal eyes widened and Ignis thought he might have preferred the thought of Gladio pilfering some of Clarus’s good liquor. Curatives were precious items, each one imbued with His Majesty’s magic, with a healing blessing wrought from the Crystal itself. Each vial represented a fraction, miniscule as it may be, of the King’s power. Each had required the expenditure of some amount of effort on the King’s part. Never in his wildest imaginings had Ignis considered himself worthy of such.

Ignis shook his head. “Gladiolus, no. I can’t. Please.” He was speaking too quickly, flustered and embarrassed that they needed to have this conversation. “I’m sure I’m not even hurt and if I am I can take painkillers, use bandages – not these.” His eyes were wide, imploring the other man to understand that these shouldn’t be wasted on him.

The other man snorted. “I’ll be the judge of that.” When Ignis looked doubtful the prince’s Shield frowned and actually looked offended for a moment. “Hey, I have my field medic qualifications, you know. I actually do know what I’m talking about most of the time.”

Ignis could see that there was no point in arguing with Gladio, and he had followed him here after all, with promises of first aid and possibly some tea. “Very well, but I must go on the record that I do protest the use of any magical curatives. I’m not worth that.” He said it simply, emotionlessly, without a trace of bitterness or sadness. It was a simple fact. Those vials were precious, he was not.

“Ignis…” Gladio trailed off and merely shook his head, sighing. The Shield’s expression went soft and sad for a long moment as he regarded Ignis. He held his hands out to the younger man and spoke softly, as softly as he’d spoken when he had first came across Ignis in his distressed state. “Let me see your hand, okay?”

Satisfied that at the very least he had formally voiced his acknowledgement that he only merited conventional first aid, he offered his left hand to Gladio. The other man took it, demonstrating once again that surprising level of gentleness and care with his examination. He cautiously prodded at Ignis’s hand, pressing lightly at his fingers to test their movement before moving down. A sharp hiss escaped through Ignis’s clenched teeth as soon as Gladio touched his second and third metacarpals. Already he could see small blotches of violent purple marring his skin as blood rushed to the site of the injury, mingling with small red marks from where Flavinius’s sole had scraped his skin.

“Ifrit’s ass, Ignis. It’s definitely broken.” Gladio looked at him with such open pity that Ignis didn’t know whether to be offended or flattered. It was difficult to accept that Gladiolus Amicitia of all people cared so much about his welfare that he could feel such levels of empathy. At the same time it was infuriating that Gladio seemed to regard him as someone so weak and so in need of his pity and concern. He had gotten by for all of these years without it, after all.

“A splint would still suffice.” Ignis ventured in a soft voice, knowing that the other man was too stubborn to heed his protests.

“Like hell. That would take weeks to heal and your hand might never be the same again!” Gladio’s eyes flashed with anger, and little red patches bloomed in his cheeks, his blood pressure obviously
rising by the second. “Not a fucking chance. Not when you play…” Gladio faltered for a moment and shook his head as if rearranging his thoughts. “You have important work to do, you can’t be dealing with an injury like this. Now quit your complaining and lay your hand flat as you can across my palm, ok?”

Too tired to fight any more, and all out of arguments to make and points to raise, Ignis complied, silently pressing his palm against the Shield, his fingers stretching up to follow Gladio’s. It hurt more than he cared to admit, forcing his battered bits and pieces to straighten. Gladio was merciful, though, and quickly cracked a potion over Ignis’s hand. Soft green light shimmered around Ignis’s hand, accompanied by a blissful numbness. The potion’s effects dissipated in a matter of seconds, leaving Ignis’s hand a touch stiff but otherwise pain-free and unmarred by scratches or bruises.

He flexed his fingers experimentally, Gladio’s gaze tracking his movements, looking for even the barest hint of discomfort. The Shield still had one hand hovering over the box of curatives, ready and seemingly willing to expend yet more of the precious wares on Ignis if need be. Ignis curled his fingers into a fist and then relaxed his grip, offering a calm smile to the other man as he did so.

“Good as new. Thank you.” Ignis paused, bowing his head before speaking again. “Truly, Gladiolus. You have my deepest gratitude. If I can ever be of assistance to you, please, I’ll readily submit to any favour you might ask.”

Gladio chuckled softly and his voice was rich with amusement as he spoke. “Yeah? Like hanging around to give me a ride home when my car’s busted?” Ignis smiled, but didn’t look up, content to study his own shoes for the moment. “I’d say we’re even, ‘kay?”

Gladio reached out, patting Ignis’s knee gently. Ignis looked up at the unfamiliar gesture and met Gladio’s smile with one of his own.

“Are you certain? I don’t give out favours so readily, you know. Are you sure you want to waste it so?”

Warm amber eyes bored into his and the Shield nodded slowly. “Absolutely. Hundred times over.”

With his hand mended and his nerves oddly soothed by Gladio’s unexpected kindness, Ignis was able to convince the Shield that he would be okay to go home then. He would make a quick stop at the archives to finally retrieve a copy of that old census report that he needed and then he would retire to his apartment to have a bite to eat and then finish his paperwork.

“I won’t stop you if that’s what you really want,” Gladio frowned though and he looked at Ignis with a critical eye, as if seeking out a chink in his armor, a crack in the mask he was wearing. “Let me at least come with you, though, make sure you get to your car okay. I don’t want you running into those fucks again on your own.”

Ignis relented, sensible to the wisdom in Gladio’s words, and he allowed himself to be escorted back to the archives to retrieve a copy of that file and then down to the parking garage. Before Ignis could enter his vehicle, though, Gladio placed a hand on the driver’s side door, holding it closed while he sought Ignis’s attention.

“Look, Ignis. If you ever wanna talk about it or whatever, I’m there, okay? I didn’t catch the whole thing up there but I saw and heard enough, and I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.” Gladio scrunched his face up, obviously struggling to find the right combination of words to express himself. “Just wanted you to know.”

Gladio’s words should have left Ignis feeling embarrassed and awkward, but instead a rush of
something warm and comfortable flooded his system. “I appreciate the thought, but you needn’t be concerned. I’ve endured worse.” A grimace twisted Gladio’s features at that casual admission. “I will take your advice from earlier and try some herbal tea when I get home, though.”

“If I can’t persuade you to try some of my Dad’s brandy instead.” Gladio’s expression still looked pained, but he managed a small half-smile for Ignis’s benefit.

“Absolutely not. Good night, Gladiolus.”

“Take care of yourself, Ignis. And after all of this I think you can call me Gladio already.”

Ignis sought Gladio’s gaze and smiled into the golden warmth he found there. “Indeed. Good night, Gladio.”

Chapter End Notes

Endless appreciation for everyone reading this. Thank you so much.

I just wanted to disclaim that the next chapter may take a bit longer to write. It's an important one and I really want it to feel right. It's one of those scenes that's been in my head for weeks now, ever since I came up with this story idea. So thanks in advance for your patience. And of course now that I've said that, I'll probably knock it out in like three days. Ugh. :P
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The chapter in which quite a lot is said.

Chapter Notes

I won't tag the entire work because I don't feel it's quite necessary, but this chapter does get a bit heavy in respect to Ignis's past. I tried to keep things as light as possible - and there is absolutely no sexual abuse, just in case anyone is concerned about that. But still, it's not always the most pleasant read, but it's a necessary one.

Apologies for the length. People got rather chatty on me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gladio arrived home in the middle of the night, although he’d left the Citadel as soon as he’d seen Ignis safely on his way. His protective instincts had screamed at him to drive him home personally, walk him to his door, and see that he was safely cocooned in blankets with a mug of tea. The alpha male in Gladio wanted to erect a giant billboard, proclaiming to all of Insomnia that he would be keeping an eye on Scientia, and that he now fell under the rather sizable umbrella of Gladio’s protection.

Somehow, he’d doubted that the other man would have permitted quite that much coddling, so he had satisfied himself with merely walking him to his car, and waited until his tail lights were a distant crimson blur before turning to leave himself.

Forsaking his car, Gladio had zipped up his hoodie to ward off the chilly night air and walked home. Or more accurately he’d jogged halfway around the city before finally stumbling home, cold and exhausted and heedless of the late hour. He’d thought, foolishly, that if he ran long and far enough he could outrun the awful scenes that kept replaying in his mind, like a horror movie on repeat.

The farther Gladio ran, though, the worse he felt. Instead of escaping the memory of Ignis on the floor with those two bastards looming over him, that memory was instead joined by countless other remembrances, and each one felt like a cactuar needle prickling at his heart. His mind flipped ceaselessly through the haunting memories, some new horror unearthed from his subconscious to torment him with every step – Ignis shrinking away from him as if afraid that Gladio too was going to hurt him, Ignis insisting that a potion not be ‘wasted’ on him, Ignis’s quiet declaration of ‘other way around’ when Gladio had teased him about princely food not being good enough for him, the countless times that he had seen Ignis avoiding eye contact, keeping to the periphery of a gathering, maintaining his silence when someone bumped into him. So many little things that had somehow flown under his radar, but now combined into a miserable tableau.

So many little things that suddenly made the man’s mournful violin music make so much sense. It was all so heartachingly obvious, now.
The memory that Gladio found most chilling, though, the one that would be permanently branded on his heart wasn’t the image of Ignis’s hand in his, the fair skin marred by scrapes and bruises. No, it was the matter-of-fact way that he had told him that he had endured worse. There was a world of undefined horror in those words and although Gladio tried to stop himself, he couldn’t help wondering what Ignis had been referring to. What had happened to him that was worse than someone breaking your fucking hand while they taunted you and tried to make you beg like a dog? And did it have anything to do with the man’s excessive humility which bordered on actual self-worth issues? It was pure nightmare fuel. As much as Gladio was loathe to pry into someone else’s business—particularly someone as private and reserved as Ignis—he was desperate to know, to rip that band-aid off and get the agony of knowledge over with.

As the evening had worn on and Gladio’s head was filled to bursting with achingly sad memories of Ignis, he began to realize how often he had probably unintentionally rubbed Ignis the wrong way, or pushed his buttons. The memory of him teasing Ignis about being raised as a little princeling suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks, forcing the tall man to stagger to a halt underneath a lamppost in some residential neighbourhood that he didn’t recognize. It was a struggle to draw air into his lungs, into a chest that felt far too tight. Once he had calmed his ragged breathing, he leaned against the post, head tilted back to stare up into the yellowish bulb.

“I’m such a fucking prick.” he lamented to the night sky. In the distance a dog barked, which was the closest thing to a response that he could hope for.

Gladio had stood against that post for a long time, staring up at the sky. Between the distortions caused by the Wall and the ephemeral glow of the streetlight above him, he couldn’t see the stars. He knew they were up there, twinkling down at him, the same stars that had blessed Ignis’s violin playing those many weeks ago. Upon the stars that he couldn’t see he swore that he would make amends to Ignis for every hurt he’d inflicted on the man, intentional or otherwise. He vowed that he would make more of an effort to get to know him, understand him, and if the Gods were merciful, help him.

Gladio sat at the breakfast table, staring intently into his glass of orange juice, as if the tart liquid held the answers to the questions swirling through his mind.

“Gladdy? You okay there? Not sick, are you?”

Gladio looked up to see Iris staring at him from across the table. Unlike him, she’d already devoured her plate of pancakes and sausage links. Gladio’s breakfast was still untouched and steadily growing cold on his plate. He grunted at his little sister and picked up his fork, forcing himself to break off a chunk of pancake.

“Yes. Just tired’s all. Go wash your hands and face, I’ll be done in a few.”

The young Shield forced a few forkfuls of breakfast into himself. It tasted like ash and dust on his tongue, which was hardly an accurate representation of Jared’s cooking. He was simply too exhausted and distracted to really taste anything. He hadn’t exactly slept the night before so much as lain in bed, his body still but mind still racing.

He pushed back his chair and busied himself for a few minutes by scraping his uneaten breakfast into the compost and then moving to rinse off his and Iris’s breakfast dishes before the maple syrup could harden on the plates, making Jared’s life needlessly difficult. He even took the time to wipe the kitchen table off with a damp cloth to erase the little rings of condensation their glasses
had left on the wood. Eventually, though, he did run out of busywork. Letting out a deep breath, Gladio scrubbed his palms over his face and headed for his father’s study.

The intricately-carved double doors were ajar when Gladio arrived, and he could see his father through the gap as he moved about, gathering folders and loose papers to pack into his briefcase for the day. Despite the open door, this room was still Clarus’s sanctuary; it was where he hid himself away with a bottle of brandy after a difficult day, surrounded by dusty old books and photographs of his late wife. Gladio dare not intrude without his father’s blessing.

The King’s Shield looked up in response to Gladio’s polite knock against the doorframe. The scowl that was his constant adornment at the Citadel hadn’t yet found purchase upon his aged face, and he favoured his eldest with a smile. “Come in, son. What can I do for you?”

Gladio paced forward a few steps, drawing to a stop before Clarus’s large mahogany desk. He remained standing, eschewing the comfort of a nearby leather chair. “Do you have a few minutes, Dad? If not we can talk later.” The younger man rolled his shoulders in a fair approximation of a casual shrug, eager to conceal how eager he was, desperate to mask his anxiousness with an air of casual indifference. He tried to channel his inner Noctis, basically.

Clarus waved a large hand invitingly. “Go right ahead, I have a bit of time yet.” He snapped his briefcase closed and pushed it to the side of his desk before looking up to fix his son with a steely gaze that tended to see much more than he ever let on.

Gladio suddenly realized that he had no idea what to do with his hands. He clasped them lightly in front of himself before deciding that made him look like he was six years old and about to give a school report. He pictured Noctis and quickly stuffed his hands into his pockets, allowing his posture to slump just slightly.

“Ahh, I wanted to talk to you real quick about Ignis. Ignis Scientia, you know him, right?”

Clarus rolled his eyes heavenward. “Yes, Gladiolus. My powers of observation may not be the stuff of legends, but I did happen to notice that one of my charges has had a bespectacled shadow for the past decade.” His lips twitched in the barest of smiles. “What about him?”

Gladio fought the urge to stare down at the rug. This was much more difficult than he had thought. He’d spent half the night lying in bed, rehearsing this conversation over and over again. He’d had such an easy confidence in his imaginings. Now, with the light of day and his father’s keen gaze upon him, his facade suddenly seemed as flimsy and fragile as tissue paper. Clearing his throat he plunged gallantly onward.

“Well, it’s just, I’ve been thinking—“

“A dangerous venture.”

“Dad!” Gladio scowled, but the irate expression melted into an easy smile. “Anyway, I’ve been working on my relationship with Noctis—you know, getting along better, working on that whole mutual trust and respect thing.”

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The elder Shield nodded, expression shifting to something more sober now that he realized that his son was discussing their work. “You’ve indicated that matters seem to be progressing well in that regard.”

Gladio nodded. “Yeah. Really well. I hope we’ll work as well together as you do with His Majesty.”
Something softened behind Clarus’s eyes, a lifetime of memories, of stories, of shared grief and joy seemed to pass across his weathered features. He merely nodded in acknowledgement, allowing his son to continue.

“I realized, though – it’s not just you and His Majesty, right? It’s the lot of you – the Marshal, and Drautos, and when you were younger there was Uncle Weskham and Cid. You guys are like, a single unit, always working in tandem with each other.”

Clarus smiled despite himself at the mention of Cid and Weskham. “So it may seem. We’re capable of our fair share of disagreements, though.” Gladio had grown up with tales of their exploits serving as his bedtime stories. It had been some time since his father had mentioned them, though. He made a mental note to ask him to share some of his reminiscences, when they had more time.

“Yeah I know that… “ His fingers twitched in his pockets, hands curling into fists to keep still. “I know that in a crisis, though, you guys would probably all be one mind, one purpose, probably without having to even discuss it.”

A gruff chuckle left Clarus’s lips. “Typically, yes. Our teamwork has been tested more times than I care to count, and we’ve generally passed muster.”

Gladio nodded. “Right. And it occurs to me that Ignis is going to be a part of Noct’s inner circle. He and I, we need to be on the same page if we want to work as a cohesive unit for His Highness.”

Clarus nodded, his brow furrowing as he tried to discern what exactly his son was getting at.

“I’ve been trying to get to know him better and get along with him better – I really have. But Titan’s ass, Dad, he makes it difficult sometimes. I just don’t get him. The way he reacts to things sometimes or the way he thinks; I just don’t get it. It’s like I’m missing some important piece of the puzzle—possibly a few pieces.”

When Gladio was quiet for a long moment, Clarus broke the tense silence. “And you’re talking to me about this and not Scientia because?”

Gladio shrugged. “I figure you would know Ignis pretty well, since you’ve spent more time around Noct and His Majesty when Noct was younger, and as you say, Ignis was his shadow, so presumably you’ve spent a lot of time around him as well.” When Clarus nodded his affirmation, Gladio plunged ahead, stabbing right at the heart of the matter. “Did something happen? Is there something about him that I should know but don’t?”

The elder Amicitia’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Gladiolus, are you asking me to share what rumours or bits of gossip I’ve gleaned about the Scientia boy over the years?”

“Uhh.” Gladio scuffed his foot awkwardly against the rug. “I don’t know if I would put it like that, but I mean, if you know something I’d like to hear it.”

Clarus’s features hardened. “Boy, if you want to know something about him, be a man about it and go to the source. Ask him. Don’t come to me wanting to gossip like a pair of old maids. Such behavior is beneath your station and unbecoming of an Amicitia.”

By some miracle Gladio was imbued with the strength of the Astrals and he didn’t flinch under his father’s harsh words. To be fair, he’d endured far stern words from him in his youth. “I apologize, Dad. It’s just that he’s so closed off, so private, you know? I’ve tried to get him to let me in, but he seems so determined to isolate himself.”
Clerus heaved the sigh of a man who suddenly felt the weight of his years bearing down on him. “Gladiolus, if he’s as private and closed off as you say, then that’s all the more reason to not discuss this behind his back. He won’t thank you for it, no matter how well-intentioned you may be.”

Gladio bowed his head and frowned down at his feet. “I suppose you’re right. Still, though, it’s frustrating. I think we could both serve Noctis better if I understood him better. But you’re right, it was unseemly of me to come to you like this. I apologize for putting you in this position.”

There was a shuffling sound as Clarus moved from behind his desk to stand before Gladio. The elder laid a firm hand on the younger’s shoulder. “For what it’s worth, son, I know your heart’s in the right place. If I did know what that boy’s issue is, I would be sorely tempted to tell you. Fortunately for my own morality I genuinely don’t know. I do encourage you to continue trying to get to know him and work with him better, though. Because you’re correct, you and he are both bound to His Highness, and therefore indirectly to each other. It behooves you to forge the strongest bond that you can with him, and mutual understanding and respect must be the foundation for that relationship.”

With his wisdom thus imparted, Clarus clapped his son on the shoulder and marched out of his office, leaving Gladio to scrape his thoughts back together and follow a few moments later.

While his conversation with his father had been short on clues as to the mysteries of Ignis Scientia, it had given Gladio much to think about. Far more, perhaps, than Clarus had intended.

It had taken a few hours for Gladio to recover from his father’s chastisement, but when he had, he was able to read between the lines as it were. While Clarus had been understandably disappointed in Gladiolus for asking anyone other than Ignis about his past, he himself had all but admitted that he may very well have given in and confided in Gladio – if he had anything to confide, that is. That, to Gladio’s mind, meant that he wasn’t necessarily in the wrong here. He wasn’t idly prying into Ignis’s life. Whatever secrets lurked in the shadow’s of Ignis’s life weren’t some spectacle that Gladio wanted to gawk at. He genuinely cared about his colleague’s well-being and wanted to find a way past the emotional and social walls that Ignis had erected around himself, so that he could get to know the real man behind them, learn to appreciate him, and if needed—help him.

He was still certain that he couldn’t ask Ignis, and his father apparently suspected that something was amiss, but did not know what it was. Who might, besides Ignis himself? His Majesty, perhaps? Or Noctis? Gladio couldn’t ask either of them about this. It would be inappropriate and gauche to ask Noct to spill his Advisor’s secrets – if he even knew them himself. And the King was, well, the King. One did not simply entreat His Majesty for an audience for the sake of what could easily be perceived as idle gossip and a penchant for drama. Plus, his father would have his hide if he tried that. Literally. Clarus Amicitia would be seen stomping about the Citadel in a pair of Gladio-skin boots if he pulled that shit. Gladio knew that Ignis had an uncle in service to the King, but he knew of him more than he knew him personally, and seriously doubted that the man would welcome his incursions into his family’s private affairs.

Clerus had, however, unwittingly provided Gladio with a nudge in the right direction with his talk of ‘gossipping like a pair of old maids.’ Because sweet Shiva preserve us all, if anyone in Lucis had a ready ear, sharp eye, and eager tongue for gossip, it was an old maid. In this instance, specifically, an old maid who had once served as one of several Nannies to the young prince. Because although Ignis had always struck Gladio as being mature beyond his years, and although he himself had been in service since a young age, surely there had been a point in time when Ignis
was too small and too new to the Citadel to get by without supervision. Someone would have been responsible for his care and management while he in turn learned to care for Noctis.

Luckily for Gladio, he had always been the sort of person who got along easily with others – Ignis Scientia being the one glaring exception on his otherwise spotless record. Although Gladio had been raised at home, only coming to the Citadel for training during his youth, he had been around enough to get to know the staff, and there was a particular woman who had always been quite fond of the young Shield-to-be, and vice-versa.

So it was that Gladio found himself pulling his old beater of a car up alongside the curb outside of a modest rowhouse near the eastern edge of the city. Unlike its neighbors, the house sported cheerful flowerboxes in its first-floor windows and a set of merrily tinkling windchimes over the door. An easy smile spread across Gladio’s features as he pulled the key from the ignition. Yup, this was definitely the place. Nanny Marita had always been a ray of sunshine on an otherwise overcast day and her personal touch and warmth was all over the modest little house.

He strolled up the narrow walkway with a spring in his step. Even if Marita couldn’t or wouldn’t help him, he had exceedingly fond memories of her and just visiting with her for a time would make the drive out here worthwhile. He smiled as he ascended the few steps to the door, remembering how the kind woman was forever tugging him aside when he visited the Citadel, unearthng whole pieces of fruit from who-knows-where, stuffing them into his little hands with a wink and a whispered ‘growing boys like you are always hungry, aren’t you dear?’ Sometimes, if she didn’t have any treats on her she would stuff some Lucian bills in his pocket and instruct him to stop by the shops on his way home to get a snack. He made a face then, suddenly wishing that he’d had the forethought to bring something for her – a cake or something, that was only polite, right? On second thought, however, that could be construed as a bribe. He would save his offerings for the next time he visited her.

He didn’t see a doorbell, so he instead rapped his knuckles gently on the glass panes of the front door. Within moments he heard footsteps pattering about from within and a hazy silhouette obscured by frosted glass. When the door swung inward, Gladio met Nanny Marita’s beaming smile with one of his own.

“Well if it isn’t little Gladiolus Amicitia, as I live and breathe. Tidemother bless me, to what do I owe this honor? Come in, come in, get off the stoop before you catch a chill!” So saying Marita shuffled a few steps back and beckoned Gladio in. He grinned at her as he toed off his shoes and she shut the door, sealing away the ‘chill’ of a perfectly temperate day.

“I’m not intruding, am I? I can come back if it’s a bad time, I probably should have called ahead.” The old woman waved off his protests with an impatient gesture. “No, no, it’s fine. I had some of the old girls over this morning for our sewing group, so the place is in a wee bit of a state, but as long as you don’t mind the mess this is a fine time. I’m not expecting any more company, although that doesn’t mean I won’t get any. I’m a lucky old thing, you know. I never had a family but I do have a lot of wonderful friends who make sure I don’t go bored and foolish in my old age. What I ever did to deserve them, I’ll never know.”

“Aww Nanny Marita, it’s all down to your charm and good looks, you know that.” He winked at her, the famous (in his mind) Gladio charm on full display. The old woman just laughed and batted at his arm playfully.

“Oh stop that, you. Well come into the parlor, dear. Have a seat. Do you want some tea? I have some squares left over from our group this morning. The berry ones are all gone, but there’s some nice lemon squares and a few molasses …” and she trailed off, pointing Gladio towards the parlor.
before bustling herself off to the kitchen without waiting for a response. Tea and squares it is, then.

Gladio’s shoulders shook with silent laughter. Marita was just as dear as she’d always been. He
folded himself into a large armchair, a fuzzy handknit blanket thrown over it that only partially
concealed a gaudy floral pattern. He settled in to wait while the woman fetched tea and assorted
dainties to commemorate his visit, taking the time to look around himself. The parlor was a perfect
mirror to the homeowner – fussy and quaint. Little tables littered the room, bearing little
photographs and assorted knick-knacks perched atop lace doilies. The furniture was mismatched,
but everything had some bit of pink worked into it, so it all tied together nicely. And like any
proper old lady’s parlor, the floors were sparkling and fit to eat off of. He didn’t know what she
was talking about when she’d said the place was in a state, unless she was referring to the basket of
yarn sitting unceremoniously on the sofa, or the lone napkin still littering the coffee table.

When Marita bustled back into the room she was quick to tuck the basket of yarn under a table, and
whisked the napkin off of the coffee table and into the pocket of her apron. Gladio tried not to
laugh.

Within minutes the pair were cozily ensconced in the parlor with cups of tea in hand and a tray of
sweets and a few cucumber sandwiches on the coffee table between them.

“Thank you, Marita. You didn’t have to go to any trouble on my account, though.” He sipped his
tea and was quietly grateful to have something to do with his hands, though.

“Nonsense, dear. I haven’t seen you in years, not since I retired from service. Though I do get your
Yule cards every year, you’re a sweet boy for remembering. Anyway, as I was saying, I haven’t
laid these old eyes on you for many a year, I can hardly let the occasion go by without at least a
cuppa!”

He grinned over the rim of his tea cup – which was mercifully devoid of anything pink or flowery.
“No problem. You were always good to me and my perpetual hunger. And I know you were always
Noct’s favourite, but I don’t trust him to keep in touch, so I figured I’d take up the slack.”

Nanny Marita chuckled at that. “He’s a sweet boy, but he has better things to concern himself with
than my old Yule cards.”

Gladio was aware of his manners, and so he sat and had a good, proper chat with the lady, catching
her up on the little details of his and Iris’s life. She asked after his family and the prince, and a
myriad of former coworkers, some of whom still worked at the Palace in some capacity. All in all it
was a pleasant, homely experience, and he had been quite right in his assessment that even if this
visit did nothing to further his cause with Ignis, it was still a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

Eventually, though, Marita set her empty cup in its saucer and fixed Gladio with pale blue eyes that
were as sharp as they’d ever been. Gladio set his down as well, but snatched up a lemon square to
keep his fingers from fidgeting too much. He could sense the impending shift in their conversation,
like a storm about to roll in off the sea.

“Now dear boy, as tickled pink as I am to have you visiting me, I know you’re a busy young man. I
assume you’re here with some great purpose or other. Let’s have it. I’m old, you don’t want me to
kick the bucket before we get to your business now, do you?”

Playing for time, the young Shield took a small bite of his lemon square. Marita was as shrewd and
direct as ever, but in a manner that was utterly charming and forgivable. Much like himself. Letting
out a soft sigh he leaned forward, setting his partially-eaten square on the edge of his saucer.
“Well okay, yes. I’ll admit there was something in particular I hoped to discuss with you.” A rueful
smile softened his features. “But please don’t think that’s the only reason that I’m here, or that I
won’t visit again with your permission.”

The old woman’s cheeks flushed a bright pink and she looked pleased to hear it. “Anytime, dear.
Now out with it.”

He held his hands up, palm outward, in a gesture of surrender. “Okay okay. Well, I wanted to talk
to you about someone we both knew from the Citadel. Do you remember Ignis Scientia? He’s—“

“His Highness’s little advisor. Well, not so little these days I’m sure, if you’re anything to judge
by.” The old woman wore a gentle smile, but her eyes had gone hard, almost guarded, as if an
invisible shield had snapped into place.

“Yeah.” He scratched his cheek absently, trying to collect his thoughts. “I don’t really know what
I’m supposed to ask you. I don’t know what exactly is going on with him, or perhaps went on with
him. And that’s my problem.” He sighed, looking over at her with wide amber eyes that begged for
understanding and assistance. “I keep saying and doing the wrong thing, and it’s because I don’t
understand the guy, and from what little he’s said I’m starting to think that I’m missing something,
that I missed something. Maybe when we were kids, when I wasn’t really at the Palace enough to
notice things?”

Marita’s lips drew into a thin line, the smile evaporating from her kindly old face.

He knew that he needed to proceed with caution and he chose his words carefully. “Before you
chastise me, I know that I should be speaking with him, not about him. But he hasn’t let me in. I
want to assure you, Nanny Marita, that I’m here with the best of intentions. I’m not trying to be
nosy for my own amusement. I just need to understand him, and then maybe I can do a better job at
becoming his friend.”

The old woman squinted one eye at him as if appraising him. “Yes, I know that. You’ve always
been a sweet boy, never one to glean amusement or satisfaction from someone else’s suffering.”

Gladio’s ears perked up at that. Suffering? Was she speaking in general terms, or did she in fact
know what was going on with Ignis, what he had alluded to when he’d said that he had endured
worse treatment than that which Flavinius had laid upon him?

He drew a deep breath and plunged bravely ahead. “Do you … do you know what happened to
him? I’m assuming that something happened.”

Marita folded her hands neatly in her lap and fixed Gladio with a hard stare. A dozen emotions
seemed to play across her wrinkled features as she regarded him and weighed his words: sadness,
uncertainty, anger, hope, shame, and so many others that Gladio hadn’t been quick enough to catch
and name. After a long, painful minute of silence she finally spoke up again. “I know some things,
Gladiolus, and I suspect others. If you like I will share with you what I know, but please don’t ask
me to discuss rumour and speculation. That boy’s life isn’t fodder for idle gossip.”

Gladio swallowed hard around a lump that had suddenly formed in his throat. He suddenly
regretted drinking all of his tea already. Not trusting himself to speak without his voice cracking
under the strain, he simply nodded.

“Also,” and the shame had returned to Marita’s expression. “You should know that, well, I truly
am sorry for what I have to tell you. I hope that you won’t think too unkindly of me, but I won’t
blame you if you do. I’m not proud of the part I played in his unhappiness, nor am I proud that I
chose to retire rather than stand up and fight for him.”

Gladio was taken aback by this. It hadn’t occurred to him that in his pursuit of the truth he may learn things about people besides Ignis, and that he may not like what he discovered. It was difficult to imagine this kindly old woman ever doing anything that might make him think badly of her, but there was such raw concern on her face that he was forced to acknowledge this possibility. He nodded his understanding once more.

“Here, dear. I’ll fetch you another cup of tea and then I’ll tell you what I know.” So saying she pushed herself off of the sofa and padded into the kitchen to fetch more tea, and quite likely collect her thoughts.

She returned before long with a fresh teapot and she poured them each a generous cup. The steam curling off of the murky liquid was fragrant and soothing, and helped to take the edge off of his nerves. Once she was settled, Marita took a sip of tea and launched into her tale.

“As you know, I was one of several Nannies attending to his Highness. I was what they called an under-Nanny, working under the direction and supervision of His Highness’s head Nanny. I’m sure you remember her as well. Tall woman, black hair, face on her like she had a lemon wedge permanently lodged in her mouth. Greta was her name.

I’m sad to say, but she was an awful woman. Very good at her job when it came to tending his little Highness, but she was rotten at her core. Looking back, I didn’t quite realize it at the time, but she was awfully prejudiced. She didn’t approve of people who worshipped any Astral but Bahamut. She couldn’t abide same-sex couples. Had a problem with redheads for a while, I think. Most importantly to your interests, my dear, is she absolutely hated outlanders – people from beyond the Wall. “

“People like Ignis,” Gladio interjected softly.

“That’s right. Saw outlanders as being dirty and less than us Insomnians. Thought they brought nothing but diseases and questionable morals, a bunch of refugees with their greedy hands out, looking for handouts. That’s unfortunately not an uncommon viewpoint as you well know. But most people have the good manners to keep those opinions to themselves, and they seldom take those prejudices out on an innocent child.”

Gladio nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah. I guess I’m a bit biased, because my parents, to my knowledge, were never like that. And I may be Crownguard, but I spend a lot of time with the Glaives, and it doesn’t matter where they all came form, you know?”

Marita nodded. “You’ve probably not been exposed to a lot of the prejudices outsiders face. That’s not your fault, dear. It’s not behavior that was ever truly condoned in the Palace. If His Majesty had ever been made aware of what went on and the motivations behind everything I can tell you, I feel sure that he would have put a stop to it. So please dear, don’t think badly of His Majesty, or your father, or His Highness. I’m as sure that they didn’t know about anything of this as I’m sure I know my name. The blame lies solely with Greta and the other Nannies like myself who didn’t say anything even when we began to realize something was wrong.”

Gladio’s face had scrunched with confusion. Words were flowing freely from Marita, but she was leaving him with more questions and virtually no answers.

She chuckled at the look on his face. “Forgive me, dear. I’m old. We tend to ramble. Anyway, my point being, Greta, I think, couldn’t stand little Ignis. He was a commoner fulfilling a role that was normally reserved for a noble such as yourself, and he was an outlander on top of that. She resented
the fact that we were asked to look after Ignis when he first arrived. We’d been hired and trained to
tend to royalty, not poor little common children. She was a very prideful woman, you must
understand. Sometimes I don’t know what she hated him for most, the fact that he was a commoner
training to be a royal advisor, or an outlander being afforded luxuries on par with the royal family.”

A frown marred Gladio’s features as he took this in. So Noct’s Nanny hadn’t liked Ignis, had been
prejudiced towards him. He shivered, realizing how dangerous it was to have someone in a
position of authority over another person, bearing such hostility.

“At first Greta tried to pass her behavior off as wanting to keep Ignis humble, wanting to ensure
that he grew up in a way that would help him to best serve His Highness. I don’t know if those lies
were reserved for he caregiver staff alone or if she told them to herself and actually believed that
fiction for a time. She’d say things like ‘He mustn’t be allowed to forget that he’s a servant and not
a prince himself’, or ‘We owe it to His Highness to ensure that his vassal is modest and
hardworking, not pampered and arrogant’.”

Marita paused to take a drink of her tea. Gladio waited patiently as the old woman clearly gathered
her resolve to tell the rest of her story. She had set it up, but hadn’t truly shared the gritty details.
Gladio, frankly, was suddenly in no hurry for her to continue. He was almost tempted to tell her to
stop, that he could imagine what had transpired. But imagining, he knew, was likely to be infinitely
worse than actually knowing, so he too took this time to steel himself.

“It started simply. His first morning at the Palace we brought Ignis a bowl of oatmeal for
breakfast. The royal family was having, oh something else, I forget. But Greta insisted Ignis have
oatmeal. She said it would be easier on his digestion, he wasn’t used to rich food where he was
from. She may have been right, I can’t argue that point. But then little Ignis took one bite and
screwed his little face up. Came over and ever so politely asked if he might have some sugar for his
oatmeal. Now what do you imagine happened?" Not waiting for Gladio’s response, she answered
her own question. “Greta slapped the bowl out of his hands and told him that if he couldn’t be
grateful for the meal he was given, he’d not have anything. And she took the oatmeal away.”

Gladio scowled. That seemed like an excessively cruel lesson for a little boy on his first day.
Effective, though, if Ignis’s current eating habits were anything to judge by.

“From the very first day to the day I left service years later, it was a standing order amongst us
caregivers that if Ignis was not dining with the royal family, his meals were to be kept small and
simple, and if he asked for anything else, or complained about the food, it was to be taken away.
Fortunately for him, he was always a sweet child, and a very fast learner. I don’t recall him ever
voicing a complaint or making many requests. So they started withholding meals. Every few days
for no apparent reason, there would just be a note sent to the kitchen that Ignis didn’t need lunch,
or breakfast, or whatnot. Three meals a day was a great luxury to country folks, after all.

Greta had other ways to keep the boy humble and mindful, too. There were a lot of little things,
superficial things that looking back, probably weren’t so superficial after all. She took his bedding
away, only let him sleep with a single sheet. Some nights she took away his pillow. Said that it was
important that he not get too comfortable, that comfort bred complacency, and complacency bred
laziness, or some similar nonsense. If Ignis didn’t have any duties tend to or a study session with
his tutor, he wasn’t allowed any free time. Greta would find him holed up in his room, doing
something as heinous as reading for pleasure, and she would set him some needlessly monotonous
chore, like polishing the banquet silverware, or scrubbing the floors in some obscure wing of the
Palace, even though the janitorial staff was always on top of everything.”

Gladio set his teacup on the table so that he could safely clench his hands into fists without being
Marita nodded sadly. “I know, dear. If I ever found him reading, or looking out the window
daydreaming, I never said a word. Let him read, let him dream. He was a good kid, he didn’t need
Greta’s heavy-handed lessons in humility. That much was plain. And that’s when it became clear
to me that it was more than just a sincere attempt at keeping the boy’s ego in check. It was
needlessly cruel of her, and I suspect her prejudices were to blame.

Greta grew bolder, I think, the more she got away with. No one questioned Ignis’s meals, or his
lack of bedding, or why you might find him in an unused guest room, scrubbing out an already
pristine bathroom during his free hours. So Greta pushed him harder, or perhaps grew careless. I’m
not certain. All I know is I started noticing things.

The way she spoke to Ignis became very ugly, but she was careful not to say anything prejudicial
around the royal family. Constantly reminding him that he was dirtier than Insomnians, and was
always sending him off to wash his hands, things like that. After a few months we had a standing
order to make sure that Ignis washed his hands every hour. I don’t know if it was another lesson or
if she really believed the boy was diseased because of where he was from.”

At this Marita paused to stare down at her hands, and the story continued with her unable to quite
meet Gladio’s eye, so she spoke towards her lap

“Sometimes, Ignis’s shirt would get untucked or his sleeves would ride up, and I’d see marks and
bruises on him. Marks that didn’t belong on a child who wasn’t running around, playing outside
like most little boys. I’d expect bumps and bruises on a lad like you, but not him. And not so
often.” She held up a hand, though still refused to meet his eye. “I don’t know how they got there,
and like I told you dear, I won’t speculate. I just know that they were there. I know that Greta hit
him if his work wasn’t satisfactory - if he spoke too loudly, or worked too slowly - and maybe he
just bruises easily. Or maybe there’s more to it. I can't tell you, dear.”

Gladio’s clenched his fists so hard, his nails bit into his palms hard enough to leave marks.

“The last thing that I can tell you, the last thing that I personally bore witness to, was the night, oh
goodness, he must have just turned ten. It was the night before Spring Festival, and I was going to
leave little cards and charms for His Highness and for Ignis. I always loved festival time. Anyway,
I went to Ignis’s room to slip a card onto his table for him to find in the morning, but he wasn’t
there! Now where could he have been, in the middle of the night? 2 am it must have been!”

Gladio found that he had forgotten to breathe, and forced himself to draw breath.

“I did notice that there was something, I think a broom? Yes, a broom. There was a broom stuck
through the handles of his closet door. I thought that was mighty strange. Odd place for a broom.
So I went over for a closer look.”

Gladio felt his blood turn to ice water in his veins. He wished Marita would look at him, he
suddenly ached for the warmth of her kindly expression.

“At first I wasn’t sure if I was hearing right, but I stopped myself in front of the closet door and
strained my old ears – I wasn’t so ancient then you see – and I could definitely hear muffled
breathing, maybe even the odd sniffle. And do you know where it was coming from?”

“The closet.” Gladio barely registered the sound of his own voice, echoing hollowly in his ears.

“The closet,” Marita agreed. “I pulled that broom out of the handles and pulled the doors open, and
in danger of breaking Marita’s china. “That’s awful. Everyone deserves a little free time.”
there he was, nestled between the wall and a pair of rainboots - little Ignis curled up in a ball, eyes wide as saucers and looking about ready to faint from fright. I remember asking him what he was doing in there, who put him in there. For some reason, even knowing Greta’s bitterness and prejudice, I just couldn’t wrap my head around the truth at first. And poor little Ignis, he just looked at me with this blank look on his face and told me matter-of-factly that he must have locked himself in there by mistake, the broom fell the wrong way and locked him in the closet.”

Gladio raised his brows until they nearly disappeared into his hairline. “That’s a pretty terrible lie.”

“It was. He was probably too tired and scared and possibly hungry to think of anything better. Don’t worry, dear boy. I’m not so foolish that I believed him. I didn’t know whom he was protecting, though. He had a history of covering for His Highness, so I thought maybe just maybe they had been playing a game, or His Highness thought it was a funny prank to lock his retainer in a closet – little boys can be silly like that. But when I moved to let him out, he just kept sitting there, curled up under his dress shirts and in amongst his shoes. And he asked me polite as can be if I would please put the broom back where I found it before I left.”

“The hells?”

“Language my dear,” Marita finally looked up from her solemn examination of her own lap to cast him a reproachful look. “And yes. He scrunched himself up all small into the closet and asked me to lock him in there again. And Shiva have mercy I did it. I closed those doors on his sad little face and slid the broomstick back into place.”

“But why would he ask you to?”

“I imagine that as afraid as he probably was of the dark and the confinement, he was more afraid of whomever had put him there coming back to release him and finding him already out. And I’m sorry dear boy, but I don’t know for certain who locked him in there, or if it was an isolated event or not. I turned in my resignation not long after that; I just couldn’t be a party to that kind of treatment of a child anymore. It wasn’t what I signed up for, but I didn’t feel empowered to do anything about it. Greta was my superior, it was my word against hers, and she had been oh so careful to keep her ugliness away from His Majesty’s sight. I feared no one would believe me, and that my making waves would only cause more difficulties for Ignis in the end.”

Gladio let out a shaky breath. “Wow. That’s a lot to take in.”

“I know dear. And as I say, I’m sorry for the part I played in it all. If it’s any consolation, and I doubt it is, but I can still see his scared little face in that closet before I locked him in with my own hands. I don’t think I’ll ever get over it or forgive myself for it.”

The young Shield shook his head. “You were in a difficult position. I … I need to let all of this sink in a bit. I had no idea Ignis’s childhood was so difficult here. His Majesty is so kind, I really thought he just grew up with Noct, and just like Noct – happy and well looked after in-between his duties and studies.”

“I hope my little story helped you.”

“It did, it really did. You have no idea – er well maybe you do – but this explains so much that I didn’t understand. Damnit, I wish I had known, there are so many things I would have said differently or done differently. But I didn’t know. Gods, Marita, I feel like such an idiot now. If you knew what I’ve said to him without thinking—.”

“Hush now. You didn’t know, and many people, Ignis included, went to great pains to ensure
people like you wouldn’t know. What’s important is now you do know, and if what you told me earlier is true, and you just want to understand and truly befriend him, then I’m glad to have been of some service.”

Gladio nodded solemnly, and reached out, one large palm beseeching Marita for hers. Tentatively she lay her frail hand in his. “I swear, on my name, on my Shield and on my life, that what I said is true, my intentions are honest, and that I’ll do my best to put this knowledge to good use.”

“I’m glad that Ignis has you in his corner, dear. You were always a sweet thing. If anyone can help him with whatever emotional or Gods help us physical scars we’ve left on him, it’s you.”

"Thanks. Hey, um, your bathroom? May I--?"

With a sympathetic smile, the old woman pointed him towards the downstairs toilet, into which Gladio was violently ill.

Chapter End Notes

We did it! We've reached rock bottom! Things can only go up for our boys from here! Gladio more or less knows what Iggy has been through (enough at least to understand how to handle him) and Gladio’s now a man on a mission to sort Iggy out. :)


Chapter Notes

Welcome back! Buckle up and strap yourself in, because if you thought last week’s chapter was soul crushing, this week's will take your heart on a dark journey to the deepest recesses of... - just kidding! This one's happier!

Also! Oh my gosh! The lovely and talented Sanru wrote this lovely fic set in the same fic world. It fits into the plot perfectly between chapters 7 and 8, so now basically! I highly encourage everyone to read it. It's perfect and I love it and it's on point and I fully endorse its happening. <3

Ignis sat curled into the corner of his sofa, knitting needles clicking between his expert fingers as a soft green blanket slowly began to materialize over his legs. The matron at the orphanage could thank his muscle memory for this and most of the other knit and crocheted goods he delivered every few months; his mind wasn’t on his knitting, nor on the old black and white movie flickering before his unfocused gaze.

His brilliant, tactical mind was firmly wrapped around the enigma that was Gladiolus Amicitia.

On multiple occasions now, the Prince’s Shield had behaved in a manner that could only be described as kind and considerate. Selfless, even. He had fed Ignis, protected both his physical body and his reputation, all while asking nothing of the young strategist in return.

People did not simply do nice things for Ignis Scientia. It was Ignis who served, who labored long hours, who anticipated and met the needs of others. Not the other way around. He was wholly unaccustomed to being taken care of by anyone other than himself—and even he had to acknowledge that he did a rather poor job of it at times. Having someone like Gladio looking out for him, the aristocrat serving the servant as it were, felt too peculiar to be real. His heart was in a tumult of emotions, warring between gratitude for the kindnesses shown him, embarrassment that Gladio had seen him in such a vulnerable light, and fear that someday Gladio might demand repayment of Ignis’s many debts.

Since coming to Insomnia he had never known anyone to do anything nice for anyone else without having some sort of ulterior motive behind it. Everyone was deplorably self-serving. They were all sucking up to those positioned higher on the social ladder, while kicking those below them in the face to ensure that they were not surpassed.

Ignis was just waiting for the day when Gladio realized that he should be kicking Ignis in the face instead of offering a hand up. People like Gladio, like his ancestors, ascended to their lofty positions on the backs of people like Ignis, after all.

City life was so different from his home village, where the people there were forced to work together to survive, each villager doing what they could to help their fellow man, secure in the knowledge that if they were in need, those same villagers would come to their aid. He had known, for example, that his parents had food on their table because the local farmers shared it with them in exchange for his father teaching their children to read and write, and for the woolen garments his
mother knit for them to shield them from the harsh winters. They lived and worked in easy
harmony, poor in material goods but rich in spirit and comradery.

By comparisons many of the people in the Crown City were absolute paupers.

A haze of embarrassment was clouding his memories of his more recent interactions with the
prince’s Shield, but he recalled enough to be conscious of the fact that while he had thanked him
and offered him a favour (which the other had graciously deflected) he hadn’t yet repaid his
unexpected kindness. Kindnesses, he reminded himself sternly. He also went out of his way to buy
you dinner the other week. His features scrunched together as if his own face were trying to
wriggle away from the writhing mass of shame roiling in his gut. That had been truly atrocious,
he’d barely mumbled a ‘thanks’ before Gladio had sauntered off to his residence as if it had been
nothing. As deeply ingrained in him as propriety and etiquette were, he’d certainly shamed his
tutors with that little display.

The recollection, while mortifying for his lack of manners, did serve as a source of sudden
inspiration.

“That’s it!” he cried into his empty apartment, the knitting slipping from his lap in his sudden
enthusiasm. Remembering himself, he quickly plucked the blanket up, and forced himself to at
least finish out the current row before securing the yarn. He then set the piece aside; it would have
to wait for another night.

Ignis eased himself out of the cozy nest of yarn and couch cushions he’d been settled in for the past
hour and stretched languidly until his back popped. He cast a quick glance towards the nearest
clock and cringed, but pressed onwards to his small kitchen regardless. He could sleep when he
was dead, or tomorrow night. Tonight, he had a mission and it involved several hours and most of
his cookware. Fortunately, his kitchen was adequately stocked for his needs, so a midnight
supermarket trip wouldn’t be necessary.

The following afternoon Ignis pulled his car into a spot outside of the training center. According to
his watch, Noct’s training session with Gladio would conclude in ten minutes. The pair would
likely be performing cooldown exercises and stretches before hitting the changing rooms. Perfect
timing. The young strategist picked a container up off of the passenger seat. After checking to
ensure that the plastic lid was still securely in place, he tucked it into the crook of his arm and
exited the vehicle, bumping the door shut with his hip.

Ignis swallowed back a yawn; he was accustomed to working late and rising early, but this little
notion of his had kept him up particularly late, and he’d also been forced to set an early alarm to
ensure that he had time to finish preparations in the morning. It would be worth it, though, if it
assuaged any of his guilt and discomfort regarding Gladio.

The center was busy, the corridors and side chambers congested with Crownsguard and
Kingsglaive members alike, all trying to squeeze a few more hours of training in before calling it a
day. Ignis dodged and weaved his way amongst them, his precious cargo held protectively in his
arms. As ever the crush of bodies, the smell of sweat, and the clashing of weapons was oppressive.
An intense wave of relief rushed over Ignis when he finally made it to Noct’s training room, both
himself and his humble offering for Gladio unharmed.

Mercifully the rank and file knew better than to intrude upon the Prince’s training sessions, so the
hall was empty, save for the Prince and his Shield. Occasionally the Marshal or Clarus Amicitia
would stop in to survey Noct’s progress or criticize Gladio’s training methods, but that was fine, Ignis hadn’t ever had any difficulties with either man. He got on particularly well with Cor, if he did say so himself. The two of them were kindred spirits of sorts; they both came from humble roots, and had fought tooth and nail for their positions, shedding more than a little blood, sweat, and tears in the process. Ignis suspected that Cor had some idea as to what Ignis had gone through as a child; a combination of shrewd guesswork mingled with the Marshal’s own life experiences no doubt. The Immortal had always had the good manners to not press Ignis with too many questions, though. Instead he simply showed a remarkable knack for knowing just how to handle the young Advisor.

As he had suspected, when he eased the double doors open, he caught sight of Noctis and Gladio seated upon training mats, working their way through a series of stretches. Two sets of eyes glanced his way when he entered, but neither young man said anything. Ignis nodded a polite but silent greeting before walking over to one of the low benches lining the room. Setting the container to one side, he sat down, primly crossing one leg over the other. Ignis was the very picture of patience—which was fair, considering that he had nothing else to do that day but tend to Noctis. He allowed his gaze to wander, admiring the intricate marblework of the room and the ornate tapestries lining the walls, spotlighted by beams of golden sunlight pouring in through the high windows.

After a few minutes Ignis heard the telltale slap of skin against skin. Glancing over, he caught the last remnants of a fistbump.

“Good job, Princess. Remember to keep that elbow in like I showed you, and you might just hold your own one day. Now hit the showers.”

“Yeah yeah,” the Prince sighed lazily and rolled his eyes in an attempt at ennui, but the ghost of a grin on his soft features spoiled the effect. “If you do your job properly I won’t hafta hold my own.”

The Shield reached over to tousle his Prince’s hair, causing the latter to scowl and scramble out of reach. Noct waved and headed off to the locker rooms. Gladio got up, scooping up their discarded training weapons so that he could inspect them for any damage sustained during their sessions, before wiping them down and returning them to their place on the weapons rack.

When the Shield appeared to be finished with his work, Ignis cleared his throat. “Gladio?” His voice echoed in the vast chamber. “Do you have a moment?”

The older man turned to regard Ignis, golden eyes alight with curiosity though his expression was guarded. “Sure. What’s up, Ignis?” The Shield brushed his palms off on his thighs and headed over to Ignis’s bench. The Advisor drew himself to his feet, as it would be rude to remain seated while the other stood.

“I shan’t keep you long.” A half-smile softened Ignis’s features as he regarded the other man. He drew a deep breath and tried to remember the words that he had rehearsed over and over during the drive to the training center. Suddenly his little speech sounded, well, far too much like a speech for his own liking. Gladio was always so open and honest, often brutally so, that Ignis suddenly felt that his carefully crafted speech would be utterly wrong. This moment called for sincerity over polish.

Gladio cocked his head to one side as little wrinkles dug their way into his brow. “Everything okay?”

“Yes.” Ignis felt his cheeks warming as embarrassed colour burst in his cheeks. “I simply wanted
to thank you again for your assistance recently, and for your discretion as well.”

The lines in Gladio’s brow deepened, and were joined by others as his entire expression tightened. A shadow seemed to fall over the man’s features. Powerful fists clenched and unclenched a few times before Gladio seemed to master himself.

Ignis forced himself to smile, seeking to lighten some of the tension he had inadvertently generated. “It also occurs to me that I did a rather poor job of thanking you for the meal the other night. My apologies, I was unprepared for that kind gesture, you managed to catch me off my guard. Please allow me to thank you properly, while also returning the favour.” So saying, he reached down to where he’d set the container, picking it up with both hands to offer it to Gladio.

“What’s all this?” The larger man bent down slightly to get a better look. The container’s lid was semi-opaque, and he could only tell that its contents were a soft shade yellowish-green.

“I’ve been informed that you’re rather fond of Cup Noodles?”

The Shield’s eyes lit up, his entire expression melting into something soft and tender, as if Ignis had whispered the name of Gladio’s lover. “Yeah, they’re the best! I know all of that sodium’s not good for you, but damn they taste good. Totally worth the extra workout sessions to burn ‘em off.”

Encouraged by the other’s enthusiasm, and perhaps a little charmed as well, Ignis continued. “I thought you might enjoy a homemade variety of ramen and broth. It’s much healthier, so you can partake of it with less guilt. There should be enough here for a few meals.” Ignis paused a moment before adding, almost shyly. “If you don’t like it please let me know; I can adjust the recipe to your taste.” Seafoam gaze shifted meekly towards the floor, as if the very implication that Gladio may dislike his cooking filled him with shame.

Gladio looked as if Ignis had told him that his birthday had come early. A wide grin threatened to split his cheeks as he carefully took the container from Ignis and clutched it reverently to his own chest. “Are you serious? You made this for me? The noodles and the soup and everything?” The man’s usually deep bass voice had risen at least an octave with his enthusiasm.

Ignis nodded, acutely aware that his cheeks were still as flushed with colour as ever. “Yes.”

Gladio held the container up and carefully peeled back one edge of the lid. He closed his eyes and took a delicate sniff and Ignis was somehow reminded of a wine connoisseur who had just uncorked a choice vintage. Apparently whatever Gladio gleaned from the broth’s aroma met with his approval because somehow the man’s grin defied reality and grew even wider. “Sweet Six, this smells amazing, Ignis. It smells better than the real thing!”

Ignis chafed only a little at the implication that the highly processed ‘food’ that came in a styrofoam cup was the real thing, while his broth with his homemade chickatrice stock and careful balance of herbs was somehow the imitation, or that those hardened lumps of noodles could compare to his hand-cut creations. He did understand the sentiment that Gladio was trying to express, and he allowed a smile to overtake his features. “I’m glad to hear it. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Oh I will, I can guarantee it. Damn, Ignis. I was going to go a few rounds with the punching bag but screw it. I’m goin’ home. Jared’s lectures about spoiling my appetite for supper be damned, this is important.” A frown suddenly marred Gladio’s features again. “Wait, if I eat these at home Iris is gonna want some, I just know it.” His friendly, open expression darkened with the beginnings of a scowl.

A soft chuckle spilled from Ignis’s lips. “There’s quite a lot there if you wanted to share,” he
pointed out diplomatically.

“Nuh uh!” Gladio snapped the lid closed and then a pair of strong arms wrapped possessively around the container. “No one’s touching my noodles.”

“It’s just noodles and soup, come now.”

Gladio actually looked offended. His eyes narrowed and Ignis swore he saw the corner of the man’s lip curl up. “Just noodles and soup? Have you smelled this? Shiva’s tits, Ignis.”

Ignis rolled his eyes. “Indeed. My apartment will smell like that broth for days if I don’t air it out when I return home.”

“Well then you know this isn’t just noodles and soup. This stuff’s the nectar of the fuckin Gods, Ignis. Does it taste as good as it smells?”

Slender shoulders lifted in a slight shrug. “That’s typically how this works, yes.” He smiled then. “I’m pleased you seem to like my offering. I know it hardly makes amends for the amount of effort you’ve been forced to expend on my behalf, but I hope it’s a satisfactory beginning.”

“Ignis,” the other man fixed him with such a serious gaze that Ignis was forced to take a step back, nearly tripping over the bench in the process. “This is the greatest thing that anyone has ever done for me. Seriously. Homemade Cup Noodles changes everything. I didn’t even know that was a thing that people could do.” The Shield paused, looking for all the world as if he wanted to reach out to Ignis, his broad shoulders twitched with the hint of an aborted gesture. “And seriously, you don’t need to thank me, or apologize, or any of that. It’s just me, Ignis. It’s cool. Okay?”

Ignis nodded his head, and was quietly pleased that his gesture was so well-received. He was accustomed to bowing and scraping, offering effusive praise and expressions of gratitude for the least thing, lest he be labelled as ungrateful and unappreciative for his place. All of that was part of the show, part of the act that he had performed since the age of seven. This felt different; it was unforced and wholly genuine, and Gladio’s easy enthusiasm was a balm to his rather bruised spirit. He was finding that he quite liked showing the other man his appreciation, and he savoured every smile and excited outburst that he wrung from him.

Gladio cleared his throat. “Hey listen, while you’re here, there was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yes?” Ignis stepped gracefully to one side, seating himself on one end of the marble bench. With a motion of a gloved hand he invited Gladio to join him. The Shield did so, his container of precious soup cradled in his lap like a beloved pet.

“I was thinking, Noct’s getting older, we’re all starting to take on more responsibilities, yeah?”

Ignis nodded in quiet agreement, not bothering to point out that he’d always borne a heavy workload and was hardly noticing a difference in the quantity of his work, merely the details.

“The three of us: me, you and Noct, we’re going to be working closely together for a long time. The rest of our lives, probably. I mean, I will be. I guess you could always retire or run off to open a ramen shop or whatever, but you know what I mean, yeah?”

Ignis felt his lips twitch at the suggestion that he might shrug off the burden of his duty and retire. He had a fleeting image of himself later in life, hair streaked with silver as he reclined on a beach somewhere. He merely offered his companion another nod and affirmed. “Yes, I know.”
The faintest hint of rose suddenly stained Gladio’s cheeks as he continued speaking. “So, look Ignis. We haven’t always been on the best terms, yeah? And we might never be bosom buddies or whatever.”

“Bosom buddies?” The words along with a snort of laughter left Ignis’s lips before he could stop himself. He blamed his lack of discretion on the fact that he had been up most of the night preparing the ramen that Gladio was so jealously guarding.

“Shut up. I read it in a book, alright?” Gladio rolled his eyes but to Ignis’s relief he was also grinning, quashing Ignis’s terror at offending his superior. “Heh. Bosom.” Gladio cleared his throat. “Anyway, what I was trying to say before someone interrupted me, is that we should probably start, I dunno, hanging out or whatever. Get to know each other a bit better, preferably outside of work, outside of the Citadel.”

Ignis canted his head to one side, regarding Gladio with a thoughtful gaze. “Hmm. That’s an interesting notion. When Noctis assumes full-time duties we will be in each other’s company rather a lot, as we’ll both orbit His Highness, as it were.”

“Right!” Gladio nodded encouragingly. “And obviously he’ll be our focus, but it wouldn’t hurt if we maybe got along a bit better.”

“It would be beneficial if we were unified in our support of and duties to Noct.” Ignis agreed.

“Yeah. Like with my dad, his Majesty, and Cor. The three of them are a real force to be reckoned with when they’re together, they’re thick as thieves. It’s kind of amazing. Kind of gross, too because they’re way too old to be cracking some of the jokes I hear when they think I’m out of earshot.”

Amusement sparkled in Ignis’s eyes. “I’m sure.”

“So what do you say? Wanna give this a try?”

Ignis gestured airily. “Certainly, provided whatever you have in mind does not interfere with my duties to Noct, or threatens my reputation.”

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t planning on dragging your underage ass to a strip club or anything.” Gladio rolled his eyes.

“Well, what do you propose, then?” Ignis quirked a brow, his curiosity piqued. He expected Gladio to suggest they work out together, or maybe play videogames as he had taken to doing with Noctis.

Gladio hummed thoughtfully, fingertips tapping against the lid of his ramen container while he considered his words. “Well, depends really. I don’t know what you’re into when you’re not working your ass off for Prince Charmless. Why don’t you go through your schedule and see if you can find an hour or so, and we can hit up that coffee shop on First Street. We can hash out the details over coffee and pastries. Sound good?”

To Ignis’s surprise and delight it did sound good, and he was pleased that Gladio seemed to be taking this little venture of his seriously enough to request a planning session first, even if he hadn’t known what to call it. Ignis had precious little free time, and he loathed to allow anyone, Gladio included, to use him frivolously. The other man seemed sincere and quite serious about his desire to get to know Ignis better and possibly even become friends. The reward certainly outweighed the risk; if he and Gladio could overcome their differences and become allies, it would
be in Noct’s best interest, as well as the kingdom’s. Ignis normally balked at any display of arrogance or self-aggrandizement on his part, but he was not insensible to the fact that both he and Gladio were fated to hold positions of significant importance for Lucis.

Realizing that Gladio was staring at him rather expectantly, waiting for an answer, Ignis cleared his throat and nodded. “That sounds fine. I’ll have a look at my calendar and I’ll email you with a time. I’ll give you as many options as I can; I’m not insensible to your own duties and obligations, my lord Amicitia.” For once Ignis was himself using Gladio’s title unironically, as a mark of genuine respect and consideration.

“Cute. Not even our butler calls me that, you know.” An easy smile had surfaced upon Gladio’s features again, and Ignis knew that he wasn’t being scolded. “Oh well. Baby steps. We’ll work it out.” The Shield then shifted his precious soup container to the floor by his boots. Ignis was confused until he saw the large hand thrust unceremoniously towards him. A bit hesitantly Ignis took the offered hand and the two young men shook. Gladio’s grip was firm but not bruising, and his palm was warm and surprisingly soft. When their grips loosened and their hands drifted apart Ignis could still feel the memory of the other man’s heat infused into his palm.

Just then the locker room door banged open and Noctis emerged, duffel bag slung over a shoulder and wet hair dripping all over the t-shirt he’d changed into. Ignis immediately rose to greet his charge while Gladio retrieved his ramen before hungry princes could make off with his prize.

“Until next time then, Ignis. Take care of yourself.” Gladio waved to him, then called “Later. Noct!”

Noctis waved lazily to both men as he moved to join Ignis, who hastened to take the prince’s duffel bag for him.

“Take care, Gladio.” Ignis offered a parting smile as he turned to lead Noctis out of the training hall. In the back of his mind, in a quiet corner he seldom allowed himself the luxury to dwell in, he noted that Gladio had encouraged more than a few genuine smiles from him in recent days. A selfish voice in his head, one he usually muted, whispered that he hoped that Gladio was right, and that they could become friends.

And Ignis tried desperately hard to not dwell on the fact that he’d not actually had a friend since moving to Insomnia and wasn’t entirely sure that he would know what to do with one should the Astrals bless him with one.

Ignis had Noctis, but he regarded the younger man as more of a brother figure than a friend. A brother whom he served, but a brother nonetheless, one he cherished and loved more than he could express in mere words or mortal actions. Neither of them had truly chosen the other, but that was how things went with family.

Ignis could remember playing with the other children in his village when he was younger. The population there was so small that virtually all of the children who were of a comparable age played together and were each other’s friends. He hadn’t chosen any of them as playmates, though, and vice-versa. Their options had been too limited to be picky.

Ignis had never, to his knowledge, had a friendly relationship with anyone by his own choice and not by circumstance. It was an intriguing prospect, equal parts terrifying and exhilarating.

He only prayed to the ice mother that he not spoil this opportunity.
Gladio scowled at his reflection in the mirror. Why did this suddenly have to be so damned difficult? He’s gotten himself showered, dressed, and groomed thousands of times before without issue, but today every little thing seemed to be a struggle of epic proportions.

First, he had run out of shower gel, and had to borrow some of Iris’s. According to the label the sparkly purple goo was supposed to smell like birthday cake—Gladio thought it smelled like a moogle’s fuzzy asshole. Not that he was intimately familiar with moogle ass or anything. Also, he had no sweet clue what was supposed to differentiate the smell of birthday cake from that of regular everyday cake. Either way, this shit was a prime example of false advertising.

Then after his shower he’d tried to dab on some manly aftershave to cover the smell of moogle ass, and his nervous fingers had fumbled the bottle and he’d spilled half of it all down his front, so he’d been forced back into the damn shower again to wash it off. The fumes had been mighty enough to down a behemoth.

Now he was half an hour behind schedule, but he at least smelled respectable. All he needed to do was fix his hair and get dressed. These were simple enough tasks most days. His usual style involved letting his hair air dry, and throwing on whatever pants were handy and clean. Shirts were always optional. In fact, shirts were not recommended when you had a physique like Gladio’s, and he knew it.

Nothing that he owned seemed quite right for his coffee meeting with Ignis, though. His wardrobe firmly hugged opposing ends of the fashion spectrum; the few items that he owned that weren’t ratty and torn were those uncomfortable starched shirts and pressed pants that his dad made him wear on formal occasions. The stiff fabric choked his thick neck and the seams always threatened to burst under the strain from his broad shoulders. But the alternative, his ratty sweats and threadbare hoodies were just a bit too casual for this situation. He was likely to cause Ignis significant embarrassment if he turned up looking like a slob, and he’d probably offend the guy, too. Ignis was always stuffed into a perfectly pressed suit, and Gladio was convinced that Ignis would judge him harshly if his clothes were ripped or too worn.

Underdressed or overdressed, those were his options.

His Crownguard attire would ordinarily be perfect; it was comfortable while still being well-maintained and respectable. The Crownguard insignia also inspired respect amongst the citizenry, so Gladio would never be accused of being underdressed in it. But the entire point of meeting with Ignis at a coffee shop instead of the Citadel cafeteria was that he wanted to talk to the guy away from work, away from the place that he now realized held so many painful memories for Ignis, and probably served as an eternal monument to prejudice and injustice to him. He didn’t want Ignis to see him as Gladio, scion of House Amicitia, future Shield of the King, flush with wealth and privilege. If he had any hope of getting Ignis to relax and just be himself he needed to see Gladio as just regular old Gladio, the guy who loved reading, who attended all of his sister’s music recitals (immortalizing them all in blurry smartphone videos), who would rather spend an evening playing...
cards with the servants than sipping cognac with their masters.

Eventually Gladio settled on a pair of jeans that were worn thin but not actually ripped yet, and a simple black tank top. He swapped his sneakers and combat boots for a pair of nice dress shoes, even though they pinched his toes something awful. When he was satisfied that his appearance was respectable without being intimidating, he finally made his way down the stairs towards the front door.

Gladio paused at the front door to retrieve Ignis’s plastic container and lid from the little side table where he’d left it. It had been cleaned and dried and left to sit there specifically so that Gladio couldn’t forget to bring it with him today to return it to its rightful owner. As Gladio hefted the bowl in his broad hands, he couldn’t miss the rush of warmth that suddenly flooded his system. The ramen soup had been delicious, of course. It was so delicious that he’d gone online to look up how the broth and noodles were prepared. Naturally there were as many recipes and methods posted as there were opinionated people on the internet (so way too many). and Gladio had quickly given up, frustrated and resigned to the fact that unless Ignis favoured him again, he’d have to subsist off of packaged Cup Noodles. The only thing that he had learned was that homemade ramen was a complicated affair, and even recipes that purported to be ‘quick and easy’ were incredibly time-consuming and complicated.

Ignis must have spent hours upon hours making that soup for him. Gladio felt giddy with appreciation and a sense of being cared for every time he thought about it. Gladio also couldn’t help marvelling at how kind it had been of Ignis to make that for him, which on the surface may not be terribly remarkable, but this was Ignis freaking Scientia here. Gladio hated to use the term ‘abuse’ too liberally, but there was no denying the fact that Ignis had been mentally and physically abused during his childhood in the Citadel. Despite all of that he had grown into the type of person who was kind and thoughtful enough to voluntarily spend hours preparing Gladio’s favourite food as a gesture of gratitude for Gladio doing something that frankly any halfway decent person should have. He really didn’t feel as if he’d done anything truly remarkable for Ignis these past few weeks. He was awed and humbled that Ignis thought so highly of him that he’d go to such trouble on his account.

As Gladio crossed the lawn towards where his car was parked, the noonday sun seemed to fill the container he held until the green plastic glowed like a beacon, a physical reminder of Ignis’s innate goodness. An unfamiliar weight settled itself in the pit of his stomach, one that no Amicitia was accustomed to feeling. If Gladio had to put a name to it, it would be unworthiness.

The drive to the coffee shop wasn’t a terribly long one, but it did take Gladio more than a few minutes to find a parking spot. A quick glance at the clock on his dashboard told him that he would still be a few minutes early. Relieved, he spared himself a moment to study his reflection in his visor mirror. He narrowed his golden eyes at himself and mentally gave himself a version of the shovel talk. If anything, it would serve as good practice for when Iris was old enough to date. Like when she was in her thirties.

‘Amicitia, get your shit together and keep it together. Don’t you dare offend Ignis or make him feel uncomfortable. Remember that he deserves your respect and admiration for everything that he’s gone through, not your pity. You’re not even supposed to know about any of that shit, anyway. Play this cool, buddy. Future King Fucking Noctis is counting on you here. Now get your dumb ass in there and make a fucking friend.’

As he continued to eye himself in the mirror he suddenly wondered just how perceptive Ignis
Scientia could be. When Gladio looked at himself he just saw himself, superficially. When Ignis looked at him, though, would he be able to see beneath the surface? Would Ignis be able to read in Gladio’s eyes the secret knowledge that the Shield had gleaned behind the Advisor’s back? Gladio felt almost as thought there was a neon sign above his head, flashing for all the world to see. *I know your secrets. I know what happened to you.* Groaning, Gladio combed his fingers through the longer hair at the top of his head, trying to smooth it down, as if taming his hair would also serve to tame his thoughts and feelings.

Feeling about as ready as he’ll ever, Gladio grabbed Ignis’s empty container from the passenger seat and exited the vehicle. It felt nice, having something to do with his hands just then. He found himself turning the hard plastic over and over in his hands as he walked the few blocks towards the coffee shop.

A few steps from the café’s entrance Gladio spied a familiar sleek black sedan parked along the curb. A wry chuckle fell from his lips before he could squelch the sound. Upon entering the coffee shop proper, it took a few moments for Gladio’s vision to adjust from the glare of high noon to the subdued navy blue and chrome of the shop’s interior. It didn’t take long, though, for his searching gaze to land upon a familiar pair of glasses and a crop of light brown hair, currently bent over a small black notebook. Of course Ignis was here first. As early as Gladio was, Ignis’s sense of propriety and punctuality meant that he would be even earlier.

“Hey Ignis,” Gladio offered in greeting as he slid himself into the chair opposite his colleague. The young strategist glanced up, a soft smile erasing the lines of concentration that had moments ago been carved into his features. “Hello, Gladio.” Teal eyes flickered towards one of the empty chairs where Gladio had placed the soup container. “Ahh, my bowl. Thank you for returning it.”

Gladio waved a large hand airily. “No, thank *you* for the noodles. They were amazing.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them. Menu?” Ignis held a sheet of laminated paper out towards the Shield, who nodded and accepted it gratefully.

“Thanks. What were you working on there?” Gladio nodded in the direction of the notebook which still sat upon the pristine white tabletop.

Ignis picked up his notebook and tucked it neatly into an inner pocket of his suit jacket. “Just some recipe ideas. You’ll have to forgive me, I tend to get a tad excitable the first time I visit a restaurant.”

“Nah, that’s cool. The menu’s not huge, but go nuts.”

Ignis merely smiled in response, and both men allowed their attentions to be absorbed by their menus until their server arrived. Ignis ordered a complicated-sounding drink with a shot of something exotic, and an orange tart. Gladio wasn’t familiar enough with fancy coffees to make an educated decision, so he settled for ordering the most easily pronounced drink on the menu, along with the shop’s pastry and preserves sampler. His nerves were beginning to get the better of him and he really wasn’t terribly hungry, but he hoped that he’d be able to convince Ignis to eat some of his food too, now that he knew how prone to skipping meals Ignis was.

Bereft of their menus and still waiting for their drinks, Ignis and Gladio found themselves with little else to do but make shy eye contact and take those first tentative steps towards friendship.

“So,” Ignis began, a polite smile just barely curving his lips, “how shall we begin?”
Gladio settled his weight more comfortably deeper into his chair as he considered. “Let’s just get to know each other better, outside of the roles of Shield and Chamberlain.”

Ignis nodded, but Gladio could read the confusion in the other man’s eyes. He was fairly certain that Ignis didn’t have much experience with trying to make friends – he’d spent most of his life in service, and he’d received individual tutelage from the Citadel’s best minds, so he hadn’t even the experience of going to school with other children. Fortunately, Gladio was familiar with the rituals of friendship, having made a few hundred friends in his eighteen years.

“Let’s just ask each other questions and see where it goes.”

Ignis nodded, but his expression remained guarded and wary.

“Two rules, though,” Gladio said, holding up first one then a second finger as he counted them out. “One, we can ask anything we like, as long as we’re prepared to answer our own questions. Two, the person being questioned is under no obligation to answer anything they don’t want to. Agreed?”

Ignis visibly relaxed. “Agreed. Do you care to do the honours and ask first?”

Gladio flashed a toothy smile. “Fair enough.” He drummed his fingertips on the cool vinyl tabletop, trying to think of something harmless and easy. “Favourite colour?”

Ignis hummed softly in quiet thought before responding. “White.”

Just then their waiter returned with a tray laden with two steaming cups and two plates. Ignis picked up the napkin from his place setting and artfully draped the crisp navy blue linen over his lap. Gladio followed suit with significantly less poise.

The server set a small plate containing two succulent open-faced tarts in front of Ignis, and Gladio directed him to set the pastry sampler in the middle of the table, where Ignis could easily reach it as well. The large rectangular platter held a variety of rolls, biscuits and cookies, with an assortment of syrups, flavoured butters, and jams to spread on them. They thanked their server in unison, and he bowed slightly before retreating, leaving the young men to their conversation.

Gladio inhaled the fragrant steam wafting from his cup. It smelled strong, and he immediately reached for a packet of cream. As he stirred it, watching the inky liquid turn a rich caramel hue, he resumed his questioning. “White, huh? Really?”

Ignis set down his own cup after taking an appreciative sip – he obviously had a stronger tolerance for scalding beverages and bitterness than Gladio. “Yes, is there anything wrong with that?”

Gladio was taken aback. Ignis looked so sincere, as if he truly wondered if he had somehow given an invalid answer, as if he genuinely feared that he had somehow offended Gladio. The Shield cursed himself internally, and mindful of the shovel talk he’d given himself not fifteen minutes ago, hastily corrected himself. “No no, nothing wrong at all. It’s just not a common response. Mind if I ask why you like the colour white?” Gladio laid his spoon down beside his cup. “Mine’s green by the way.”

Ignis’s teal gaze grew unfocused, and for a moment the other man seemed to be miles away from their little coffee shop in the heart of Insomnia. “It’s nice. It makes me think of things that are pure and clean, like crisp linen sheets or a fresh snowfall.”

Gladio felt something in his chest twinge and constrict. There was just something so wholesome and good about Ignis equating his favourite colour with clean sheets and new snow.
“That makes sense. More sense than me. I’m pretty sure I only like green so much because that’s what colour my bedroom’s always been.” Gladio shrugged and flashed a self-deprecating smile. “Anyway, your turn.”

Ignis’s expression had shifted from concern to relief, and now amusement as he was handed the proverbial reins of the conversation. “Hmm. What is your favourite holiday, since we’re on the subject of favourites.”

Gladio’s eyes lit up. Even though it wasn’t polite to do so, he propped his elbows up on the table and leaned forward. Ignis looked amused as he took another sip of coffee, regarding Gladio through wisps of fragrant steam.

“That’s easy. It’s gotta be Longest Night!” Gladio was grinning as he spoke, and his smile only seemed to grow wider and wider with each word and each memory that surfaced in his mind.

“What do you do?” Ignis asked politely.

Gladio cupped his chin in his palms, a wistful smile playing about his features. “Oh the usual. My family’s real traditional about it. We do the massive supper, then turn out all of the lights except for the fireplace while we gather together and sing songs and play cards ‘til we all fall asleep where we’re sitting. Then in the morning we exchange gifts.” As far as Gladio knew this was how most families in Lucis celebrated the winter solstice. Traditionally the family would get together to eat a huge meal and pray to the Astrals that the nights would grow shorter again. The family would then spend a quiet evening huddled together around a single light source to wait out the night. When morning inevitably broke, dubbed the New Dawn, they would then exchange gifts as a way to celebrate the Astrals answering their prayers and bringing the first of longer days and shorter nights, and to celebrate the family surviving the darkness together.

Gladio was temporarily lost, cast adrift in a sea of memories. He could recall every New Dawn spent with his sister, see her happy smiles with each gift she opened. More than that, though, he enjoyed the image of his father, spending a rare evening at home with his family completely at ease, singing along with them, or playing card games with Jared to pass the time. Longest Night also contained some of his favourite memories of his mother. She was a notoriously terrible singer, and had always insisted on humming along to the folk songs rather than singing them fully and ‘incurring the wrath of the Gods’ as she would say. Gladio could fondly remember curling up with her close to the fireplace for light while she read to him from a new book she would always buy especially for that night.

“Are you alright?”

Gladio snapped back to reality, amber eyes growing clear of the haze of fond memories and daydreams, until he could clearly read the concern in his companion’s features.

The Shield cleared his throat. “Sorry, yeah, I’m fine. Just got caught up in my own memories.”

He reached for a pastry and a small knife, spreading some ulwaat preserve onto it. The tactile activity helped to ground him in the here and now.

“Apologies if I made you uncomfortable, Gladio.” Ignis looked genuinely contrite, so much so that Gladio felt a sudden compulsion to reach across the table to give the poor guy a reassuring hug. That would probably do much more harm than good, though. Gladio instead forced his features into a reassuring smile.

“No it’s fine. They’re happy memories.”
“Ahh. Good, then.”

Suddenly Gladio wanted to kick himself, hard, right in the ass. Here he was, languishing in happy memories from his childhood, when the guy sitting across from him probably had all of zero fond memories of festivals and holidays. Gladio fought against the urge to feel pity for Ignis, tried not to imagine the young Advisor as a child, probably kept busy by the Palace staff scrubbing floors and dusting shelves while everyone else made merry. Had there ever been anyone to leave him New Dawn gifts?

“Mine’s Heart Festival.”

Gladio blinked, almost missing what the other had said. He took a bite of his pastry, chewing slowly and carefully, taking the time to gather his scattered thoughts before responding.

“Heart Festival, eh? I never had you pegged as the romantic type, Ignis.” A cheeky grin lit Gladio’s features. He couldn’t help himself, the image of straight laced Scientia pining over someone with flowers and chocolates in hand was almost too much to handle.

Ignis responded with an elegant eye roll. “Hardly.”

“Aww shucks. Why, then?” Gladio raised a bushy eyebrow, his curiosity overriding his discretion. Ignis had opened this door, after all, it would be impolite for Gladio to not bumble through it.

Ignis shrugged, pausing to take a sip of coffee before speaking. “Noct usually forgets my birthday, which is a week before Heart Festival. By the time the festival rolls around he’s realized that he’s forgotten, and he always gets me something nice and calls it a double birthday and festival gift.”

Gladio was reaching for his phone before his brain could catch up with his body, opening the built-in calendar. “So what, February seventh?” When Ignis nodded in confirmation, Gladio typed the info in and set himself a reminder for the first. “Princess won’t forget this year, don’t worry. I can’t believe he’d forget, though. Little shit. He remembers mine.”

Ignis chuckled around a mouthful of orange tart. Immediately his cheeks coloured with embarrassment and he hastily dabbed at the corners of his mouth, where crumbs and bits of orange filling had gathered.

“No, I remember your birthday, and I remind Noctis to get you something.” Ignis smiled then, one of those open, soft smiles that Gladio recognized as being genuine. “In Noctis’s defense, it’s difficult to remember the birthday of the person whose job it is to remind you of important dates. I can hardly remind him of my own birthday without appearing gauche.”

Gladio laughed at that and found himself relaxing. Listening to Ignis talk about Noctis in this setting, it was easy to forget that he was their Prince. Ignis sounded like an amused and only mildly exasperated older brother – a feeling Gladio knew all too well.

“Your turn, I believe.” Ignis took another bite of tart, eyes rolling with obvious pleasure at the taste.

“So it is,” Gladio mused, and gestured absently at the platter of assorted baked goods and spreads. “Help yourself by the way, I got this to share.” Because Shiva fucking knows when your selfless ass will take the time to eat again today.

“Thank you, Gladio.” Ignis reached for a tea biscuit and a dish of herbed butter while he waited for Gladio to take his turn asking a question.
“Alright, let’s get to the meat and potatoes here. What are your hobbies? I know you’re busy grooming the next leader of the kingdom and all, but even you must have down time.”

“Hmm, well cooking comes to mind immediately. These tarts are delicious. I mustn’t forget to make a note in my book before we go.”

“You’re an amazing cook, Ignis. It’s borderline ridiculous.” Gladio was easy with his praises, the taste of that ramen soup still fresh in his mind.

“Thank you,” Ignis ducked his head slightly. He needlessly pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, hiding behind his hand. “I do enjoy coming up with new recipes, and adjusting them to suit the person I’m cooking for. It’s quite satisfying to see someone else enjoying my cooking.”

“Heh, seriously, you can cook for me anytime, Ignis, and I guarantee you’ll know just how much I like it. I ain’t shy.”

The young strategist looked up then, meeting Gladio’s look of open enthusiasm with a slightly crooked smile. “Thank you, Gladio.”

“What else, though?” Gladio took a drink of his coffee, and his nose immediately wrinkled. Without looking away from his companion, he reached for the dish of sugar packets on their table and began liberally sweetening his drink.

Ignis began chewing on his lower lip. Gladio noted that the tips of the other man’s ears were glowing a bright pink. It was cute. Really fucking cute, if Gladio was honest with himself. Ignis Ice Queen Scientia, bane of his existence, was sitting across from him with the most adorably awkward look on his face, complete with blush and chewed lip. He looked absolutely ripped out of one of those sappy rom coms his sister was so fond of watching.

“I, well, I like to watch old movies and television shows.”

“Classic stuff, huh? That’s cool. Anything in particular?” Gladio took another experimental drink of his coffee and found it to be much more palatable now that he’d added an entire handful of sugar to it.

Ignis shook his head. “No, nothing in particular. I don’t really pay all that much attention, honestly. I just like to have something on to mask the silence of my apartment and I find the vintage shows to be somehow more relaxing. There’s a difference in the way people spoke then, both in terms of their vocabulary but also the cadence of their speech, the ebb and flow of the dialogue as it were. And the acting style was very different, less nuanced and subtle than it is now. Likely due to the fact that actors of that era were still more accustomed to the stage than the screen.”

Gladio gazed wonderingly over at Ignis. The other man, seemingly embarrassed at having rambled on so, was furiously occupying himself with selecting a small croissant from the platter. Without being asked, Gladio picked up a small container of sticky syrup and nudged it towards Ignis invitingly. The rich sweetness of the syrup went really well with the slightly salty crust of the pastry.

“That’s cool. I never really thought about it before, but you’re right. I can always tell when my dad has an old movie on before I even get into the room, just from the sound of it.”

Ignis accepted Gladio’s silent suggestion and began drizzling syrup onto his croissant, brows furrowed as he concentrated on not making a mess.

“Indeed.” Ignis took a small bite of his pastry, chewing thoughtfully, teal eyes half-lidded with
obvious delight. “This is quite good, thank you.”

Gladio waved a hand in silent acceptance of Ignis’s praise, but remained quiet. The younger man looked like he still wanted to say something and Gladio was loathe to dissuade him. These fleeting glimpses into Ignis’s private life were exactly what Gladio had been hoping for. He’d already learned so much, and was already formulating plans for how he could use this newfound insight into Ignis’s interests to bond with him. With Noct it had been videogames. With Ignis it could be classic movies. He vaguely remembered that one of the smaller theaters downtown showed old black and white movies some mornings, he could invite Ignis to see one.

“I also read quite a bit, though seldom for pleasure, so I don’t know if that quite fits the context of your question.” Ignis smiled slightly and then his expression abruptly grew guarded. Long, elegant fingers were pulling his croissant apart, tearing it into little pieces on his plate. The Advisor kept his gaze resolutely on the mess of pastry before him as he spoke. “And I enjoy playing the violin, although I imagine you knew that already. And… --” Ignis cut himself off there, shrugging his narrow shoulders. “That’s pretty much it.”

Gladio bit the inside of his cheek. He had a sneaking suspicion that Ignis had been on the cusp of sharing some other interest or hobby but had censored himself for some reason. He knew better than to pry, though, particularly not with Ignis looking so miserable and embarrassed. The poor guy was still refusing to meet Gladio’s eye and Gladio himself was finding it difficult to look at Ignis as well. The way the strategist was hunching forward, curling protectively into himself, was like a punch to the gut. It physically hurt, knowing that Ignis felt so uncomfortable. Gladio wasn’t sure if it was the mention of the violin or whatever Ignis had left unsaid that was making him so unhappy. All Gladio knew was that he wanted desperately to erase those lines of tension from Ignis’s features, and replace them with a smile.

Suddenly those stolen moments in the music room felt like a tangible barrier between them. As pure and beautiful as they had been for Gladio, it was obvious that Ignis had never intended for anyone else to hear him play – otherwise the music room wouldn’t have sat abandoned for weeks after Ignis had stumbled upon Gladio asleep in the hallway. It had become apparent that Ignis had forsaken playing, at least at that time and place, as soon as he’d been discovered.

Gladio knew that he would have to address the matter of his sweet starlit prince someday – just not this day. Their friendship was too new, too tentative, to withstand a confession of musical voyeurism. He knew that he would have to confess someday, though.

They had been quiet for a few long moments, while Ignis shredded and eventually began eating the remnants of his pastry, and Gladio drank his coffee. It was pretty good, once he’d cut it with enough cream and sugar.

“Forgive my impertinence, but isn’t this where you tell me about your hobbies?”

Gladio looked up from his contemplation of his cup of coffee. *Shit, right.*

“Right, sorry about that.” Gladio gave his head a bit of a shake. “Let’s see. I read a lot as well. A fair bit is for work—books on strategy and tactics, books about psychology and sociology, that sort of thing.” Gladio felt a familiar flare of triumph at the surprised look that Ignis didn’t quite manage to hide, though to his credit he obviously did try. There was only the slightest lift of an elegant brow that gave him away. For some reason, everyone always underestimated the intelligence of the Shields, as if they were nothing more than slabs of flesh to stand between the royals and any threats. A strong but stupid Shield would end up a very dead Shield to an equally dead King, though, and Gladio had devoted as much time to his academic studies as he had to his physical training, particularly in areas of social sciences, anything that might help him read a person or read
a situation better, to more accurately detect or predict hostile behavior.

“I read for pleasure a lot too, though,” Gladio continued as if he hadn’t noticed the flicker of surprise in his companion. “Pretty much anything, honestly. I’ve even picked up my sister’s cheesy fairytale romances from time to time. Pretty sure one of ‘em gave me a cavity, it was so over the top sweet.”

Ignis laughed at that, eyes crinkling up in the corners. “I don’t think it quite works that way, Gladio. But, ahh, pre-teen romance fantasies excluded perhaps, I would welcome any reading recommendations you have.”

“I’ll bring a selection of books to Noct’s next training session.”

“Really? That’s so kind, Please do, as long as it’s no trouble to you.” Ignis looked pleased, and Gladio felt something in his chest turn light and fluttery in response. He felt a mad urge to run home that instant to plunder his bookshelves, then run back to this café to lay mounds of books at Ignis’s feet for his approval.

“No trouble at all!” Gladio beamed an enthusiastic smile. He loved the thought of Ignis reading one of his books, the advisor’s slim fingers turning the same pages that his own larger fingers had. It would give them something to discuss as well, and Gladio was already working on a mental list of titles that Ignis might find interesting enough to want to read and discuss.

“So you have any other hobbies?” Ignis eventually asked, and Gladio realized that once again he’d let his mind drift too far afield.

“Sorry, I was thinking about all of the books I want you to read so we can talk about ‘em.” He chuckled. “Alright yeah let’s see, hmm, reading and training kinda take up most of my time. I spend as much time with my little sister as I can, since Dad is so busy, and I know I’m only going to get busier myself as Noct gets older. I don’t want her to be one of those kids who’s closer to her servants than to her own family, you know? Might be hard to help with my duties, but I gotta try. So uh, just between you and me, I’m really good at tea parties.”

Ignis was staring at him, eyes wide, probably picturing the gruff bodyguard wrapped in a pink feather boa, drinking invisible tea from little china cups with floral patterns.

“My favourite, though?” Gladio sought Ignis’s gaze before continuing. “I really like to sketch and paint. Mostly watercolours. Not many people know about that, either.”

This time Ignis’s brows arched fully and he made no obvious effort to mask his surprise.

“Really?”

Gladio nodded, sitting back into his chair with a smug expression. “Yup. Surprised?”

“I must confess that yes, a bit. My apologies for not noticing your artistic streak.”

The larger man shrugged and waved a hand dismissively. “You didn’t miss anything. I don’t exactly broadcast it, y’know? And I’m not even all that good at it, honestly. My mom was so much better than me – our house is full of her paintings. But I’m really terrible at singing and playing any kind of musical instrument, and it’s kind of tradition for members of our house to be proficient at some form of the arts, so here I am.”

“I’m impressed. Are your father and sister artistic as well then?” Ignis was looking at him with such open wonderment that Gladio wouldn’t have denied him anything at this point, up to and
including video evidence of his tea parties with Iris.

“Iris is really musically inclined. Her tutors say that she’s ‘accomplished’. She sings, dances, and plays the flute really well. Dad can sing, though he seldom does anymore. Now that he’s old I guess it’s less important that he be well-rounded. Me on the other hand? Oh yeah, I need to be an exemplary citizen or whatever.” Gladio rolled his eyes, but he smiled, softening the effect.

“Do you enjoy it, though? The painting I mean.”

Gladio shrugged. “Yeah. It’s pretty relaxing, actually. Kinda quiets my mind.” He frowned. “Now that I think of it, that’s possibly why they insisted I study the arts. If I didn’t have drawing and painting to channel some of my energy into from time to time, I’d probably explode.”

Ignis flashed a knowing smile to Gladio and then, so softly he almost missed it, admitted: “I knit.”

Gladio’s full lips twitched into a grin. Cooking, old movies, and knitting. Ignis had completed the grandpa trifecta at the ripe old age of seventeen. Gladio wasn’t sure if it was tragic or endearing, but he was strongly leaning towards endearing.

“What do you knit?” Gladio asked, eager to keep the momentum of the conversation going.

Ignis laced his fingers together atop the table, looking embarrassed still. His lips were pressed together into a hard, thin line. A faint voice in the back of Gladio’s head was whispering to him, wondering if a kiss would smooth away that tension ...

Holy shit, Amicitia. Get your head in the fucking game, man. You are not allowed to sit in the middle of a coffee shop thinking about kissing Ignis fucking Scientia, even if it is just to see if he’ll stop making that tense little face. The guy would literally die of shock. And he’s not even your type.

“Nothing fancy. Blankets mostly, sometimes caps and scarves. Things that I can make without thinking about it too much.” Ignis adjusted his glasses unnecessarily again, and regarded Gladio shyly from between his fingers. “I don’t like to be idle, so knitting allows me to be busy and useful, while resting my mind.”

Gladio cleared his throat, and did his best to clear his head as well. “Hey that’s really cool, Ignis. No need to be shy or whatever.” Gladio meant it, too. He didn’t know anyone who could knit, though he knew a few that could sew, but that wasn’t really the same thing.

“Apologies,” Ignis smiled slightly, visibly relieved by Gladio’s easy acceptance of his hobby. “I, well, usually people make fun of me when they find out. Not that I think that you’re someone like that.” Ignis amended quickly. “I’m just not accustomed to talking about it so plainly.”

“Helps when the other guys fesses up to painting pictures of flowers and having tea parties with his sister first, huh.” Gladio flashed a winning smile Ignis’s way, as he reached for one of his last pastries.

“A bit, yes.” Ignis reached for a cookie, pausing to dip it in a pot of honey, a rather bold move, but based on the satisfied look on his face when he bit into the cookie, it was an inspired one.

They finished their drinks, including the refills that their server brought, along with another plate of pastries. They kept up an easy flow of conversation, continuing to take turns asking and answering questions. They were both careful to not ask anything too deeply personal, and Gladio made a pointed effort to avoid any topics of conversation that might circle back into Ignis’s childhood. He also, mercifully, managed to avoid thinking about hugging or kissing Ignis again as well.

Before Gladio knew it, their hour was up and Ignis needed to return to the Citadel to attend the
afternoon Council meeting.

The young advisor would abide no arguments from Gladio regarding their bill, signalling to their server that they were ready. He had his wallet out before Gladio had time to open his mouth to protest.

“Ignis, this was my idea, you shouldn’t have to pay.”

“You can pick up the tab next time if you like.” The young man smiled, and Gladio’s heart did a happy cartwheel at the prospect of there being a next time. “Remember to bring those books to Noct’s training session, and perhaps we can meet up to discuss them.”

“Deal,” Gladio agreed eagerly. He’d enjoyed his time with Ignis, in spite of the odd awkward moment here and there. He was absolutely looking forward to next time.
Ignis scowled at his reflection in the mirror. Why did this suddenly have to be so damned difficult? He’s tidied his apartment thousands of times before without issue, but today every little thing seemed to be a struggle of epic proportions.

Sighing at himself for his own foolishness, Ignis sprayed the cleaning solution at the bathroom mirror, obscuring his unhappy reflection. He tore a sheet of paper towel from the roll and carefully polished the mirror with a steady circular motion to avoid streaks. Once he was satisfied with that he worked his way down, spraying and then wiping down the faucet, sink, and countertop. The fumes from the cleaner were beginning to get to him, making his eyes sting and water behind his glasses and causing his breathing to be just a tad more difficult than it ought. He coughed into his sleeve and carried dutifully on with his cleaning.

This was not precisely how he preferred to spend his Sunday afternoon. He generally kept his apartment neat and clean by doing bits of housework every day. Small bursts of activity suited his schedule much better than the lengthy blocks of time that most people devoted to their domestic chores. It also helped that his apartment was tiny. Not small, not compact, but actually and unmistakably tiny. Even the most diabolical realtor would balk at labelling it as “cozy” in a listing. So really, there wasn’t too much that he needed to worry about keeping clean, and his regular dusting and scrubbing was sufficient to keep the place presentable.

At least, it had been sufficient until he had agreed to Gladiolus Amicitia coming over for an evening.

Honestly, Ignis didn’t know what he had been thinking when he had agreed to this. It had seemed like an innocent, harmless enough proposition – and wasn’t that always how the worst stories began? Gladio had found a recipe for a fairly simple soup combining both dualhorn and daggerquill meat. Evidently after sampling Ignis’s homemade ramen broth and with summer giving way to autumn, the Prince’s Shield was craving the comfort of a good homemade soup. Ignis’s lips twitched into a fond smile as he remembered the excited flush to the other man’s cheeks and the earnest light in his eyes when he’d shown Ignis the printout he’d made of the recipe and asked him if he would please, oh pretty please, help him make it.

How could Ignis deny him such a simple request? Particularly in light of how much Gladio had done for Ignis over the past few months. As if the other man hadn’t already done so much for him by rescuing him from the clutches of that wretch Flavinius – sure all he’d had to do was simply show up in order to send the nobleman and his crony scampering, but that didn’t negate the end result, which had been Ignis preserving what was left of his dignity, and possibly the function of his left hand. Ignis would have felt himself beholden to Gladio for that alone, but the man had gone above and beyond Ignis’s wildest imaginings by actually extending a genuine offer of friendship to him. To him, Ignis Scientia, the guy whom most of the Crownguard would happily dropkick off of the Citadel’s roof on a lark, a guy who was so many tiers below Gladio in the social hierarchy of the world that Ignis shouldn’t even be permitted to stare at the soles of his shoes, much less stand next to him in friendship and comradery.

Ignis knew, of course, that were it not for his job (what a small word for something that encapsulates his entire existence) that indeed, Gladio would never take notice of him. His position as Noct’s Advisor was what caused Gladio and him to share an orbit around Noctis, and it was
what prompted Gladio to seek out Ignis’s acquaintance and eventual friendship. Ignis knew better than to allow himself to over-emphasize his own importance. This was all, in the end, for Noctis’s benefit.

Still, though, despite the seeming disparity in their stations and the incompatibility of their personalities, they were getting along rather well. They had met up a few times since their initial chat at the coffee house. With Ignis’s schedule that sometimes meant a brief stroll through a nearby park while they drank iced coffee and discussed the books Gladio had recently loaned Ignis. Once his schedule had opened up enough one quiet Tuesday morning and they had taken in a classic film festival at a tiny cinema downtown. Ignis had been pleasantly surprised by what a fine conversationalist Gladio was, and the breadth and depth of his knowledge and interests. So long as the conversation didn’t center around Ignis’s alleged coddling of the prince, or Gladio’s demanding training regimen, Ignis found that he quite enjoyed and looked forward to his time with Gladio.

As Ignis swept his critical gaze about his bathroom, he tried to imagine the world from the perspective of someone six inches taller than himself. Snapping his fingers, he grabbed a cloth and moved to clean the top of his medicine cabinet.

He would be eagerly anticipating an entire evening of Gladio’s company, had their little cooking lesson not been set to take place in Ignis’s apartment. When he had agreed, happily and willingly, to the request, he had assumed that they would meet up at Gladio’s home both for the other man’s comfort and convenience. That had been the intention, in fact, until Ignis had consulted his schedule and found that the only time in the foreseeable future when he would have enough free hours all in a row to suit their purpose was this Sunday. Gladio had been free, but had let Ignis know that his little sister was having friends over for a sleepover that night, and his conscience wouldn’t allow him to subject Ignis to the type of horror that only a half dozen ten-year-old girls can inspire. The Citadel kitchens had been Ignis’s next thought – he was on good terms with the head chef, but with Noct’s birthday approaching, the kitchen staff was busy preparing for the upcoming birthday reception and Ignis didn’t dare burden them with his and Gladio’s presence. That had left Ignis with only two options: reschedule, possibly indefinitely since Noctis would be returning to school in a week’s time thus increasing both of their workloads, or invite Gladio to cook in his own apartment.

Fool that he was, Ignis had offered his home for their little venture. He had warned Gladio quite sternly that his apartment was small and not likely to be comfortable. There wasn’t room in his kitchen for both of them to work together. Gladio had offered one of his easy smiles and made a breezy gesture with his hands, assuring Ignis that it was fine, all they needed was a stove and a bit of counter space. Reluctantly, Ignis had agreed.

Sighing, Ignis finally stowed his cleaning supplies under the bathroom sink and exited the room, which was so small that it didn’t even boast a bathtub, merely a shower stall wedged into the corner, next to the sink and across from the toilet.

Exiting his bathroom brought Ignis into a small alcove in his apartment that in a larger residence might have been a hallway. To his left was a small storage closet, and directly across from the bathroom his bedroom door stood ajar. That room contained only a wooden desk and a double bed. Floating shelves adorned the walls, bearing his more sentimental treasures: a framed photograph of himself as a toddler with his parents, a little potted cactus that thrived despite Ignis’s lack of attention, and his favourite books. The lamp on his desk glowed particularly brightly, having just been dusted as part of Ignis’s current quest to vanquish every speck of dust from his apartment, and destroy any smudges or streaks in the apartment’s surfaces.

Turning to his right, Ignis strode into the rest of his apartment. The remainder of his living space
was cramped but functional. A small kitchen was tucked into a corner beside the front door, surrounded on three sides by gleaming white cupboards and appliances. The kitchen was small enough that Ignis could stand in the middle of the space and easily reach every cupboard, the dials on the oven, and the contents of his refrigerator. Poverty served as a blessing in disguise; Ignis couldn’t exactly afford to keep his cupboards well-stocked with food, and therefore had ample space to devote to storing the cookware that people were fond of gifting him on his birthday and holidays. He had an impressive collection, and had been able to assure Gladio that he needn’t bring any cooking equipment with him.

Ignis flicked his critical gaze around his kitchen. He’d given it a thorough cleaning earlier, his knees still ached from the hour he’d spent obsessively scrubbing the floors and the interior and exterior of his cupboards. Everything sparkled to perfection. He let his gaze drift past the countertop and bar stools that separated the kitchen from the living room, which extended the remaining length of the apartment towards a set of sliding glass doors that lead onto a balcony. It was a narrow space, barely wider than the patio doors. A plush gray couch and an end table were pushed against one wall, while an entertainment center and several bookshelves covered the other wall. There wasn’t sufficient space for a coffee table. Pursing his lips, he strode towards the lone end table, picking up a stack of reports and moving them into his bedroom. He’d make sure that if they used the living room, Gladio could sit next to the table in case he needed to set down a drink or his phone. Ignis didn’t want his paperwork to be in the other man’s way. It was the least that he could do, he already felt shame curling in his gut, knowing that he would be a poor host despite his best efforts. He only had so much to work with here.

Honestly, he had done the best that he could with the space that he could afford on his meager stipend. The few pieces of furniture that he owned were comfortable and appropriately sized. Handknit blankets were everywhere, neatly folded and just waiting for someone to warm and comfort. Shelving adorned most walls, and he had small trinkets or little plants in every room. Nothing lavish, nothing ornate, just something to infuse his home with a sense of self, with a warmth and sentimentality that was hard to find in the Citadel. Soft golden light spilled readily from several lamps, softening the off-white walls and cupboards, adding to the cozy effect.

A shrill beeping jolted Ignis out of his quiet contemplation. Blinking, he quickly pulled his phone out of his pocket and disabled the alarm. It was time to head to Noct’s. He needed to fix the prince something for an early supper, and also as per their usual custom on Sunday evenings, they’d review their schedule for the coming week. Then Ignis would rush back home to make one final inspection of his apartment before Gladio arrived.

Warm golden light was flooding the apartment by the time that Ignis returned home from the Prince’s. He had just enough time to assess the state of his flat one more time before a series of polite knocks thudded against his front door. Swallowing past his nerves, Ignis strode to the front door, drew the deadbolt aside, and swung it inwards.

“Hey Ignis,” Gladio’s cheerful smile was there to greet him, along with an armful of grocery bags.

“Gladio. Please, come in. Let me take those for you.”

“Thanks.”

Gladio handed his burdens over to Ignis’s care, and the latter retreated a few steps into the apartment so that Gladio could come inside. The Advisor veered into the small kitchen and set the groceries on the counter, waiting patiently while Gladio closed the door behind himself and worked on removing his boots.
“How have you been?” Ignis asked politely while he remained busy in the kitchen unpacking the groceries that Gladio had brought. The other man had insisted that he at least buy the foodstuffs, since Ignis was letting him use his kitchen and cookware. Considering the price of dualhorn meat, and the hit his savings had been taking with their recent coffee outings, he was more than happy to acquiesce to Gladio’s demands in that regard.

“Really glad to be out of that house. I’m telling you, I love my sister, and I even like her little friends ‘cause they’re just versions of her with different hairstyles and clothes. Seriously, all ten-year-old girls are the same. But Gods, Ignis, I can’t handle more than a couple of ‘em at a time and we got eight of ‘em over for the night.” Gladio raked his fingers through his hair, an utterly exasperated expression on his face, that Ignis found quite charming. He also wondered how a small army of excitable preteen girls stacked up against one spoiled, brooding teenaged Prince. He suspected that Gladio would win in a contest of who had the more difficult charge, although the Shield’s woes were temporary – Ignis was bound to his for life.

“Well, make yourself at home, such as it is.” Ignis gestured towards the apartment, which could probably fit inside of Gladio’s bedroom. At the very least it could fit inside of the manor’s sitting room, Ignis had seen enough of it when he had dropped Iris’s backpack off that one morning.

“Thanks,” the Shield smiled as he made his way deeper into the apartment. Warm golden eyes scanned his surroundings, and Ignis tried desperately hard to not fidget nervously. Every fiber in his being wanted to bow and apologize profusely for the inadequate setting.

Gladio seemed untroubled by his modest surroundings, easily striding over to one of the counter stools and hoisting himself up onto it. Elbows propped up on the counter, he smiled over to Ignis who was still in the kitchen.

“Can I offer you anything to drink before we get started?”

“Maybe some water? It’s a hot one out there.”

Ignis hummed in agreement and swiftly fetched two tall glasses from the cupboard, and a pitcher of water from the fridge. Ignis tried to block the other man’s view of his frightfully empty fridge with his own body. Filling both glasses, he gracefully slid one of them along the polished countertop towards Gladio.

“Apologies,” Ignis inclined his torso into a modest bow. “The air conditioning in the bedroom does a poor job at cooling the rest of the apartment. If you become too uncomfortable please let me know and we can head out to somewhere more comfortable.”

Gladio’s cheeks were suddenly flushed crimson and the burly man hastily waved his hands in a frantic, dismissive gesture. “No no! It’s completely fine, Ignis. Your place feels like being in Shiva’s lap compared to out there,” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the sliding glass door leading out onto the balcony. “I ought to be apologizing to you, asking you to cook soup when it’s so fucking hot outside.”

Ignis straightened and offered his companion a shy smile, shaking his head at the attempted counter-apology. “No, it’s perfectly fine. Soup is a year-round staple of my diet. I’d likely be having soup tonight even without your intervention.” Ignis could feel the rosy heat glowing at the tips of his ears. “Really I ought to be thanking you for providing me with supper.”

Gladio chuckled lightly. “Alright alright. Apologies and gratitude all around. If we keep this up we’ll die of starvation before we cook anything.”
Ignis smiled gently. It felt nice, to have someone else here, their laughter and banter vanquishing the solitude. “Indeed, and this soup is simple enough, but still requires adequate time for the broth to simmer. We’d best get started.”

Gladio rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Alright, sweet. I’m at your command, Kitchenmaster Scientia.”

Teal eyes rolled heavenward. “Honestly now.” Ignis bit his cheek to keep from smiling too much at the cute moniker. “I’m uncertain how best to proceed. I’m afraid the kitchen is a tad, er, compact.” He dragged his tongue across his suddenly dry lips. Fumbling, he plucked up his glass of water and took a long, slow drink to help calm the sudden rush of anxiety tearing through him.

The smile that Gladio saw fit to grace him with was so tender, Ignis could almost have wept. There was a trace of sadness as well, though, tightening the corners of his eyes. Ignis hoped that he wasn’t depressing the other man too much. He hoped that Gladio didn’t regret his decision to come over. Perhaps he hadn’t taken Ignis seriously when he’d warned him that his kitchen was too small for both of them to easily work in.

“Why don’t we switch places? You sit here and give me directions and supervise me, and I’ll head in there and start chopping and boiling or whatever?”

Ignis blinked and looked over to Gladio, who was already half off of his stool.

“Certainly,” Ignis agreed. “Let me just retrieve the tools that you’ll need.” He bustled from cupboard to cupboard, retrieving cutting boards and knives, a skillet, a pot, and several spoons and spatulas. He arranged everything neatly on one of the counters before stepping nimbly out of the kitchen and around Gladio. It was a tight fit, and his chest brushed against the other man’s back in passing. Ignis meant to mumble an apology for the casual contact, he was so accustomed to his superiors being revolted by the myth of his outlands germs and filth that it was second nature. Not that he truly believed himself to be dirty, but try telling native Insomnians that.

Something silenced him, though. Something warm and fluttery and exceptionally fragile burst in his chest at the incidental contact between himself and Gladio. It rendered the eloquent man temporarily speechless, and by the time he’d recovered himself sufficiently to speak, Gladio was also situated in the middle of the kitchen, seemingly unperturbed by Ignis’s touch. Ignis wisely let the matter drop before he made a fuss over apparently nothing.

Ignis had a copy of the recipe in front of him, quaintly dubbed “Quillhorn Soup” by its author, in honor of its two chief ingredients. He settled himself on a stool and prepared himself to gently guide Gladio through the process.

The strategist did his best to make the most out of this opportunity for Gladio. They started a pot of water simmering away on low heat with a dash of salt to speed the process along. He patiently explained why he had several colour-coded cutting boards for different types of food. He showed Gladio how to curl his fingers when holding the onions and carrots he was chopping, to ensure that should the knife slip, Gladio wouldn’t be down a finger. He explained that they were taking the time to brown the meat and caramelize the onions in a skillet before adding it to the soup because it would greatly enhance the flavour of the ingredients.

Ignis had been afraid that he would find it uncomfortably stressful to watch someone else work in his kitchen and use his tools, with him powerless on the other side of a counter. Should something go wrong it would take him precious seconds to race around the counter and by then the meal could be spoiled or his companion could be injured. He was relieved to find himself actually feeling quite the opposite. Instead of feeling the icy clench of fear and anxiety in his gut, he felt a
warm rush of contentment wash over him.

Watching Gladio work was mesmerizing. Ignis found himself spellbound by the man’s least movements and gestures. He was simply so earnest, and there was something so sweetly satisfying about watching a man with such prodigious strength and bulk as Gladio trying to delicately manipulate a kitchen knife or precisely measure out herbs and spices. Ignis found himself fixating on the little things that the man did, such as the way his brows would furrow together in concentration as he peeled a carrot, or the way he held a measuring spoon up to the light as if he needed to inspect it from all angles before being sure that he had in fact measured the spices properly. What had truly begun to charm Ignis, though, was the way the larger man would shoot him questioning looks, so achingly shy and unsure, waiting for Ignis’s nod of approval before adding anything to the pot.

It didn’t take long before, with Ignis’s careful supervision and gentle corrections, Gladio had the meat and onions simmering in the pot, along with an array of fresh herbs and spices. The carrots and sweet peppers were peeled and chopped and already measured out into little bowls, just waiting for the right time to be added to the soup. Until then, though, they had an hour to wait. Gladio set the kitchen timer for them, and the pair retreated to Ignis’s living room for a time.

The evening passed pleasantly enough. Gladio turned the television on and found a live feed of the Totomostro in Altissia to watch. Ignis uncovered his stash of mints (the good sort with the chocolatey centers) and the pair wiled away the minutes using the candies as currency as they bet against each other. Gladio made for an exceptionally entertaining companion. He placed wildly unlikely bets on beasts with poor odds, loudly proclaiming that he had a good feeling about this one or that one. He’d make up silly names for the creatures and elaborate and implausible backstories.

“That couerl there, his name’s Carl. Carl the couerl. He has a wife and 11 babies back home. He sends all of his earnings to them, ‘cause some of the kids are sick and the medicine’s expensive. He’s motivated as shit to win”

“That gigantoad just broke up with his girlfriend, so he’s pissed off and has somehtin’ to prove if you know what I mean. I’m goin’ all in.”

“Ehh I wouldn’t bet on those spiracorns if I were you. The one on the left’s been sleeping with the other one’s sister. I wouldn’t be surprised if they start charging at each other and forget all about the other beasts.”

They paused briefly after the timer began ringing, returning to the kitchen to stir the soup and add the final ingredients. Ignis was surprised by how quickly the minutes and then hours were flowing past, like a handful of sand spilling from between his desperately clenched fingers. Ignis wanted to cling to every precious fleeting moment before it was gone. Too soon Gladio would leave, and his tiny apartment would somehow feel too empty.

When the soup was finally ready the pair relocated to the kitchen counter. Ignis refilled their glasses of water while Gladio ladled out bowls of soup. The steam wafting from their contents made Ignis’s mouth water. It smelled spicy and savoury, a perfect combination of flavours for a world on the cusp of summer and fall.

“Do you care to do the honors?” Ignis gestured at their bowls with his spoon.

Gladio squinted one eye and cocked his head to one side, peering dubiously at his soup. “Maybe I should. In case it’s bad. Shit, it could be poisonous for all I know.”

Ignis snorted derisively. Cheeks instantly aflame, he grasped for his glass of water and took a long

Gladio took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He shrugged his broad shoulders and rolled his neck side to side until it cracked. “Alright then. If I die, tell Iris I love her. And tell my dad not to look under my mattress. Just burn the whole bed.”

Ignis choked on a drink of water. He blinked at Gladio through watery eyes as the other man just laughed and thumped him on the back with a heavy fist.

“I’m kidding. Mostly. Anyway okay, here goes nothing!” Gladio made a show of pinching his nose closed with his thumb and forefinger as he brought a spoonful of soup to his mouth. Ignis leaned towards the other, wide-eyed with mock concern.

The Shield held up three fingers in the “a-okay” signal. Ignis exhaled an exaggerated sigh before bringing a spoonful to his own mouth. It was rather good, not that Ignis had expected anything else. Certainly, there was room for improvement. He thought that alstrooms would give the broth a more robust flavour profile, for instance, but all things considered, Gladio had done exceedingly well, particularly for his first attempt.

“Well done,” Ignis praised.

“Couldn’t have done it without your help, Ignis,” Gladio beamed a mighty smile his way and held up a powerful fist. When Ignis only blinked dumbly at it Gladio barked a laugh. “C’mon, this merits a fist bump. Don’t leave me hanging here.”

“Oh!” Ignis scrunched down into himself, embarrassed by his inability to properly read and interpret the gesture. He’d seen Gladio and Noctis share similar gestures after a training session that went well. He’d somehow never imagined that he might be on the receiving end of such a friendly and familiar gesture from anyone, least of all Gladiolus Amicitia. Hesitantly, the advisor curled his fingers into a fist and gingerly thumped it against Gladio’s.

They finished their meal in companionable silence, the only sound being that of spoons clinking against ceramic and the little slurping noises that Gladio seemed incapable of avoiding. When they’d both scraped their bowls dry, Ignis slipped back into the kitchen, re-filling both of their bowls with the remainder of the soup without bothering to ask Gladio if he wanted more. The man had looked on the verge of licking his bowl to get another taste, of course he gladly accepted seconds.

Eventually they were done, the soup pot was empty, and Ignis felt so full that he was certain he could sweat broth from his pores. Gladio rubbed his stomach, his eyes closed and mouth half-open in a look of utter contentment. Ignis chuckled fondly at the other man, as he eased himself down from his barstool and began clearing away their dishes. Roused by the clinking of silverware and ceramic, Gladio cracked open a sleepy eye.

“Hey, I can take care of that.”

“Nonsense,” Ignis waved him off with the hand that was not currently engaged in the act of balancing a stack of bowls. “You cooked. And you’re my guest.”

The older man scowled and looked primed for an argument, but Ignis ignored him and continued gathering up the cookware scattered about his tiny kitchen. Soup required an inordinate number of spoons, knives and cutting boards. Out of the corner of his eye, Ignis watched as Gladio shrugged and sauntered a few paces into the living room, drawn to the large bookcases that dominated the room.
Ignis filled the sink with hot soapy water before carefully stacking the dirty dishes in the basin to soak. Unsure if it would be considered impolite if he started wiping down the kitchen surfaces, he decided to retire to the living room, joining Gladio at the bookshelves.

“See anything interesting? You’re welcome to borrow anything that catches your eye.” A shy smile worked its way across Ignis’s features. The Astrals knew the Shield had loaned enough books to Ignis recently, it was only polite of him to reciprocate.

“Maybe.” Ignis tilted his head to regard Gladio, attempting to follow the other man’s line of sight to see which volume might have caught his eye Ignis had learned in these last weeks how delightfully varied Gladio’s literary tastes were. He derived equal pleasure from bodice-ripper romances and political biographies, murder mysteries and high fantasy.

A sudden frown tugged the corners of Ignis’s mouth down harshly. It didn’t seem as if Gladio was looking at the neatly arranged books at all, but rather at the two large cardboard boxes nestled into the bottom shelf. Both were neatly labelled with permanent marker in Ignis’s careful script: Refugee Aid Center and Lady Terra’s Children’s Home respectively. Both boxes were partially filled with Ignis’s knitted creations. When he made something, he would consider which organization might make the best use of it, and tuck it into the appropriate box. When the box eventually filled, he would drop it off at the charity in question. He occasionally kept items for his own use and also gave them away as gifts, but the majority of his work found its way into those boxes.

“What’s up with these?” Gladio asked, curiosity ripe in both his words and expression.

Ignis could feel the heat rising in his cheeks and up into his ears. It felt as if someone had poured glue into his mouth; his tongue seemed to be stuck to the roof of his mouth and it was difficult to speak. His voice was smaller and feeble than he would have liked when he answered. “I told you. I knit.”

Gladio raked his fingers through the longer hair at the nape of his neck, still the picture of confusion. “Yeah I know, but what’s with the boxes?”

Ignis sighed and immediately felt his usual calm façade slip back into place. Gladio wasn’t mocking his hobby after all. Guilt nibbled at his gut and he chided himself for being so quick to judge the other man. Mustering up a smile, he made a weak attempt at humour to lighten the moment. “Well one only needs so many blankets and scarves. So I donate the rest.”

Gladio turned, and suddenly Ignis was forced to bear the full brunt of the man’s gaze, his amber eyes glittering, crackling like fire. Or – no wait just a tick – were those tears shining in the corners of his eyes? Surely not. Wide-eyed with confusion, Ignis withdrew a pace, which was enough to bring the backs of his legs flush with the couch.

“What’s wrong?” he managed to ask, hating himself for the distinct crack in his voice.

It took Gladio a moment to respond – a very long moment in which the Shield continued to stare at Ignis, as if the secrets of the universe were engraved into the Advisor’s glasses or something. Finally he shook his head and spoke in a voice that was softer than Ignis had ever heard him use before.

“I just can’t believe how kind you are. Kind, selfless and generous. Despite everything that happened.” Pure wonderment infused the Shield’s hushed tones.

Ignis meant to retreat another step but found himself without any additional ground to concede, and
instead he toppled back into the plush embrace of his couch. Trying not to look like a man who had just tripped over his own sofa, he peered up at Gladio and as calmly as he could, begged for clarification.

“What does that mean, ‘despite everything that happened’?”

Ignis didn’t know what he expected the Shield to say. Perhaps the ‘everything’ he spoke of was simply Ignis’s duties which were as numerous as they were trying. Perhaps, much to Ignis’s chagrin, he found it astonishing that someone who lived so modestly would still be willing and able to offer charity. But based on the way that the colour was draining from the Shield’s face Ignis just knew what was coming. He’d known that someday this would happen, that as careful as he was to not let anything slip, that somehow someone would find out. He almost couldn’t hear the Shield’s words over the sudden racket of his own heartbeat thundering in his ears.

“Shit. Everything, everything … you know. When you were a kid.”

Gladio had the grace to look embarrassed, and Ignis had the grace to not pick up a couch cushion and bury himself beneath it as shame and fear suddenly rushed over him like a tidal wave.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, Ignis,” the elder was quick to amend. He was still deathly pale, and if Ignis still had his wits about him, he would have told the other to sit down before he fell over. “I didn’t mean to just blurt that out.”

Ignis managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth and swipe it across painfully dry lips. He continued to gaze up at the Shield, mute with horror as realization settled in his gut, cold and heavy as ice. “What do you know?” he managed to croak out. “And whom did you tell?”

Unable to help himself, he curled his legs up towards his chest, as if his thighs were the wall of a fortress that he could take shelter behind in the face of the coming storm.

Chapter End Notes

So, because I am incredibly OCD, I just had to do a mock up of Ignis's apartment in the Sims, just to make sure that the layout that I had in my head would actually work. The kitchen came out a bit too big due to the limitations of the game, but otherwise it's about right.

Also! Next chapter should be more exciting!

As ever, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to read this. <333
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Many words are said, and feelings are felt.

Chapter Notes

I cannot thank you guys enough for reading this and for being so incredibly supportive.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What do you know?” he managed to croak out. “And whom did you tell?”

Gladiolus Amicitia was accustomed to getting whatever he wanted out of life. If his wealth and the privilege of his family name were insufficient to bend the world to his whims, then his good looks and effortless charm would. At that particular moment in time, his soul positively ached with the desire to wrap his arms around Ignis Scientia and hold him until his smaller body stopped shaking. He wanted to tuck Ignis into the warmth and security of his own body and offer him the protection that he should have given him a decade ago, that he wanted to believe he would have given him, had he only known what was going on.

Strictly speaking, he could do it, but he really shouldn’t. The young man sitting, or more accurately huddling, into the couch cushions in front of him appeared as fragile as a butterfly wing. Gladio feared that the other man would snap, either physically or mentally, if Gladio suddenly swooped down upon him with his strong arms and powerful embrace.

The Shield felt as if his heart were being torn into little pieces of confetti as he forced himself to avoid the couch entirely. Instead he eased his massive frame down to the hardwood floor, sitting cross-legged in front of Ignis. He was eye level with the guy’s shins.

Fuck. Gladio had fucked up, and fucked up badly. This was worse than the time he’d thrown his training sword across the yard in a fit of rage and it had bopped Iris on the head. She’d needed a dozen stitches. This was worse than the time he’d berated Noctis for endangering his sister, when all along the Prince had actually gone to her aid and covered for her. This was even worse than the time he’d been caught shit-talking Cor, not realizing that the Immortal was standing right fucking behind him with a face on him that could curdle fresh milk. He had reduced Ignis to an anxious, cowering mess. This was so much fucking worse.

He had just blurted out that he knew all about the shit that had happened to Ignis when he was a kid. Just blurted it right out like a moron with no filter between his brain and his mouth. It had been a minor slip up, he hadn’t even really been all that direct. A less observant or less inquisitive person would have let the comment slip by unremarked upon. But this was Ignis fucking Scientia, child prodigy, perpetually the smartest guy in the room. Of course he couldn’t let that little morsel of information breeze past him without snatching at it.
And now, somehow, Gladio needed to explain everything. Every fucking thing.

He had always meant to. Always meant to let Ignis know that he knew about his childhood. Always meant to reassure Ignis that he wasn’t like those assholes who thought that the location of their birth made them better than anyone else. Always meant to even come clean about how he’d covertly listened to Ignis play the violin for weeks, in awe of the then unknown young man. The deeper that their friendship had taken root, the more Gladio had truly longed for transparency. The unspoken truth had hung heavily over his head like the meteor above Titan for weeks now.

He’d just never found the right moment to have that talk. There was always something – some stupid excuse. There were too many people around and Gladio was afraid of casual eavesdroppers. The next time they met up suddenly the setting was too private and he was afraid that Ignis would feel cornered. There was always something that Gladio in his cowardice latched onto as an excuse to not have this difficult conversation. Next time. There was always next time.

He’d run the fuck out of next times, thanks to his big, stupid mouth. His dad had always warned him that his mouth would land him in a world of trouble one day; Gladio doubted this was what Clarus had had in mind, though.

Gladio hung his head, muted by a rush of shame and fear. A thousand words, most of them apologies, churned in his throat, choking him. What could he even say? All of his apologies and explanations were meaningless, flimsy as tissue paper. No words could soothe the obvious distress that Ignis was in. Or maybe they could, but not from his unskilled tongue. Someone like, well, like Ignis, who was well-spoken and erudite might be able to wield words like a sword or a salve depending upon their needs. Gladio, intelligent though he may be, was at his core a man of action, not discussion.

Although he could hear the roar of traffic in the streets below, and snippets of conversation floating through the open balcony doors, Ignis’s apartment seemed oddly hushed, as if the tension between the two young men were dampening all sound. Even the hum of the refrigerator in the kitchen sounded oddly muffled.

Eventually, after too many painful seconds, Ignis spoke.

“Gladio? Please. Don’t make me beg.”

That snapped Gladio to attention, sent his blood rushing like molten lava through his veins. Ignis probably hadn’t meant anything by that turn of phrase, hadn’t given it a second thought. But it weighed heavily on Gladio’s heart. Beg. He never wanted Ignis to beg for anything, not ever again. If the world were just and fair, Ignis should need only whisper his merest fancies into the ether, and the universe should reward his goodness and selflessness by granting him his every desire. Instead, and though he hadn’t been told every detail of every miserable day of Ignis’s childhood, he could easily imagine the bespectacled young boy begging them to stop hurting him, to let him eat fucking breakfast.

He couldn’t even console himself with the fact that maybe, just maybe, Ignis had never been forced to beg his caretakers to actually take care of him, that maybe he had always been too proud to debase himself like that, maybe he’d suffered in dignified silence. No, he still remembered Lord Flavinius’s disgusting behavior, his sneering voice commanding an Ignis who was on his hands and knees to fucking beg the Lord’s forgiveness. It didn’t even matter that Gladio had arrived on the scene to interrupt Ignis’s torment. It didn’t matter that the young Advisor had not, in fact, resorted to begging in order to get Flavinius to stop crushing his hand. Just the fact that Ignis had been in that position at all was enough to make Gladio’s stomach turn inside-out with disgust.
“No!” Gladio’s voice was as hoarse with turbulent emotion as Ignis’s had been.

Ignis peered down at Gladio from between his upturned knees, blinking owlishly, obviously confused.

“I’d never make you beg,” the larger man amended quickly. Gladio tried to ignore the furious burning in his cheeks. He drew in a deep, calming breath.

“Will you please answer my questions, then?” The note of panic in Ignis’s voice was hard to miss. “What is it you know, and who all have you told?”

“Shit, yeah. Of course.” Gladio let out a long breath. “Sorry. I just wasn’t exactly planning of having this conversation tonight.” He closed his eyes, desperately reaching for the scattered threads of his thoughts.

Above him, Ignis snorted contemptuously. Gladio let it slide. After a moment, he opened his eyes and looked up to the young man cowering before him. There was a handknit blanket draped over the back of the sofa and Gladio yearned to pull it down and cocoon Ignis in its comfort. He shoved that thought aside, focusing on answering those two short but not very simple questions.

“The second question is easier to answer,” Gladio began. He gazed up at Ignis, expression open, eyes wide and sincere. “I haven’t told anyone anything.”

“No one?” Ignis’s worried face peeked out from between his knees.

“No one, I swear it.”

Ignis frowned as he scrutinized Gladio with seafoam green eyes that Gladio would happily drown in at this point. “Very well. And as to my first?”

This was the part that would hurt the most. Gladio wracked his scrambled brains, trying to think of a way to explain to Ignis what he knew, without having to go through the whole laundry list of abuses. It turned Gladio’s stomach just thinking about it, and he was reluctant to force Ignis to relive those memories. Perhaps he could be vague, give Ignis the barest gist of things?

“I may have paid a visit to one of Noct’s old nannies,” he began tentatively, amber eyes carefully scrutinizing Ignis’s expression. If he’d looked frightened before, he was downright terrified now. His cheeks had gone paper white beneath a smattering of little moles and freckles, pupils blown wide, nearly eclipsing the boy’s vibrant irises.

“Who?” came the query in a voice so painfully frail, followed by a sharply indrawn breath, as if Ignis were bracing for a blow that he knew couldn’t be blocked.

“Marita.”

The effect was immediate and blessed. The tension in Ignis’s shoulders eased slightly, and the young man let out a long breath, colour returning to his pallid cheeks. He still looked anxious, still hugged his knees to his chest, but he no longer looked like he was on the brink of a meltdown.

“Well that could have been worse.” Wait, what? Oh fucking Six, as if what Marita had told him hadn’t been fucking bad enough.

Gladio licked his lips, finding that he’d chewed them raw with worry without even realizing it. He prodded a particularly sore spot with the tip of his tongue, the metallic tang of blood sparking across his taste buds.
“I must know, though,” the young strategist pressed on. “I cannot abide ambiguity. What precisely did she tell you?” Ignis continued to sit curled behind the shelter of his own knees, visibly frightened of what he was about to hear, but with eyes burning bright with the fires of determination to see this through. Gladio’s respect for the young man swelled. He couldn’t imagine what it must have taken Ignis to ask that, to open the door wide for Gladio to shove all of his childhood traumas through.

“Six, Ignis. Do you really need me to spell it out? I don’t want to make you remember all of that shit.”

A laugh, dark and bitter as his beloved Ebony, fell from Ignis’s lips. “Because a day ever goes by when I don’t remember all on my own?” He waved a dismissive hand. “Go ahead. You’re not going to traumatize me, Gladio.”

“Fine.” But what if I don’t want to remember? Gladio closed his eyes again, summoning his memories of his visit to Marita. How ludicrous it all seemed now, sitting in her cheerful parlor, eating little sweets and sipping tea. Such a charming, happy backdrop for such an ugly tale.

Quietly, gently, he recounted to Ignis what Marita had told him. He did his best to not picture a seven-year-old Ignis as he spoke, for fear of being violently ill. Again.

“She told me about how prejudiced or maybe just jealous people were, how they wouldn’t let you have any fun, how they did their best to keep you from having anything comfortable. She told me how they had orders to skip some of your meals and keep you busy when you were supposed to have downtime. Oh, and the hand washing.” Gladio grimaced and paused for breath, and to gauge Ignis’s reaction. The smaller man stared back at him sadly, something suspiciously like remorse in his eyes.

“Anything else?” Ignis queried. Hope flickered in those beautiful teal eyes. It was going to be a sin to quash it.

Gladio sighed. “She was really clear that she’d only tell me what she knew for an absolute fact. No idle gossip or speculation, only things that she’d seen herself. But she, um, well she did tell me that you got bruised and banged up a lot for a kid who never got to run around and play, but she was really clear that she didn’t know what happened.” Ignis nodded, his expression a calm mask that surely belied whatever emotional cacophony raged underneath.

“And she told me about the night she found you in a closet.”

Ignis’s forehead thumped against his knees and he groaned audibly.

“Ignis?” Worry overrode Gladio’s previous caution, and he found himself edging closer towards his companion, though he still kept to the floor and didn’t invade Ignis’s space on the couch.

It was fortunate that Gladio had crept nearer. Ignis’s next words were whispered so softly, Gladio almost missed them.

“I’d forgotten about that, forgotten that she knew about the closet. Damnit.” Ignis paused, exhaling a shuddering breath. “She … she wasn’t really involved with that. Please don’t think ill of her. I don’t. She was actually very kind to me; she did as much for me as she probably thought that she could.”

“Yeah,” Gladio murmured softly. “I could tell. She seemed pretty disgusted by it, and rightfully so.”
Ignis lifted his head. His glasses were slightly askew, but he ignored it. He gazed at Gladio through the crooked lenses, the corners of his eyes tight with worry. “I’m sorry.”

Gladio blinked one, twice, three times. *The fuck was Ignis apologizing for?* “The fuck are you apologizing for?” *Oh goddamn it, he wasn’t supposed to say that out loud.*

Ignis flinched.

Before Gladio had a chance to take back what he’d said, Ignis answered in a voice as calm and cool as a spring morning. It was remarkable, really, how easily he could affect a calm demeanor. It was also a bit terrifying.

“I regret that you had to hear all of that. She shouldn’t have burdened you with those stories.” Ignis pursed his lips, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “I always imagined that Marita was better than that, better than idle gossip.”

Gladio slapped a meaty palm to his forehead. Ignis thought Marita had just sprung this shit on Gladio out of nowhere. Like she’d had him over for tea and a game of cards and just casually spilled the beans on the Citadel’s secret history of prejudice and abuse. As lovely as it would be to be absolved of any wrong-doing by Ignis, honour demanded that he be honest.

“No, Ignis. It wasn’t like that.”

Ignis arched a delicate brow. “Oh?” He sat forward, uncurling his legs to plant his feet on the floor. With his forefinger he shoved his glasses up his nose to straighten them, regarding Gladio with a newfound intensity.

Gladio gulped. He was walking a tightrope over a very deep pit, without a safety net in sight and he knew it.

“I may have asked her to tell me what she knew.”

“May have? Either you did or you didn’t.” Ignis was clearly doing his best to remain calm, but cracks were appearing in his mask, revealing terrifying glimpses of the raw emotions churning just beneath the surface. A lifetime’s worth of anger and disgust, and Gladio feared that he would soon bear the brunt of Ignis’s rather justified fury.

“Oh, okay.” Gladio held his hands up palm outward, imploringly. “I did. I was worried about you, and worried that we’d never learn to be friends if I didn’t figure out what I was obviously missing about you.”

“So you tracked down one of my former nannies and pumped her for information?” Ignis cut in, uncharacteristically abrupt. Another crack in the mask.

Gladio frowned. “I don’t know if that’s precisely how I’d put it. I visited her, we chatted for awhile, and then yes, I asked her if anything had ever gone on with you when you were younger, before I knew you better.”

“Unbelievable.” Ignis ran his fingers through his soft brown hair, leaving little tufts of it sticking up in their wake.

“Please don’t think badly of her for telling me, Ignis.” Gladio hated the thought of Ignis thinking too badly of Marita. The old woman had been kind, and had only confided in him because she thought her stories might help. Help, not hurt. “She was trying to help me, and I was trying to help you.”
“Thank you, but I neither need nor desire your help.”

Gladio laughed softly. “Yeah? Because we were getting on real famously before. Gods, Ignis, the stupid shit I used to say to you without knowing better. You have to admit, we’ve been getting along a lot better since I found out.”

Ignis frowned, brow creasing thoughtfully. “You never did mention when this was. How long?”

“Couple months ago,” Gladio answered, shoulders scrunching up towards his ears sheepishly. “After our little run-in with Flavinus, I talked to my Dad to see if he knew what the hell was going on, one thing lead to another, and I had the idea to chat with Marita.”

Ignis went very still; he didn’t even appear to be breathing. “You discussed this with your father? With Lord Clarus?” Ignis whispered.

“That’s my dad, yeah.” Gladio winced as soon as the words had left his mouth. That had sounded much cuter in his head. Out loud it sounded rude and patronizing. He meant to apologize, but Ignis was already speaking.

“Does he know? Six above, Gladio. Does he know?” The mask was all but cast aside now, panic radiated from every line of Ignis’s face.

“No!” Gladio waved his hands frantically. “I told you, I didn’t tell anyone anything, including Dad. And when I tried to ask him about you he said he didn’t know anything, and that even if he did, he wouldn’t tell me.” Gladio snorted. “Said if I had questions I should talk to you instead of gossiping behind your back like an old woman or something.”

Ignis snorted inelegantly. “And you took his sage advice and twisted it into a suggestion to seek out an old woman to gossip with?”

Gladio hung his head in silent affirmation because, well, yes he had.

“You should have listened to your father, Gladiolus.” Oh shit. We’re back to the full name. “Contrary to what you seem to believe, my life is not fodder for your entertainment and your curiosity does not trump my right to privacy. I thought that you were better than that. I thought that you were different.” Ouch. That stung more than perhaps even Ignis intended.

“I was only trying to help. I’m sorry, Ignis. Sorry that I handled this in such a crappy way, and sorry that you had to go through all of that. I’m really so sorry.” Gladio murmured softly, feebly. He wanted to say more, but pity and sorrow were choking him. If he kept going he was definitely going to cry, and that would only make matters worse.

“Yes, very helpful indeed.” Ignis’s voice was like ice. Gladio was amazed that his ears weren’t blackened with frostbite yet. “The first friendship I make in this city, other than Noctis, and it’s tainted by pity.” Ignis practically spit the word pity at him.

“Ignis, I don’t—”

“Don’t you dare look at me with your face all twisted up into knots, don’t talk to me with your voice breaking like it is, and try to tell me that you don’t pity me.”

Gladio snapped his mouth shut because once again, well, yes.

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it.” Ignis ran his fingers through his hair again, further mussing it, before tangling his long fingers into his bangs and tugging absently as he spoke. “I can see the pity
in our every interaction now. You practically reek of it, it’s so obvious now. My only explanation is that I didn’t want to see it. I wanted so badly to just be friends with someone, to just be normal.” He barked a laugh. “I should have known better. You must think me such a fool, carrying on for all of these weeks, chatting about books and movies, never realizing that I was just some charity case for you.”

Gladio stared at Ignis, wide-eyed, mouth agape. He’d been handling this whole thing pretty well, all things considered up until now. Now, though, the other man’s composure had finally been burned away by the fires of his wrath. There was a bite behind Ignis’s words, each one like a dagger being thrown into the air, slashing at the both of them.

When it didn’t seem as if Ignis had anything else to snap at him, Gladio spoke up, softly, carefully. “What can I do to make this right? I can’t forget what I found out, Ignis, but I really do want to be your friend. I’ve honestly enjoyed hanging out with you. You’re … kind of awesome. You’re definitely not some charity case, and never were, not to me.” Gladio felt his cheeks heat up. That sounded incredibly lame, and ordinarily he’d be embarrassed, but right now all that mattered was salvaging his relationship with Ignis. His pride was a small sacrifice for that noble venture.

Ignis was quiet for a moment, considering Gladio through narrowed eyes. Gladio waited, patiently, head slightly bowed in a gesture of contrition.

“You can do two things for me,” the Advisor finally declared.

Eagerly, Gladio lifted his head. He’d do anything at this point, and do it gladly. “Anything,” he affirmed.

“First, you can swear to me that you won’t mention this to anyone. Not your father, not His Majesty, not Noctis, not my uncle, not your diary if you keep one. Need I go on?”

Gladio swallowed thickly and nodded. “I swear it. I swear it on my life, on my sister’s life, and on the names of all of the Gods. I won’t tell anyone about your history.” Ignis nodded, and when the strategist didn’t immediately continue with his next demand, Gladio dared to ask the question that was suddenly burning in his mind. “Do none of them know?”

Ignis shook his head slowly, though he never broke his stern eye contact with Gladio. “They do not, and I intend to keep it that way. I have worked very hard, for a very long time, ensuring that was the case. I will not have you ruin that.”

“Why?” Gladio knew he had no right to be asking questions of Ignis right now, but fuck it, he couldn’t help himself anymore. He could understand why Ignis wouldn’t want him to know, but his own uncle? The King? If it were Gladio he’d be shouting it from the rooftops, naming and shaming those bastards until everyone in the city knew of their shame and disgrace. As far as Gladio knew, the King was extremely fond of Ignis. Saying that his Majesty would have Ignis’s abusers’ heads wasn’t just a figure of speech, but a very realistic outcome, should Regis ever find out.

Ignis blinked in confusion, looking at Gladio as if he’d just asked something incredibly stupid, like why he shouldn’t lick an electrical outlet.

“because I don’t want any of them to ever look at me the way you have been for the past ten minutes. With so much pity and sadness.”

Gladio bowed his head, thoroughly chastised. Of course. Of fucking course Ignis would be more concerned with sparing everyone else’s delicate sensibilities than with justice or his own well-
“I understand.” Gladio whispered. What could he even say in the face of such naked altruism? Personally, he thought Ignis was being a bit foolish. He’d been burdening himself needlessly for years, coping with these horrors on his own, when there were people in this city who cared about him and okay yes, they might pity him, they might feel anger towards those who’d hurt him, and guilt for not recognizing what had been going on under their frigging noses. But those same people—the King, his uncle to name a few—would be more than happy to bear those burdens if it meant helping Ignis. Gladio was sure of it. That’s what a family does. Did he not realize that Regis, Clarus, Cor and all of the rest of them saw Ignis as a surrogate son, or at least a nephew they’re especially fond of?

It wasn’t his call to make, though, and if he had learned anything in the past fifteen minutes, it was that he really shouldn’t meddle in other peoples’ affairs.

“Good.” Ignis nodded. “As for my second request … “

Gladio looked up expectantly.

“Kindly leave.”

Gladio blinked, physically recoiling so that he almost crashed into the bookshelf behind him.

“What?”

“Get out,” Ignis enunciated carefully, his words as crisp as a fresh apple. “I need to be alone now.” That frosty edge was back in his voice.

Gladio frowned, but obediently pushed himself to his feet. He hated to leave Ignis like this, alone and devoid of comfort, with only his tumultuous thoughts for company. Gladio’s fingers twitched with the urge to reach over, smooth out Ignis’s messy hair, pull the blanket from the back of the couch and snuggle Ignis up until he was too warm and cozy to be hurt anymore.

“Are you sure?” Gladio murmured, desperate for a chance to stay, even just as a silent companion, a warden against loneliness and solitude.

“Gladiolus, if you do not give me some peace, I will not be held accountable for my actions. My composure is hanging on by a bloody thread here.”

Gladio winced at the venom underlying Ignis’s icy tone. He understood, though. Ignis needed to process this, and if Gladio stayed, he’d only make Ignis angrier, and then he’d say something he’d regret, then Gladio would lash back at him, and before you know it, the whole neighbourhood is reduced to rubble around them while they keep arguing. Yeah, best to give Ignis some space, maybe text him later to make sure he’s okay.

Not wanting to make matters worse, he inclined into a deep but brief bow before making his way to the door. He paused to step into his boots and saw that Ignis was still perched on the couch, watching him.

“Gladio?”

The Shield’s heart did a hopeful cartwheel.

“Yeah, Ignis?”
The Advisor closed his eyes tightly, either unable or unwilling to look at Gladio.

“I’ll be in touch tomorrow, okay?”

“Whenever you’re ready. I’ll come running.”

Gladio offered him a soft smile in parting, before forcing himself to open the front door and step out into the hallway. His feet felt like lead and he had to fight for each step that took him away from Ignis, from the young man so obviously in need of comfort, but currently unwilling and unable to accept it.

It was then that Gladio came to understand a fundamental flaw with apartment building living: no matter how thick the walls are, no matter how much insulation is crammed between floors to soundproof neighbour from neighbour, there’s not much that can be done about the front door and that little gap that always seems to be there, between the floor and the bottom edge of the door. Even in the most soundproof of buildings, the front door of an apartment always leaks sound like it’s made of paper. And it’s through Ignis’s front door that Gladio can hear the distinct sounds of sniffing, followed by faint whimpers that soon erupt into all-out sobs.

Gladio really wasn’t the masochistic sort. But by the Six, he wished that Titan himself would come charging through the city and stomp him into paste. It would be less painful than listening to Ignis crying on the other side of a door that wasn’t even locked, but Gladio wasn’t welcome behind.

Ignis’s parting words had been such a blessed reassurance to Gladio, the promise of an update the next day, the implication then that this was not the end of the road for them. Hope burned like a small but strong ember in his heart, and with that bit of warmth in his soul, Gladio made his way to his car, a plan already taking shape in his head.

A plan that involved actions, actions that spoke louder than words. When he got into the car he didn’t even bother starting the ignition. He pulled his phone out of his pants pocket and began firing off a series of texts and emails.

Gladio just prayed to the Six that his grand apology gesture wouldn’t be his parting gift to Ignis, and that he could actually pull this plan of his off.

His phone lit up with an incoming text and a grin spread over his features. He was off to a good start. Eagerly he keyed the ignition and set out for Noct’s.
Another cliffhanger, I'm sorry! But at least this one's not scary? I think?
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

One of these days I will post a chapter that did not veer wildly off-script. Seriously, I don't even know why I bother with outlines. I never stick to them. This one wasn't even CLOSE.

I feel a bit blargh about this one, probably because it developed a mind of its own. Please let me know what you think, if I missed any glaring errors, if you liked it, or if I screwed up and should have stuck with whatever it was I had planned instead.

Or, you know, it's honestly okay to not let me know. What's important is that you enjoy reading it, and I thank you for doing so.

Once, when Ignis was a mere five-years-old, he’d heard a story from some of the older children in the village. They had told him that a bird had made a nest and even laid eggs in the large tree that grew just on the edge of the village square, directly across from the schoolhouse where Ignis lived.

Young Ignis was ever curious by nature, and desperately wanted to see the nest and the eggs for himself. Also, with autumn soon to give way to winter, his tender heart had twisted itself into knots, worrying that when the ground froze and the snows came, the family of birds wouldn’t find enough to eat. He remembered the last winter and how, despite careful rationing, there had been many rumbling bellies in the village before the spring thaws arrived. If he was going to have extra mouths to feed it was best to find out now while there was time to prepare.

On a blustery Saturday afternoon in late autumn, young Ignis had made quick work of the readings his father had assigned him (very interesting, all about the Hexatheon) and the chores his mother had tasked him with (less interesting, polishing the desks in the schoolhouse and dusting their rooms above it). Unfettered of any responsibilities or obligations, the small boy had waved to his mother, who was busily knitting a new sweater for him, and ran out into the cloudy gray afternoon, determined to climb the tree and see the fabled nest and eggs for himself.

It wasn’t unusual for a child as young as Ignis to be given free rein to roam about the village unaccompanied. The village was small, presenting very few opportunities for a child to get himself into any serious trouble. Additionally, there were plenty of watchful eyes about the village to notice a child in distress, or getting into mischief. It was a widely accepted fact of life that any villager who was smaller or younger than yourself was your responsibility and should be taken care of like your own child or younger sibling. Conversely, any villager who was larger or older than yourself should be respected and obeyed as an elder, like your own parent or older sibling. Therefore Ignis, being quite small and very young, always had more than his fair share of concerned neighbours keeping an eye on him.

No one paid the schoolmaster’s boy any mind when he ran towards the ancient tree, whose boughs shaded the southern half of the square on sunny days. They didn’t pay him any mind when he began jumping up and down, small hands scrabbling to catch hold of one of the lower branches—the local children climbed trees all of the time, it was a rite of passage, and a necessary skill in the countryside, where one’s ability to climb a tree could mean the difference between being able to pick fruit or going hungry.
After several attempts, the little boy finally managed to grab onto a branch, and with his feet braced against the tree’s trunk, he managed to scramble his way up onto it. Above him sinewy branches criss-crossed each other, with leaves in shades of gold and copper still clinging to the boughs, obscuring Ignis’s view of the cloudy sky above. He stopped to rest for just a moment, before continuing onwards and upwards.

Ignis did his best to climb carefully, keeping close to the trunk of the tree, where the branches were thicker and sturdier. His confidence and excitement grew with every successful movement from branch to branch, and a huge grin split his rosy cheeks as he fantasized about what he was going to find, absolutely convinced that he was going to find a happy family of birds. He imagined that, since he lived just on the other side of the square, that maybe they could become his pets. He could bring them food when the winter came, so the babies wouldn’t go hungry.

The hopeful smile never left Ignis’s face, even as the branch beneath him wobbled and the world suddenly dropped out from beneath his feet.

Not having the good fortune to land on the southern side of the tree, where the grass was soft and the soil merciful, Ignis instead fell hard onto the cobbled stones of the square. He didn’t fall far enough to break anything, but he managed to skid across the rough stones enough to leave him with some ugly scrapes on his right arm and his knees and some sore spots that would erupt into colourful bruises by evening.

To date in his young life, Ignis had suffered nothing worse than a few paper cuts and stubbed toes. Shy and studious, he preferred to sit outside with a book, rather than roughhouse with his peers. The surge of pain that flared across his battered skin was unfamiliar and downright terrifying to him. Convinced that he was in mortal peril, he scrunched his little face up and started wailing, a flood of tears that would have impressed Leviathan rolling down his round pink cheeks.

All over the village women lay down their sewing needles or their kitchen knives while the men set aside their tools. Shutters and front doors were flung open, revealing curious and concerned faces, including Ignis’s mother. Recognizing that for once it was her own child who was screaming, Mrs. Scientia flung her knitting needles aside and hurried down the steps of the schoolhouse and across the paved square to where her son sat, nursing two scraped knees and a very sore elbow.

As it didn’t appear that the little boy was actually in mortal peril, she graciously waved at her neighbours, urging them to go back to what they were doing. There were calls of “Let me know if you need anything!” and “Aww the poor wee fella!” before the windows and doors were shut tight against the chilly autumn winds.

Ignis’s mother crouched down before her son amid the crackling of dry leaves, clucking her tongue gently as she surveyed his injuries. Gentle hands ran over his arms and legs, checking to make sure nothing was broken or swollen.

“M-mummy! Am I, g-g-going to d-die?” Ignis hiccuped wetly between sobs.

His mother laughed quietly and pulled the sobbing boy into her arms.

“No, Sweet Pea. You’re going to be just fine.” she soothed.

Ignis sniffled and buried his face against his mother’s blouse. She rubbed circles into his back, waiting for the boy to calm down before trying to move him or clean his scrapes.

After a few minutes, little Ignis sniffed and peeled his wet face away from her blouse. “I’m sorry
for crying, Mummy. I know I’m not a baby anymore, and the other boys say only babies cry.” His little chin jutted out defiantly, as if he just dared her to think that he was a baby.

Mrs. Scientia smoothed her son’s hair back away from his eyes and smiled down into that bright seafoam gaze that was a mirror of her own. “It’s okay, Sweet Pea. Tears are the poor man’s Elixir. You cry when you need to.”

Ignis’s little face scrunched up again, this time in confusion instead of misery. His mother smiled patiently and explained. “Tears are like magic medicine. They can make you feel better, if used properly. Don’t you feel better now?”

Ignis blinked, damp lashes sticking to his cheeks. He realized that yes, actually, he did feel better. His elbow still throbbed dully and his knees felt funny and tingly, but it really wasn’t that bad after all. He could probably limp home all on his own, like a big boy.

“Wow, I do! That’s amazing!” His smile returned, lower lip wibbling only a little.

Ignis’s mother helped him to his feet and together they walked back across the square towards home, with Ignis determinedly hobbling along under his own power.

A dozen years later, and Ignis Scientia woke from his light doze, still curled up on the couch where Gladio had left him the previous evening. At some point during his crying episode he’d pulled the blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it snugly about himself. Cool morning air permeated his apartment and he shivered, grateful for the layer of thick wool between himself and the chill.

Ignis reached up to rub at his eyes. They were tender and swollen from excessive crying, and though he couldn’t see himself, he was sure that the skin around his eyes was red and raw. He probably had bags under his eyes from lack of sleep as well, although that was hardly a new phenomenon, and easy enough to explain away. The exhausted Advisor with his coffee dependency just worked long days. No one needed to know the real reason behind his exhaustion this time.

Groaning, he fumbled for his glasses, which he’d had the good sense to remove and set on the side table next to the couch. Perching them in their rightful place on his face once more, he glanced over to the nearest clock, relieved to find that he still had plenty of time to get ready for the day.

Instead of getting up just yet, Ignis remained bundled into his blanket. As his mind slowly embraced wakefulness and alertness, he found himself with quite the collection of scattered thoughts to somehow put into order.

It was remarkable, truly, how the reality of one’s fears tended to pale in comparison to the fear itself. His fear of someone uncovering his past had been like a boulder chained to his foot, dragging him down with each step, but the reality of Gladio uncovering his truths had been no more than the discomfort of a pebble in his shoe. Ignis felt somehow lighter, his breathing easier, as if he’d been slowly drowning for years and had finally surfaced.

It was oddly liberating.

The waiting was over, the anxiety of the unknown was behind him. Now the truth was out there in a limited, contained fashion and Ignis simply needed to deal with it.

He rocked himself gently back and forth as he considered his new reality, a life in which Gladiolus Amicitia knew that he’d been tormented by the Citadel staff. Gladio knew that Ignis’s young self
had been beaten down, mentally and physically, until it was second nature to shed his own worldly desires, natural to prop everyone else up onto his own frail shoulders, natural to give without dreaming of taking. Gladio knew, had known for weeks it seemed, and had done nothing but continue to nurture their fledgling friendship.

He hadn’t suddenly remembered that Ignis was common as dirt not to mention foreign scum -- as locals were so fond of calling the refugees from the outlying territories.

He hadn’t run to His Majesty to sadly inform his that the Prince’s advisor was damaged goods, a broken person who couldn’t possibly be fit for his important duties.

He had not confided in his many friends and acquaintances, to share the bits of extremely juicy intel he’d picked up on that weird Scientia kid who always trailed behind the Prince, the subject of so many rumours and gossip.

Instead, Gladio had shown sensitivity towards Ignis, and upon careful reflection, Ignis struggled to detect signs of outright pity in the young noble’s actions, nor contempt. The only noticeable change in Gladio’s behavior to him in recent months had been a lack of snide or snarky comments about how Ignis pampered Noctis, or how special or privileged Ignis must think himself. Now, of course, Ignis understood why, understood where Gladio’s newfound sensitivity had come form.

Really, Ignis thought, he should have known that something like this had happened. Gladio had needled and picked at him for years, with Ignis quietly nursing the wounds left by the other man’s ill-conceived barbs and jabs. He had always suspected that Gladio hadn’t truly known what he was saying, hadn’t understood the sickening context of his words. Ignis should have known that Gladio hadn’t somehow simply outgrown that behavior. He had required prompting.

All in all, it really wasn’t so bad. So long as Gladio could be persuaded to keep this information in the strictest confidence, Ignis could see little harm in his secret being known to him. In fact, it was a relief, and based upon how much healthier his relationship with Gladio had become, it was a blessing. All of those moments when Gladio had handled him with gentleness and respect, those sweet moments upon which their friendship had taken root, none of them would have happened if Gladio had remained ignorant. Gladio had single-handedly built a bridge of understanding toward Ignis, even if he had used slightly underhanded methods to do so.

Gratitude and relief washed over Ignis, but it was undercut by a sharp stab of shame. Ignis, who always prided himself on his ability to remain composed at all times had lost that famous composure last night. He had attended lessons while nursing welts and bruises unbeknownst to his tutors. He had been amicable company for the Prince on an empty stomach and after a sleepless night being shut up in his closet. He had spoken cheerfully with his uncle during their routine check-ins, enthusing about how honoured he was to perform his duties, even when his duties that day had consisted of scrubbing floors with a nail brush for no reason other than his Nannies didn’t want him to laze around on his day off. Ignis had borne every discomfort and hardship with his trademark stoicism, yet somehow had needed to rudely accuse Gladio of spoiling their friendship, and had expelled him from his apartment without so much as an apology or thanks.

Features twisting into a grimace, Ignis fumbled for his phone. He had promised Gladio that he would be in touch, and he may as well begin with the overdue expressions of gratitude and contrition.

6:22am Ignis: My thanks for allowing me my privacy last evening. Please allow me to apologize for behaving discourteously.

Ignis tapped the send button and then proceeded to stare at his phone for several minutes. He
didn’t imagine that Gladio would be awake any time soon, not with his schedule being so flexible these days. He didn’t expect a response any time soon, if the man deigned to respond at all. Still, Ignis couldn’t help staring at the little text bubble, attempting to read it with Gladio’s eyes, process it with his mind. What does he think of me? What will he think of this text?

Wincing, realizing that his message was perhaps too clinical, too impersonal, he expanded the on-screen keyboard and hummed contemplatively for a moment before shrugging and trying something for himself, using a recent chat between himself, Noctis, and Prompto as a reference.

6:27am Ignis: (´▽`)

Cheeks colouring with embarrassment at his own awkwardness, he turned the phone off and forced himself to vacate his couch so that he could get ready for the day.

Although Noctis wouldn’t be returning to school until the middle of next week, he had a packed schedule for his last full week of summer vacation. Ignis therefore arrived at the Prince’s apartment promptly at 7:15am, briefcase and thermos of coffee in tow.

With a whoosh of fabric, Ignis drew back the curtains in the royal bedroom, having to step nimbly around stacks of comic books and half-eaten snacks that littered the floor to reach the window. As expected, the sudden influx of buttery morning sunlight did not, in fact, rouse His Sleepiness. Huffing a sigh, Ignis forced his tired limbs to march towards the bed. Somewhere beneath this mass of comforters and pillows a sleeping Noctis lurked.

“Highness!” Ignis called, in a tone that teetered on the line between brusque and impatient.

The pile of blankets did not stir. Groaning, Ignis reached for the nearest blanket and tugged. The inky black comforter barely moved; Noctis must have rolled around in his sleep until the sheets and blankets were wrapped around him, like an over-large sushi roll. Gritting his teeth, Ignis took a firmer hold of the bedding, and with his feet braced apart he gave an almighty jerk with all of his strength, sending the blankets billowing onto the floor in a great heap, with an off-balance Advisor landing hard onto his backside beneath them.

Twin grunts filled air as one nursed wounded pride and the other protested his untimely eviction from dreamland.

“Rise and shine, Highness,” Ignis intoned drily as he extricated himself from his prison of fallen blankets. With a huff the Advisor smoothed his palms over his pant legs, erasing little wrinkles and bits of fluff from the crisp material.

“No rise, no shine,” came the sullen response. “Sleepy.”

Ignis could scrape together little sympathy for his charge, despite himself fighting exhaustion. Ignis fought his weariness on his feet, poised and dignified, prepared to slog through his day to fulfill his duties. Noctis could do the same.

“Breakfast will be ready in twenty minutes. Kindly shower in the meantime.” Ignis turned and made to exit the bedroom, pausing briefly to scoop up a pile of comics from the floor before Noctis tramped on them in his early morning obliviousness. “Oh and your gray button-up is hanging on the closet door where I left it last night. Please wear it. It should be your most comfortable option, given the heat we’re due for today.” As ever, Ignis wore a neat set of black trousers and a matching vest, though he had opted for a short-sleeved dress shirt beneath it. He would have liked to forego the added layer of heavy cloth from the vest, but it wouldn’t have been proper.
“I really hate you,” Noctis grumbled as he pushed himself into a seated position. He was slouching, shoulders slumped and lopsided, but he was more or less vertical. Ignis knew from long experience that at this point Noctis was indeed up for the day despite his protests, and could be trusted to shower and get dressed without risk of the teen crawling back into bed as soon as Ignis’s back was turned.

“It’s not my fault that you chose to stay up late reading comics or playing videogames, Highness.” Ignis retreated down the hall, deaf to Noct’s grumblings.

Once in the kitchen, Ignis felt the pesky tug of guilt on his consciousness. His parting remark to the prince had been harsh by Ignis’s usual standards. It was not his place to judge the young heir, merely to ensure that both of their duties and obligations were fulfilled, even if that meant Ignis would have to pick up the Prince’s inevitable slack. They had a morning full of meetings and appointments surrounding His Highness’s upcoming birthday celebrations, and Ignis would prefer that his charge not be sullen and surly with the event planners and Citadel staff.

As an appeasement, Ignis bustled about the kitchen, fetching the ingredients for pancakes. He could mix in some bananas and berries, ensuring that Noct received some much-needed fruit in his diet, while also satisfying his sweet tooth. It wasn’t Ignis’s preferred breakfast, not having the greatest nutritional value, but it should serve to soften the Prince’s mood.

Ignis was just sliding the last fluffy, berry-speckled pancake onto a plate when Noctis staggered into the kitchen, water dripping from the ends of his messy hair, shirt crookedly buttoned.

“Thanks, Specs. Smells good.” The rare bit of praise was enough to stifle the admonishment regarding the Prince’s appearance that had been just on the tip of Ignis’s tongue.

“You’re welcome,” Ignis murmured quietly before turning to busy himself in the kitchen, fetching Noctis a glass of orange juice before his charge could ask for one, then withdrawing to allow Noct to eat in peace while he tidied the kitchen.

The Prince demolished his breakfast in record time. Ignis was just setting the skillet on the drying rack when a dirty plate and cutlery were dumped into the sink of soapy water. Ignis hastened to clean those, while Noctis stomped over to the closet to find a pair of shoes.

When Ignis joined him, Noctis’s shirt was still crooked, and he was now sporting one brown shoe and one black. Feeling the distinctive throb of a tension headache between his eyes, Ignis held up a hand placatingly.

“Noct- Highness. Please. You’re a mess. Let me just fix you.” Tsking gently at his charge, Ignis swooped down upon him, nimble fingers unbuttoning and rebuttoning the Prince’s shirt before he stooped to insistently tug the out of place brown loafer off of Noct’s foot, replacing it instead with a black shoe to match the one on the Prince’s other foot.

“Wha-?” Noctis cut himself off with a loud yawn.

“Noct- Highness. Please. You’re a mess. Let me just fix you.” Tsking gently at his charge, Ignis swooped down upon him, nimble fingers unbuttoning and rebuttoning the Prince’s shirt before he stooped to insistently tug the out of place brown loafer off of Noct’s foot, replacing it instead with a black shoe to match the one on the Prince’s other foot.

“There.” Ignis brushed his hands together. “Honestly, Highness. I shudder to think of how you’ll cope when it’s back to school next week.”

“Aww c’mon Specs. I was just up late last night. Working on stuff.” Noctis glared, blue eyes sleepy and sullen. “Not playing games.”

“Mhm.” Ignis shook his head gently. He’d not left any reports or assignments for the Prince. He had been all caught up when they had parted ways at supper.
Noctis scowled. “Fine, don’t believe me. But you’re gonna feel pretty dumb when you see. I’ll accept your apology then.” And with an enigmatic smirk, the Prince pulled open the front door and trudged out into the hall, leaving Ignis to quickly snatch up his things and lock the door behind them. He didn’t have time this morning to worry about what ‘work’ the Prince thought he’d had to do last night. Probably something that spelled eventual trouble for Ignis.

As the pair made their way to the parking garage, Ignis felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. Once they were in the elevator with nothing else to do, Ignis fished out his phone and read the text notification with wide eyes.

7:51am Gladio: Don’t gotta apologize, it’s cool, I understand.

7:52am Gladio: You doin ok?

A pleasant warmth tingled in Ignis’s core. Gladio said he understood. Gladio still cared enough to inquire into Ignis’s well-being. The knowledge that Gladio still seemed to return Ignis’s friendly feelings made the young Advisor unreasonably glad, almost giddy.

The elevator dinged and the doors spread wide to admit them into the garage. Ignis allowed Noctis to exit first before following, moving automatically to open the rear passenger-side door of the black Crown-issued sedan. Once Ignis was settled in the driver’s seat, he had just a moment to fire off a response.

7:54am Ignis: Yes, thank you. Currently with Noct. Are you free around noon?

It wasn’t until they had driven to the tailor’s shop where Noct was due to try on his new suit that Ignis had a chance to read Gladio’s response.

7:55am Gladio: Yeah. Anything for you.

7:57am Gladio: Seriously. I feel really shitty about all of this. Whatever you want, just let me know and I’m all yours.

7:57am Gladio: Uh, that came out wrong. Sorry. Duck.

Ignis cocked a brow. Duck? Why would he be talking about ducks? Frowning, he read the next message.

7:58am Gladio: stupid autocorrect.

7:59am Gladio: Anyway yeah, what I meant was I still want to be your friend. If you need space, ok, if you wanna hang out, awesome, if you’re pissed and wanna punch me, I won’t block.

Ignis had to wait until the royal tailor came out to greet them, with many deep bows and exclamations of ‘happy early birthday!’ to the Prince before he had a chance to reply. While Noctis was in the little curtained off changing area to try on his new suit, Ignis managed to type out a response. His fingers trembled, and he had to correct several typos. Gladio’s flurry of texts had stirred up so many long dormant emotions in Ignis: amusement, gratitude, affection. It was overwhelming, and Ignis was on duty, godsdamnit. Gladio was proving to be a wonderful yet terrible influence on him.

8:19am Ignis: You truly are too kind, Gladio. Thank you. Would you mind stopping by my office? I should be there from 12:15 until 12:45.
The morning passed in a hazy blur of appointments, wherein Noctis feigned only the minimum of interest, and Ignis made all of the decisions and took pages of notes. He knew the Prince’s preferences well enough after a decade of friendship and service to know that he would prefer foie gras to caviar, silver accents instead of gold, and any kind of cake except for carrot cake.

Gladio’s texts had brightened Ignis’s mood, to the point where he was glad to take care of these trivial matters for Noctis. He’d scale the tallest mountain and try to lasso the stars for his charge at this point.

“Stupid that it’s my birthday and I have to wear a dumb monkey suit and entertain aristocrats instead of eating pizza and going to the arcade with the guys,” Noctis lamented as they got into the car for the last time. “Isn’t it supposed to be my special day? Why can’t we do what I want?”

Ignis was dropping Noctis off at his apartment where the Prince intended to nap until Prompto came over later that afternoon to hang out. Ignis, on the other hand, had Council meetings to attend, a thesis to work on, and perhaps some late night Crownguard training if he still had any energy left by then.

And before any of that, he’d get to see Gladio, a thought that made his heart do unexpected cartwheels.

“How odd. I seem to be experiencing déjà vu,” Ignis quipped from the driver’s seat. In the rearview mirror he caught sight of Noct’s signature scowl.

“Yeah yeah, I probably say this every year,” Noctis waved a hand dismissively. “ Doesn’t make my complaint less valid, y’know.” His lower lip protruded alarmingly, on the verge of an all-out pout.

“Highness--,” Ignis began.

“Noct. Geeze, Specs. It’s just us.”

Ignis sighed as he merged smoothly between lanes, striving to make the drive home as efficient as possible.

“Noct,” Ignis continued with a slight smile. “Your sacrifice doesn’t go unnoticed. Why don’t you check with Prompto, see if he’s free on the 29th? You can go to that pizza place you like, and then close out the arcade?”

Noct’s eyes immediately lit up. “The Original Famous Tony’s?”

“Is there any other?”

Noctis snorted. “Actually yeah. There’s Famous Tony’s, Authentic Tony’s, Famous Authentic Tony’s, Real Tony’s.. and I’m probably forgetting a few.”

Ignis actually laughed, a rare sound of unprofessional merriment. “That all sounds ridiculous and needlessly complicated.”

“Tell me about it. We ordered Famous Tony’s one time by mistake. Ugghhh. Their sauce is so gross. Huge chunks of tomato. It was awful.”

Ignis pretended to shudder in horror. “How awful. Well then, we’ll take all due care to ensure that
you get the right Tony’s.”

“*Original Famous Tony’s,*” Noctis emphasized. “There’s probably a Right Tony’s Pizza somewhere, and it’s probably crap.”

“Duly noted.” Ignis smiled, teal gaze locking briefly with sapphire in the rearview mirror, the two boys sharing a rare moment of humour with each other.

“Cool. Lemme text Prom now, make sure he’s free. Oh and I’ll see if Gladio wants to come, and maybe Iris. She’s old enough to not be so boring anymore.”

“I’ll ensure that I’m free to drive you boys as well,” Ignis offered.

“Awesome, thanks!” Noctis beamed a smile, one that slid off of his face suddenly. “Hey, uh, you can come with us y’know. You don’t have to just be the driver. You’re my friend too.”

Ignis was ready with his usual response. A polite refusal and insistence that he was content to merely serve him, that someone should wait in the wings so to speak to ensure that everything went smoothly. That was always Ignis. He was always the person lurking in the shadows, planning, organizing, solving problems before they came to anyone else’s attention. He couldn’t do that as effectively if he were in the midst of all of the fun, and it was his job to be effective.

Ignis did not go to pizza parlors with the Crown Prince. He did not hang out in the arcade. He did not play at being Noctis’s equal. It simply wasn’t done.

“Thank you, that would be lovely.”

Ignis was as surprised as Noctis when he accepted the invitation, although he suspected that he knew where his sudden bout of rebellious good humour came from, and he would be waiting for him outside his office by the time he arrived at the Citadel.

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Ignis managed to be a few minutes early returning to the Citadel, and as expected, Gladio was already waiting for him. The young Amicitia was leaning against the wall beside Ignis’s office door, large hands fiddling nervously with the handles of a sparkly, hideously pink gift bag. He wore an open Crownguard jacket over a bare chest, it apparently being too hot for Gladio to consider shirts a necessity.

“Hey.” Gladio flashed his usual toothy smile, a stunning flash of white against tanned skin.

“Hello Gladio. I’m sorry to have kept you.” Ignis tucked his briefcase under one arm as he moved to unlock his office door, ushering Gladio into the cozy space that was like his second home. Filing cabinets and bookshelves lined the room on three sides, papers, folders, and thick reference books filling them in a way that made sense to Ignis and probably no one else. Sufficient light poured in through the window in the corner, but out of habit Ignis flicked on the light switch, the wall sconces immediately coming to life to add additional illumination to the space.

“Nah, I’m early. I was worried that traffic would be bad and didn’t wanna be late.” Gladio set the bag down on the floor beside Ignis’s desk. A leather-padded chair was arranged for visitors, but Gladio eschewed it in favour of standing, shifting his bulk anxiously from foot to foot.

Ignis for his part set his briefcase on the desk and also chose to stand, despite the inviting presence of his office chair. He’d barely sat all morning, except to drive, and his legs were a bit sore. Still, he could hardly sit while his visitor stood, it would be the height of rudeness, and he’d shown Gladio enough impoliteness in the past twenty-four hours.
“Well,” Ignis began, wishing he had rehearsed this. “Thank you for meeting with me. I appreciate it.”

The Shield ran a hand through his hair, a gesture that Ignis had come to recognize as a nervous habit. He frowned, hating to think that he inspired such a feeling in the other man, when Gladio was proving himself to be a source of so much unexpected peace and contentment for Ignis.

“Oh, no problem,” Gladio muttered gruffly, honeyed gaze not quite meeting Ignis’s. The Advisor’s heart cracked at how nervous and uncomfortable Gladio obviously was.

Ignis took a deep breath and swiftly resolved himself to just do it, to say his piece and hopefully soothe the mounting tension between them. He was woefully unskilled and unpracticed at this, and defaulted to his usual method of doing whatever seemed most efficient.

The Advisor bowed deeply at the waist, head down, bright green eyes staring fixedly at the floor between himself and Gladio.

“I treated you unfairly last evening. You’ve been nothing but kind to me, and I repaid that kindness with suspicion, doubt, and anger. You do not owe me anything, while I feel I owe you so very much. However, selfish creature that I am, I hope that you can forgive me, and that we might continue as friends, though I do understand if you would prefer not to.”

With that Ignis snapped his mouth shut with enough force that his teeth clacked audibly together. He knew that his cheeks were red, embarrassed by the torrent of inelegant words that had just tumbled forth from him. He waited with his breath held for several beats before straightening his back, carefully keeping his chin tucked down while he awaited Gladio’s judgement, waiting, he hoped, for confirmation that yes, their friendship was intact, that Ignis had not misread the tone of the Shield’s text messages.

“Fucking hell,” the other man swore under his breath. Ignis flinched. Had he misjudged? *Oh Astrals no, please.* Ignis would do anything—bribery, debasement, cooking entire vats of ramen—if it meant salvaging their friendship—the one happy relationship that Ignis had that was not shrouded in lies and withheld truths, the one person who actually knew him and had accepted him.

Before Ignis could spiral further he was shocked out of his ruminations by the sudden force of two powerful arms locking around him. He was drawn like the tide to the shore against the solid mass of Gladio’s chest. The taller man tucked Ignis neatly under his chin, so that he was surrounded on all sides by smooth skin and supple leather, all of it warm and comfortable.

Ignis should have stiffened, should have felt the icy pinch of panic squeezing his chest. But Gladio’s big hands were rubbing soothingly up and down his narrow back, and the Shield’s heartbeat was pounding a comforting rhythm against Ignis’s ear where he stood pressed to the other man’s chest. Ignis felt safe and warm, as if Gladio’s embrace was home.

“You idiot.” Gladio mumbled into Ignis’s hair. “You selfless, wonderful, beautiful idiot.”

Gladio’s squeezed Ignis tighter and tighter with each word, until all of the breath had been wrung out of him and he was left gasping. Gladio seemed to realize all at once what he was doing and he released Ignis with a whispered apology and a remorseful gaze.

Ignis was having none of that. He had gotten a taste of affection and comfort, and he was starved for more.

Taking a deep breath, Ignis threw himself at the Prince’s Shield. This time it was his turn to wrap
his arms around the other, his arms sliding neatly beneath Gladio’s to wrap around the elder’s waist. He clung, greedily, savouring the simple pleasure of touch.

Gladio hesitated for a mere fraction of a second before those powerful arms once more encircled Ignis’s smaller frame, forming a sanctuary with his own body wherein Ignis felt safe and cared for, for the first time since leaving home, since the last time his mother had held him.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Yep, another chapter. This was all meant to be a part of the previous chapter, but it was already quite long, and had quite a lot going on already. I thought it best to save the rest of this scene for its own chapter.

Next week things should start moving along for the boys. :)

Gladio was, by nature, an extremely physical person. A one-armed hug was his version of a handshake. He couldn’t walk side-by-side with a friend without slinging an arm over their shoulders. Fist-bumps, back-slaps, and bear hugs were his native language. He’d never had much of a way with words, but could always count on a gesture to communicate all of the things that his clumsy voice couldn’t.

And then Ignis Scientia had to come along and muck it all up.

Gladio had exercised considerable self-restraint over the course of his burgeoning friendship with Ignis. It hadn’t been necessary for Gladio to have read so many psychology and sociology books to know that you simply did not get handsy with an abuse victim without their explicit consent. So every time that Ignis had stood there, looking so small and alone after saying something unintentionally heartbreaking, Gladio had steeled his resolve and managed to not crush the kid with a bone-grinding hug.

Gladio had sworn to himself that whatever Ignis wanted, however he wanted to proceed with their friendship at this point, Gladio would abide by his wishes. He had meant it when he’d texted Ignis that he would do anything that the other man wanted. If Ignis wanted them to go back to their distant, professional relationship, Gladio would have been gutted, but would have respected his wishes. If Ignis was furious and wanted to use Gladio’s face as his personal punching bag, he would have shown the kid how to throw a decent punch and then stood there and taken his beating like a man.

What Gladio had not been prepared to do, however, was stand there and listen as Ignis fucking apologized to him. Apologized, for being a human being with actual feelings, who had been understandably upset when he found out that Gladio had gone behind his back to uncover all of his secrets. Apologized, for politely asking that he be left alone for a time so that he could lose his composure privately.

And then the guy had the audacity to call himself selfish? Oh, fucking hell no.

Just like that, Gladio snapped the shackles of his self-control. Without even being entirely aware of his actions, he had crossed the slight distance between the two of them and tugged the other young man into his arms.

Ignis fit so neatly in Gladio’s embrace. As in all things, the Advisor was absolutely perfect. He slotted easily against Gladio’s broad chest, and Ignis was just the right height for Gladio to snuggle his cheek into the top of his head.
“You idiot.” Gladio had mumbled into Ignis’s hair. “You selfless, wonderful, beautiful idiot.”

The Shield found himself squeezing the Advisor’s lean body, as if he could physically push his own ideas about Ignis’s worth into him, overwriting the damage that their society’s prejudice and jealousy had done to his self-image. He had a lifetime’s worth of affection that he wanted to pour into the embrace, and a decade’s worth of regret for not doing anything to uncover and stop the abuse when they’d been younger.

But then Ignis had gasped for breath, and Gladio suddenly realized with a jolt of horror just what exactly he was doing. Not only had he manhandled Ignis into a hug that very well may have triggered some traumatic childhood memory, but he was hugging him so hard that he was in danger of asphyxiating. He let go of Ignis as if the other man’s touch burned him, backing away a few steps.

“I’m so sorry. Are you okay? I’m so…”

The rest of his apology died on his lips when Ignis was suddenly slamming into his bare chest, thin arms circling his waist. Ignis clung to the back of Gladio’s open jacket as if the Shield were a lifeline and Ignis was a drowning man.

It took Gladio the span of three heartbeats before he registered that yes, this was actually happening. Ignis Scientia had just tackled him into a hug and was clinging to him, burrowing himself into Gladio’s chest as if he wanted to disappear into his warmth. Oh, Ignis …

Without a second thought, Gladio drew Ignis securely into his embrace. One powerful arm wrapped around the Advisor’s narrow back, the other cradled his head in the crook of Gladio’s shoulder. Gladio let his fingers card gently through that crop of tawny hair, finding it silky and soft beneath his fingertips.

They stood that way for several minutes, Gladio doing his best to curl his larger frame around Ignis’s smaller body, serving as the shield, as the protection and safety that the young man had needed for so long. Eventually though, Ignis had his fill of skin against skin contact and the arms around Gladio’s waist withdrew. The Shield carefully slid his arms down and away, giving Ignis the freedom to take a cautious step backwards.

The Advisor’s cheeks were flushed, peridot eyes overly bright as he regarded Gladio. He looked rather like Gladio felt, as if he didn’t quite believe what had just happened, and was torn between feeling awkward and apologizing, and wanting to ask for more. Because Astrals know, one hug, no matter how epic and amazing, wasn’t enough to feed the soul of someone so obviously touch-starved.

Gladio offered what he hoped was a reassuring smile, and keeping his voice carefully gentle he asked, “You okay?”

Ignis shoved his glasses up the bridge of his nose with an elegant forefinger and nodded. “Yes, I believe so.” He absently smoothed the front of his shirt and vest, which had gotten a bit rumpled, and then moved on to fixing the swoop of his bangs, which had also become a tad mussed. “I, my apologies. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oi, careful.” Gladio cautioned. “Apologizing when you didn’t do anythin’ wrong is what got you clobbered by me in the first place.” He flashed a crooked smile, his own cheeks glowing with the residual heat of their hug. “And anyway, that was on me. And I’ll apologize if you want me to, if I made you uncomfortable. But otherwise, fuck, I’d do it again.”
Ignis laughed gently and shook his head. “What a day. I don’t know what’s come over me. First Noctis, now you.” Elegant hands were tucked into his pants pockets as Ignis adopted a pose so awkward that it was actually rather precious. “So um, does this mean that you accept my apology?”

Gladio chuckled. “Depends. Will you accept mine? I don’t bow as gracefully as you do, but I can kneel if you like.”

He felt just the slightest bit guilty about the horrified look that swept Ignis’s face at that suggestion. He also tried extremely hard to ignore how enticing that actually sounded, how exquisite Ignis would look, looming over him., all sharp angles and sleek lines … 

Ramuh’s ear hair, calm that shit, Amicitia.

Ignis cleared his throat politely and murmured. “That’s hardly necessary, but thank you.”

Gladio scratched at the side of his head, where his hair was buzzed so short that it tickled his fingers to touch it. He was tempted to argue about how it absolutely was necessary, but he restrained himself. They’d never get anywhere if they just kept trading apologies all day, and he knew that Ignis had other appointments to get to today.

“All right, cool.” He flicked his gaze down to his wristwatch. They still had some time. “Hey, look, since we’re kinda clearing the air and all, there was one other thing I needed to talk to you about, and if I’ve learned anything here, it’s to quit waiting around for the right time.” He offered up a crooked grin, hoping that a little dash of the ol’ Amicitia charm might soften Ignis up a bit.

“Oh dear, should we sit?” Ignis quirked an elegant brow.

“Heh. If you look like you’re gonna faint, I’ll catch ya. But yeah, may as well be comfy.”

They sat, Ignis in the leather chair behind the desk, and Gladio in the smaller chair across from him. He resented the distance between them, cursing the large black desk with its stacks of folders and computer monitor.

Gladio felt like he was a little kid again, getting into trouble at school, and having to sit there in his Dad’s study, confessing his crimes and then bracing himself for the inevitable lecture about duty, responsibility, and the example that he was supposed to set as an Amicitia. Clarus and Ignis may not have much in common with each other, but by the Six, they both knew how to peer at you from the other side of a desk, curious and stern, until you reveal all of your secrets and confessed to crimes you hadn’t even committed.

Gladio took a deep breath and let it out slowly, all while saying a silent prayer to the Six that Ignis takes this well.

“Damn, dunno why this is so hard. Can’t figure out if I should be quick and to the point or if I should go easy here.”

“To the point, if you’d be so kind. My blood pressure can’t take much more of this.”

Gladio chuckled, but also squinted anxiously over at Ignis, who did have an odd flush creeping up his neck.

Gladio cleared his throat and laced his fingers overtop his lap, squeezing and kneading the digits together hard enough for it to hurt. “Alright, so, do you remember the time you brought Iris’s bag home for her? She’d left it in the Citadel music room a few months back?”

“Yes,” Ignis replied calmly, though Gladio could practically see the wheels turning in his brain,
trying to deduce what that little act of consideration had to do with anything.

Gladio took a deep breath and then launched into what he hoped like hell would be the last confession he ever had to make to Ignis. Or anyone, really. This tense, skin crawly icky feeling was pretty awful.

“So I might’ve gone back to the Citadel to get it for her the night before, and I might’ve overheard you playing the violin – except I didn’t know it was you. It was dark, your back was to the door, the window did weird shit to your silhouette. I fucking swear, Ignis, I didn’t know who it was. But it was you, yeah?”

Ignis swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing above his neatly buttoned collar. “Y-yes, that would have been me.” The flush that had been creeping up the Advisor’s neck now glowed prominently in the tips of his ears and the heights of his cheekbones.

Gladio leaned forwards, caramel-hued eyes wide with genuine wonder, a desperate to impart his sincere admiration to the guy who suddenly looked so damn embarrassed over himself. “It was incredible, you were incredible. I’m crap at this, I don’t know the right words to use, but just trust me, it was some magical fairytale level stuff. The music, the lighting, not being able to see who it was. I didn’t want to intrude or anything but I was kinda hooked, y’know?” I was enchanted, mesmerized by the most classically romantic figure imaginable. My sweet starlit prince.

The Shield continued to wring his hands tightly together. This part was going to be the worst. It was one thing to innocently happen upon Ignis the night he’d gone back for Iris’s bag. He’d had every right to be there, and had been on an honest errand for his sister. But the nights that followed were a different matter.

“I kept going back for more. Not all the way to the music room. I wasn’t trying to creep on you or anything. I just wanted to listen to the violin. The music and the person playing it were a distraction that I really needed. I’m really sorry, though. You stopped going there after you found me napping on the floor, didn’t you? And it was because of me, right?”

Gladio fought the temptation to lower his head and hide his face. Instead he met Ignis’s shocked gaze, and allowed the other to see the remorse haunting his features. Ignis merely nodded in confirmation that yes, Gladio’s presence had chased him away from the education wing, robbing him of that outlet or enjoyment or whatever the violin truly was to the man.

“I’m really sorry. I know I’ve been saying that a lot lately, but I mean it. I knew I was violating your privacy. S’why I was skulking down the hall and not sittin’ in the room applauding you.”

Ignis exhaled softly and shook his head, his expression enigmatic. He looked simultaneously poised to burst into tears, break out in hysterical giggles, all while wanting to ram one of the fancy fountain pens on his desk through Gladio’s eye.

In the end, Ignis seemed to settle on giggling, although in the end it was more of an amused little chuckle.

“Ignis? You okay?”

Ignis nodded, his chuckles swelling into all-out laughter. “Yes!” he gasped between chortles. “I just, gods, I thought you were there to have a quick romp with some girlfriend in an empty classroom or something. I thought it was the new place to hook up.”

There was something fundamentally wrong with Ignis Scientia talking about hooking up, and
girlfriends. It made something prickly and unpleasant unfurl in his belly, a little beastly feeling that roared its displeasure at those words on Ignis’s lips. Gladio should probably take some time to reflect upon this feeling later, but probably won’t.

Gladio just sits there for a moment, basking in the pure relief he feels from how well Ignis has taken this last confession. Not to mention how weightless and free he feels now that he has no other secrets, no other sins dragging him down with an insistent need to confess.

“So you ain’t mad?”

Ignis coughs to clear his throat, expression quickly sobering. “No, I’m not upset. In the grand scheme of things that you’ve discovered about me, this is a fairly benign entry.”

Ignis made a decent point there.

“In any event,” the Advisor continued, his accent only serving to heighten the dignity behind his words, “I was always conscious of the fact that I might be overheard. While not open to the public, that area of the Citadel is hardly private. I am also aware that if I leave the door ajar, it rather negates the soundproofing of the music room.” Ignis’s lips quirk into a wry smile. “You are hardly at fault for overhearing me.”

Gladio’s brows furrow as he pieces a few things together, his brain sluggish, seemingly more so when pitted against someone as clever as Ignis.

“But, you stopped playing when you found me that one night. I went back for weeks after and nothing.”

“Ahh.” Ignis drew his spectacles off of his nose, nimble fingers dARTing into an inside pocket of his vest to retrieve a little cloth. He looked younger without his glasses, his features instantly growing softer, his eyes larger and brighter. “Well that was before I knew that you knew. Or perhaps it was even before you knew what you now know. It’s of little consequence now” The lenses squeaked beneath the cloth as Ignis erased imaginary smudges.

Gladio sat there, blinking at Ignis. He mentally replayed his last words once, twice, and three times before giving up, acknowledging that nope, he wasn’t following the other man’s train of thought. “Sorry, I’m the Prince’s meat shield, not always the brightest. I don’t follow.”

Ignis slid his glasses back onto his nose, the lenses flashed as they caught the midday sun that filtered in through the open window. “Kindly do not diminish your own worth in some misguided effort to bolster my own self-estimation. Which, I hope is what you are doing, because I would hate for you to truly see yourself in that light. Regardless, to clarify: that was before you were aware of my past history. The violin was, or is, something of a release for me. It communicates the feelings that I lack the time and privilege to express in other ways. I’ll admit that I felt uncomfortable, knowing that someone else had heard my thoughts – even if they were expressed in musical form and therefore should be impossible to properly understand. It felt too much like talking about my problems with someone in the next room eavesdropping.” Ignis huffed a sigh, looking suddenly weary. “Does that make sense?”

Gladio gave in and hung his head, ashamed that his selfishness had forced Ignis to stop doing something so obviously cathartic, something he probably needed desperately. He didn’t imagine that Ignis did many things for his own well-being and Gladio had unintentionally deprived him of one of those things.

“So you stopped, because you thought I, or other people even, were hanging around there at night?
And that made you uncomfortable?"

“Correct.” Gladio couldn’t see Ignis’s expression; he had his gaze firmly planted on the swirls of black and gray in the marble floor. The Advisor’s voice was soft, without any hint of anger or resentment. The kid’s a fucking saint.

“Uh, for what it’s worth? I stopped going there a long time ago, and I don’t plan on goin’ back unless I have a good reason. You can use the room again in peace, if you want. I won’t try to listen in, promise.”

“Thank you, Gladio. Perhaps I will.”

Gladio kicked his feet together. He still felt uncomfortable, as if Ignis’s acceptance was coming too easily. He knew that Ignis was accustomed to being agreeable, to not causing a fuss. A nagging, ugly voice in the back of his head whispered that perhaps Ignis wasn’t as okay as he seemed, and would cry his way through the remainder of his lunch break over this, like he’d cried last night as soon as the apartment door had clicked shut on Gladio’s heels.

“Why aren’t you mad?” He finally asked, blunt and to the point. He lifted his head, knowing that he needed to face this like a man, damnit.

Ignis shrugged. “Nothing to be angry about. Truly, Gladio. Just because I was uncomfortable or upset, doesn’t mean that you actually did anything wrong or are deserving of my wrath. I’ve always known that this could happen, I’ve always lamented the fact that I don’t own a violin myself and must therefore play in the Citadel, with one from the royal stores. And I’ve lamented my weakness for needing the door to be open, to not feel trapped behind a closed door.”

Gladio scratched his head, messing up the longer hairs on the top of his head ‘til they stood straight up. “Well okay, if you’re sure. Lemme know if you change your mind, though. Open invitation to yell at me.”

“That will hardly be necessary. But thank you, I suppose?”

Gladio barked an awkward laugh. “You’re welcome, I guess? And oh hey, this works out kinda well! I brought you somethin’. I was hoping that it wouldn’t turn out to be some sorta parting gift. It’s meant to be an apology for last night, and for the whole violin thing too.”

Ignis quirked a brow, his gaze flickering to the gaudy pink gift bag on the floor. “You needn’t have gotten me anything. I hope you didn’t go to any great expense on my account.” Frown lines marred Ignis’s cheeks. Gladio quickly shook his head.

“Nah. The main thing didn’t cost a single gil. Uh, is it cool if I give it to you now?”

Ignis smiled, and Gladio’s heart did a happy little tapdance in his chest. “If you’re going to ignore my protests that I do not require nor merit a gift, then yes, proceed.”

Gladio snorted and picked the bag up, placing it lightly atop Ignis’s desk. “Read the note first, and then I’ll explain. I meant to whip up some nice organized thing with charts and spreadsheets and shit, but we met up kinda sooner than I expected, and I didn’t know if you’d give me another chance so I wound up hustlin’ a bit. Anyway yeah, go ahead.”

Ignis’s pale brows shot up at the mention of spreadsheets, and Gladio wanted to laugh at the obvious confusion written all over the guy’s face. He waited, fidgeting impatiently in his seat, as Ignis pulled the folded piece of paper from the top of the bag’s contents. It read:
Igvis. Please be advised that upon the conclusion of the formal celebrations of HRH Noctis Lucis Caelum’s birthday this coming Thursday, August 30th, you are officially and entirely excused from ALL duties, until the morning of Monday, September 3rd. As authorized by HRH Noctis Lucis Caelum and HRM Regis Lucis Caelum CXIII.

ALL of your duties (official and unofficial) are being taken care of. A list of responsibilities and assigned personnel will be forwarded to you ASAP. Please inform Gladiolus Amicitia if anything is missing, or if you have any concerns regarding the assignments.

Please send your uncle a copy of His Highness’s schedule for next week so that he can go over it with the Prince on Sunday. Also, please forward him the lesson on economic theory you were going to teach on Saturday.

Gladio watched as Ignis read and then re-read the note, which Gladio had printed off not an hour earlier after getting the last of his preparations in order. The young Advisor’s lips were parted in obvious shock, as if he couldn’t quite understand what he was reading, despite multiple attempts. When he finally looked up, he held the note up in one hand and just asked, “What?”

Gladio offered a tentative smile. “Three days. Zero responsibilities. And I mean zero. Like, you can turn off your phone and go hiking up in the mountains for three days with no human contact if you want. I’m pretty sure I took care of everything.”

“How?”

Gladio didn’t know whether he should be pleased or alarmed that he’d somehow reduced this eloquent man to monosyllabic communication.

Gladio shrugged, flashing an easy smile. “Noct helped a lot. I went over there last night – didn’t breathe a word of what happened, before you start worrying yourself frantic. I just asked the kid to trust me and help me get you some proper time off so you could relax a bit. Might’ve said something about how everyone deserves a break, sprinkled in some guilt ‘bout how you don’t really get vacations ‘cause you’re always fussing over him.” Gladio shrugged.

“Oh dear,” Ignis groaned. “Please tell me you did not badger the Crown Prince on my account.”

Gladio rolled his eyes. “No. Honestly, he didn’t take much convincing. He cares about you, y’know. He’s just not great at showing it, but I can tell. Anyway, he called His Majesty to get the all-clear, which was really easy. You’d be impressed with us. I fed Noct some really great lines about how for his birthday he wanted to do something nice for the guy who always does everything for him, blah blah blah.” Gladio grinned, all dimples and teeth. “It was great. Noct came out of it smelling like fuckin’ roses, and you got the time off as long as we made sure everything’s covered.”

Ignis gawked at him.

“So yeah, we pulled up your schedule and worked out everything you need to do, including brainstorming all of the unofficial stuff, like cooking and cleaning. I called in a few favours, emailed your uncle about some of the stuff that I know you’re particular about to see if he’d help, and next thing you know, bam, mission accomplished. Like the note says, I’ll email you the spreadsheet we made and you can review it. If we fucked anything up lemme know and I’ll fix it. Okay?”

“I … I ….” Ignis faltered, blinking rapidly. “I don’t know what to say. This is, I could just … oh Gladio.” If it weren’t for the huge smile sweeping his features, Gladio would have thought that
Ignis was upset. His eyes were glassy, cheeks flushed, but he looked happy. “What will I even do with myself?”

“Anything you want, kid. Hopefully relax some, yeah? Catch up on sleep, eat a few square meals?” Gladio offered a gentle smile, aware that Ignis probably wasn’t really used to having huge chunks of free time. “There’s some stuff in the bag if you need inspiration. And I’m at your beck and call. I’m also at Noct’s beck and call ‘cause I took over being his emergency go-to guy, but he knows better than to abuse the privilege with me. If you need company, or feel overwhelmed or anything, let me know, or Noct know, okay? This is meant to be enjoyable, Don’t let yourself get stressed out.”

Ignis nodded. He made a bit of a show of adjusting his glasses, and if his fingers dipped under the frames to swipe at a bit of moisture, well, Gladio could pretend to not notice that.

“Thank you, Gladio. This is the most spectacular thing that anyone has ever done for me.” Still smiling, Ignis peered into the gift bag, where several books, a tin of herbal tea, and scented soy-based candles sat atop a mountain of neatly packaged wool, in various shades of white, some with flecks of other colours, some shimmering with threads of silver, while others were a pure, simple white, like fresh fallen snow. “Oh wow,” the strategist breathed softly.

Gladio thanked each Astral, personally and by name, for the smile that remained on Ignis’s face as he finished looking through the gift bag. It lingered even as they noticed the time, and Gladio walked him to the Council chambers where the afternoon session was due to begin soon.
The final week of August passed in a haze of hot weather and warm memories.

True to his word, Ignis joined Noctis the evening before the Prince’s official birthday – not as his chamberlain but as his oldest friend.

Noct had, in recent years, all but given up on his efforts to pull Ignis out of his shell; he’d stopped asking if Ignis wanted to be his player two for a game, stopped asking why Ignis never ate any of the dinners he served the Prince. Ignis would never ask him directly, but he had his suspicions regarding the catalyst for Noct’s renewed efforts to put friendship before service in their relationship. That catalyst, of course, would be Gladio, and the time that the Prince and his Shield had spent listing all of the varied duties of Ignis’s that would require covering to allow the young man a few days off.

It had been a shockingly long list, and it had been incomplete. Ignis had been obliged to add a few errands and menial but time-consuming tasks for the weekend, which Gladio had swiftly found some poor sod to do in his stead. Apparently Gladio had collected quite a few favours through the years.

Ignis was touched that Noctis seemed to be conscious of all of Ignis’s labours, and that in his own awkward way, he was letting Ignis know that he was appreciated. Not that Ignis needed or expected anything in exchange for his service, but of course he was grateful for what the Prince was offering.

They all met up at the pizza place – The Original Famous Tony’s pizza, accept no substitutes. Gladio, Prompto, and Iris were already there and had claimed a booth in the back of the establishment. Ignis lead Noctis carefully through the restaurant, wending their way amongst little tables with red checkered tablecloths to join the others.

Gladio and Iris were seated together on one side of the booth, with the ten-year-old nestled into the inside seat. Prompto sat across from her, and Noctis slid easily onto the padded bench beside his best friend. Ignis then perched himself on the end of the bench beside Noctis, earning an approving nod from Gladio.

An appreciative smile played across Ignis's features when he realized what Gladio had done – subtly maneuvering them all so that the younger members of their party were tucked into the inner part of the booth, with Ignis and Gladio on the edge - the first line of defense in the unlikely event of an attack. Always the Shield, even in his leisure hours. Like himself, Gladio was never truly off-duty, but he somehow managed to balance his obligations with his personal life, his friendship to the Prince with his sacred duty.

Ignis resolved to learn from Gladio’s example.

Ignis was as of yet still uncertain how to proceed, but as with their seating arrangements, he trusted in Gladio's better judgement and experience, and followed his example, sitting back and allowing the happy chatter of their companions to wash over them, filling any moments of silence with mutual laughter, and easing away any uncertainty with their youthful enthusiasm and merriment. It didn’t matter if Ignis didn’t know what to say, if he was unfamiliar with the television show or
comic book they were discussing. He still laughed at their jokes and nodded along to the flow of
corversation. He may not have inserted himself into the thick of things, but at least he wasn’t
attempting to blend into the wallpaper like he usually did.

Iris in particular seemed to be over the moon to be included in their outing. She kept throwing
Noctis shy little glances when she thought the Prince wasn't looking, hastily looking away with
pink-cheeked embarrassment when he glanced her way with a quirked brow. The young girl
laughed perhaps too loudly and too readily at the Prince’s awful jokes.

They kept the meal simple, ordering several pepperoni pizzas and pitchers of soda for the table to
share. When their food arrived, steaming hot and perched upon little metal stands with small
braziers beneath, both Ignis and Gladio reached for the serving spatulas. Gladio ostensibly not
trusting the others to not burn themselves, and Ignis not able to fully switch off his compulsion to
serve those he still viewed as his betters.

When they had all eaten their fill, and Prompto had simultaneously impressed and disgusted them
all with his ability to down an entire pitcher of soda at once ('Waste not want not, guys!') they left.
Gladio picked up the bill as an early birthday present to Noctis.

With full bellies and happy hearts, they walked as a group down the street, towards the nearest
arcade. Gladio and Ignis intended to flank their Prince, but Ignis was beaten to Noct’s side by Iris,
who insistently grabbed the teen’s hand. Ignis chuckled and instead took a place just behind Iris,
where he could keep both eyes on her and Noctis.

Once inside the arcade and surrounded by flashing lights and beeping arcade cabinets, Ignis was
more than content to fade into the background. He vehemently professed his preference to simply
observe the others as they tried their hand at the various games. In truth, he found the entire thing
quite overwhelming. He didn’t know what to do with himself, or where to stand without blocking
someone’s access to a game. He opted to hover just behind Noct’s shoulder where he was fairly
certain he would be out of everyone’s way, and he could observe Noctis, perhaps learn to play one
of the games via observation.

“You wanna have a go, Specs?” Noctis asked after a few minutes of Ignis lurking behind him.

"I'm afraid I've not played any of these things before. It would be a waste of tokens, you go ahead.”

In the end Noctis managed to pull the 'it's my birthday' card, and was deaf to Ignis’s gentle
corrections that it was, in fact, not his actual birthday just yet. Regardless, the Prince managed to
persuade his chamberlain to try his hand - or feet rather - at a rhythm game called Ninja Dance
Party Attack. He was paired against Prompto, who Noctis swore up and down had been cursed
with two left feet and a complete lack of rhythm.

Sighing through his nose, he cast a forlorn look in Gladio's direction, but the older teen was too
busy trying to win a plush cactuar from the crane game, with Iris bobbing excitedly on the tips of
her toes beside him, too distracted to notice Ignis's plight.

He relented, stepping up onto the game pad across from Prompto. The blonde flashed him a
crooked smile and saluted. Ignis mirrored the gesture, though he noted that the manner in which
Prompto held his fingers and the angle at which he touched his brow was hardly military-standard.

Despite the game's name, it bore very little resemblance to actual dancing. Instead, the player stood
in the middle of a mat with eight coloured squares around him. A music video flashed on the
screen in front of the players, with directions to tap one's foot onto the appropriate square or in
some cases squares in time to the beat. it involved a great deal of hopping about, dividing one's

...
attention between watching the screen and where one's feet landed.

Ignis was fairly certain that he and Prompto looked like they were standing on a bed of hot coals, dancing a foolish jig in an effort to not burn the soles of their feet off. Ignis felt quite silly, and he could feel the heat rising in his cheeks with every hop and jump.

In the end, the young chamberlain emerged victorious, with the screen flashing “Perfect Score!” in shimmering neon pink letters.

Applause rippled around him and Ignis nearly tripped over his own two feet in his haste to remove himself from the playing area and the limelight.

"That was freaking awesome, dude!" Prompto exclaimed, his own face flushed pink with exertion.

"It was nothing, simple foot-eye coordination." Ignis inclined his head modestly. “But thank you, Prompto.”

After his impressive debut as a ninja dance master, Ignis was forced back onto the mat a few more times. Iris had insisted that he take her on, and unable to resist the petulant jut of her lower lip or the way her brown eyes shimmered with the threat of tears, Ignis had relented.

Iris bested him by a narrow margin, Ignis’s steps faltering at the last minute to stamp against the wrong tile. The youngest Amicitia whooped out a victory cry as Ignis dipped into an artful bow.

“It must have been beginners luck when I bested Prompto. The victory is yours, my lady.” He smiled at her, and locked eyes with Gladio over the young girl’s head, a knowing grin on Gladio’s face.

On his way to the prize counter to cash in some tickets, the Shield brushed past Ignis and muttered, “Hey thanks. She’s a brat when she loses.”

Ignis merely smiled, returning Gladio’s knowing wink with a little thumbs up gesture.

All in all, it was a fine evening. Ignis managed to avoid stumbling headfirst over any firm lines of propriety, and he had a genuinely nice time. Even being forced to play some silly rhythm dance game hadn’t been so bad. He’d felt a bit silly, but he managed to make Gladio happy by allowing Iris to beat him. Gladio’s appreciation was worth any embarrassment. Noctis as well had seemed pleased. The Prince was likely to get a crick in his neck from constantly turning around to look at Ignis, checking up on his Advisor to make sure Ignis hadn’t run off in search of a report to file or something to clean.

The following evening’s celebrations stood in stark contrast to the warmth and merriment of the previous. Instead of an intimate gathering of friends in a comfortable setting, Noctis was forced into a suit, pinstripe tie and stiff collar both threatening to choke all of the joy out of him. A long evening of small talk with aristocrats and foreign dignitaries awaited. Prompto would not be attending, and while Gladio would be present, he was on duty and wouldn’t budge from his post near the door.

The Citadel’s main ballroom had been tastefully decorated with sheer black drapes and twinkle lights, giving the guests the impression that they were strolling through the night sky amidst the stars themselves.

Noctis rolled his eyes and muttered in Ignis’s direction. “The night sky. How very original.” Ignis smirked but made no reply, though he privately agreed. By this point it was no longer cute or
clever to enshroud Noctis in a theme of night skies. It was cliché and trite, showing no consideration for the Prince’s actual interests and tastes. It was as if the person who Noctis was didn’t matter, only his title and the symbolism behind it. Ignis thought it quite sad, and was glad that Noct’s true friends had been able to give him a more appropriate celebration the previous evening.

As was customary at such functions, Noctis wove his way amongst the assembled gentry, nodding hello and shaking proffered hands. Ignis was ever at his side, or more accurately ever at his left shoulder. The Advisor’s duty was to shadow his Prince, whispering softly behind him, reminding him of guests’ names, titles, and any points of interest that would ease Noctis through awkward small talk.

Despite the overwhelming number of aristocrats and nobles in attendance – many of whom had been previously disposed to berate or degrade him – Ignis didn’t mind these gatherings nearly as much as Noctis did. The other guests largely ignored him, knowing better than to accost the young Advisor with the Prince mere inches away. He would occasionally be handed an empty champagne flute by a smirking noble as if he were a servant, but it was a simple matter to politely hand such items off to a member of the wait staff with a murmured word of thanks.

The Prince conducted himself quite admirably in Ignis’s estimation. His smiles came more readily, he looked significantly less bored and surly than usual, and he made more of an effort to engage in small talk beyond ‘Hi, nice party I guess?’ Ignis wasn’t certain, but a small, prideful part of him hoped that his suggestion that they properly celebrate the day before might claim some credit here.

After an hour of shadowing his Prince, an attendant sidled up to the Prince and his Advisor. The attendant offered a brief bow and murmured in a voice just loud enough to carry in the noisy ballroom, “Mr. Scientia, His Majesty requests your presence.”

Sapphire and emerald eyes flickered from the attendant to the side of the ballroom where the King sat, flanked by Clarus Amicitia and Cor Leonis – the latter of whom was doing his best impression of a grouchy housecat. Ignis excused himself from Noctis’s side, though not before steering him in the direction of a Council member, reminding him of the man’s name and sending him off to chat while Ignis saw to the King.

Ignis inclined into a deep bow, right hand clutched reverently at his left breast.

“Majesty,” the young chamberlain greeted his liege.

“Ahh Ignis, thank you.” Regis nodded with the ghost of a smile.

“How may I serve?” Ignis’s heart was hammering against his breastbone so loudly that he was certain that the three men before him could hear it. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of his neck, itching uncomfortably beneath his starched collar.

Ignis was seldom summoned to his Majesty in public. His place was beside the Prince, guiding and coaching him through these events. This deviation from his normal routine was unsettling. Had the King summoned him to publicly chastise him for going out with Noctis and his friends? Had he crossed a line after all? Was he about to be harshly reminded that his place was beneath Noctis, Gladio, and the others rather than at their side? An apology was already working its way to his lips; he was merely waiting for the initial reprimand, for the initial blow to fall.

“I’ve called you over for two purposes, Ignis.” The King’s voice was as stern as ever, and his lined features were perfectly inscrutable.
Ignis’s gaze shifted downwards, waiting patiently.

“First,” Regis’s lips twitched. “Clarus here wanted to see how well my son fares without your helpful voice in his ear. I have a thousand gil that says he can go at least five minutes without running away.”

At the King’s shoulder, Clarus smirked, steely gaze flitting from the King to the Prince. Noctis’s face was glowing pink and he was slowly backing himself towards a dark corner of the ballroom where his black suit would blend nicely into the shadows.

“Secondly, and more importantly about last night...”

Ignis’s breath hitched, shaken to his core. Here it is, then. Bracing himself, he dared to look up, exposing his tense features, anxious eyes meeting a kindly gaze. Regis sighed and as if flipping a switch, his severe expression eased into a gentle smile.

“I can see why Noctis and Gladio wanted you to take a few days off. Relax, dear boy. I simply wanted to thank you.”

A lone tremor rocked Ignis’s lean frame before he grew still, the King’s words slowly penetrating the cloud of anxiety that had wrapped itself around his brain.

“Yes, Sir.” Ignis inclined his head politely, making his very best efforts to not look too visibly relieved.

“Noctis is performing most admirably tonight. He’s even looked genuinely happy at times. I can only assume that his good humour is thanks to your efforts to arrange a more age-appropriate celebration yesterday. You have my thanks, Ignis, as a King and a father.”

Ignis bowed once more, relishing the precious seconds when his blushing face was obscured from view.

“It was my pleasure, Majesty. I’m happy to see His Highness thriving.”

“As am I.” Regis smiled once more. “And I’m glad to see you taking a few days off, Ignis.” The King sighed then, his smile slipping away, replaced by a familiar weary expression. “As much as I regret that my son and I can never lay aside our duties for a moment’s rest, it grieves me more that those who would be closest to us must share that burden.”

Ignis blinked, unsure quite how to respond, though he knew he must. Clearing his throat, he managed a modest “My thanks, Majesty. I shall of course be at the Crown’s disposal should you have need of me, however.”

Regis chuckled softly and shook his head. He may have said more, but Cor suddenly spoke up.

“Time!”

All eyes flicked to the corner of the ballroom where Noctis stood, mere steps away from the oblivion and anonymity of the shadows. Alas, he had been waylaid by some lesser noblewoman who was probably busy extolling the virtues of her very much available daughter, or pressing him regarding policy matters that he was too young yet to actually hold sway over.

Clarus scowled – or at least Ignis thought he did. It was difficult to tell, as the man’s face just usually looked like that. Regis however grinned like the cat who stole the cream, hand outstretched, fingers curling and uncurling in an impatient gesture until Clarus handed over a stack
of gil.

“Thank you, old friend. And thank you, Ignis.” Regis nodded his dismissal. “Please go rescue my son, and then enjoy your time off.”

Ignis bowed and then hastily retreated, wending his way through the crowd to where Noctis stood, shifting his weight awkwardly from foot to foot. The grateful smile he sent Ignis upon his approach spoke volumes.

“Ah, excuse me, I believe my chamberlain needs me. Thank you, good night.” Noctis’s fingers curled in a vice-like grip around Ignis’s bicep as the Prince attempted to steer them away from the worst of the crowd. “Oh my Gods that was awful. Never leave me again. Ever.”

Ignis merely smiled serenely and allowed himself to be lead towards a quiet corner where they could both recover.

The next morning Ignis awoke shortly before dawn, as was his custom. It mattered not that he’d gotten home late and had been exhausted from being on his feet all night. It mattered not that he had the day off and could sleep ‘til noon if he so desired. His body had long been conditioned to function on minimal sleep. He did spare a few moments to simply languish in bed, the covers drawn cozily up to his chin.

I could just stay in bed all day if I wanted to, he thought. If weren’t in need of a shower, and perhaps food.

Eventually Ignis pushed himself out of bed in search of a shower and a cup of precious Ebony. His caffeine dependency won out above all other considerations.

Cup of coffee in one hand, Ignis padded barefoot towards the balcony doors, unlocking them and sliding them open with his free hand. The rush of cool morning air that greeted him made the fine hairs on his arms prickle and stand on end. He breathed deeply, appreciatively, savouring the way the cool air burned his lungs.

Ignis paused to pluck a throw pillow from the sofa before venturing out onto the small balcony. It was a small space, no more than four square feet of wooden planks surrounded by an iron railing. Unlike some of his neighbours, Ignis’s balcony was unadorned, bare of such frivolities as house plants or barbecues. This was, in fact, his first time actually stepping out here. The wooden slats were chilly with dew underfoot and Ignis supressed a shiver while cradling his steaming mug of Ebony a bit closer. He set the pillow down and lowered himself to sit cross-legged atop it.

Ignis’s apartment was in an upper floor of modest apartment building that sat nestled between other, smaller high-rises that were home to both local businesses and private citizens. He had a most excellent view of the morning sky, with hints of rose gold just peeking over the horizon. He smiled to himself as he watched the sky transform itself before his eyes, pausing every so often to take a sip of coffee.

It was a truly glorious morning, made all the more so by the realization that he could, in fact, just sit there and enjoy the view to his heart’s content. Ignis had no pressing obligations to attend to, nothing to do, and nowhere in particular to be. He was free to simply sit there, savouring the rich, bitter taste of his favourite coffee, while appreciating the spectacular light show that the heavens were putting on, just for him it seemed.

Even when his cup was drained of its contents, Ignis continued to sit there upon his little throw
pillow, staring up into the sky which by now had morphed from rose gold to buttery yellow. The sun had crested the horizon, but hadn’t quite risen above the city’s taller skyscrapers. Ignis continued to sit and enjoy the view, because he could. He could sit there all day, in his checkered pajama bottoms and white undershirt, with his hair uncombed and unstyled, and no one could say a thing about it. A silly smile crept over the angles of his face at the idea.

It was a bit daunting, if he were honest with himself. Three days off, his time as wide open and free as the open sky before him. Up to this point his duty had been his entire life, and his entire life had been for his duty. Now with the burden temporarily lifted from his shoulders he felt so small and frightfully untethered.

Ignis let a soft sigh spill from his lips as he sat there, choosing to forget his worries for a time and just enjoy the pleasant feelings of the morning light on his face and the scent of the fresh morning air.

He did, eventually, push himself to his feet, but only when he realized that his stomach was growling loudly enough to potentially disturb his neighbours. He turned about and headed back inside, though he left the pillow where it was, and left the doors open, allowing the fresh morning breeze to sweeten his apartment.

On most days, Ignis was satisfied with a cereal bar or bowl of oatmeal for breakfast. This morning, however, he allowed himself the luxury of a proper meal. He took the time to slice, chop, and grate toppings for an omelette, carefully sprinkling in herbs and spices for extra flavour. While it was frying in a puddle of butter, he sliced some fruit and arranged it on the side of his plate. It was a satisfying, delicious breakfast by any standards, but compared to Ignis’s usual sparse efforts for himself, it was positively decadent.

Ignis took his breakfast and a glass of orange juice back onto the balcony. He had, in a brief moment of wild rebellion, considered just taking the entire juice carton with him and drinking straight from it, but that would be taking matters just a step too far. There was a fine line between relaxing and being an utter barbarian, and Ignis refused to cross it. It was bad enough that he was eating slices of oranges and melon with his fingers, with the juices trickling in a sticky mess down towards his palm.

Although Ignis did not stay in bed all day as he had initially fantasized, he did stay home. He showered, but then changed back into a pair of fresh pajamas. It was a pleasant day, spent enjoying his own company for a change.

He made good use of the small gifts that Gladio had included for him. He lit the soy candles, which according to the labels were meant to smell like fresh sugar cookies. He brewed a pot of fragrant herbal tea. He found a book, its pages soft and yellowing with age, its spine dented from repeated use. It was called *The Sky-Pirate’s Treasure* and its cover featured a dashing young man standing in front of an unusual-looking airship. Ignis wondered if Gladio had picked it up at a second-hand book shop, or perhaps this was from his own personal library. Ignis knew he hadn’t had much time to collect the tangible components of his gift. A quick inspection of the inside cover confirmed his suspicions: Gladio’s name was inscribed in a messy scrawl. Ignis’s fingertips traced the faded ink reverently.

As the hours drifted lazily past, Ignis alternated between reading the new-to-him book and knitting. He read on his balcony, and retreated indoors to knit on his couch. Bit by bit he felt the tension in himself ease, the knots of stress uncoiling. He hadn’t entirely realized just how stressed he had been, until he had the time and freedom to let his mind and body relax.

Gratitude welled up inside of him, threatening to overflow by way of his tear ducts. He was still in
a state of disbelief, that Gladio had arranged all of this for him, that Gladio knew him probably better than anyone else now and still accepted him. Gladio had been true to his word; he had kept Ignis’s secrets and had been so careful to not treat him differently when they’d all gone out for Noct’s birthday. No fuss, no undue attention. Just a soothing presence that Ignis found himself longing for more and more. If he had once held Gladio above himself due to his rank and title, he now did so due to the quality of character he had displayed. Well-intentioned snooping notwithstanding.

More than once he had considered texting his friend, inviting him over for supper or to watch a movie. Once he’d gotten as far as his messenger app. He always turned the device off, unused. He felt somehow that he needed at least one day of solitude, one day to be alone with his own thoughts. It had been an eventful week to say the least, and he needed a bit of time to let everything that had happened and everything that had been said sink in.

Besides, he still had two more days off.

As he settled into bed for the night, before midnight for once, he thanked the Six once again for blessing him with Gladio’s friendship. Smiling, the Advisor shut his eyes against the lamplight and drifted into an easy rest.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. I meant to cover the entire weekend in this chapter, but it was already so much longer than I intended. I already wrote part of the next chapter, not realizing that I would end up cutting it here, so the next update should be sooner rather than later.

I want to thank everyone who's devoted so much of their time to reading this story. I appreciate it so much, whether you've sat there for hours reading it in one go, or have been here since the beginning, tolerating the shifts between angsts and fluff. Thank you. <3
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The rest of the weekend. <333

Chapter Notes

Welcome back! And thank you! Thank you so freaking much for being here. <3

The following dawn broke as crystal clear and perfect as the last, and once again Ignis enjoyed the simple pleasure of breakfasting out on his balcony, watching as the world around him gradually woke. This day, however, he decided that he would put on ‘real’ clothes and venture out into the wide world.

Eschewing his customary pressed dress pants and waistcoat, he instead donned his most comfortable slacks and a light knit shirt. He packed his messenger bag for the day, but instead of reports and textbooks, he filled it with yarn, needles, crochet hooks, some light reading, and a handful of granola bars in case he got peckish while on his travels.

With a spring in his step he ventured out, head tilted back to capture the warmth of the sun on his cheeks. His first destination wasn't terribly far away, a mere three blocks to the east of his apartment, so he foresook the convenience of his car – he was in no hurry after all – and began to walk.

The sidewalks were already growing congested with people. Insomnia does live up to its name and never truly sleeps, but early morning does tend to be a bit quieter. Ignis wove amongst tired pedestrians with practiced ease. He was light on his feet and had years of practice at staying out of other peoples’ way.

His unhurried strides eventually led him towards the waterfront, where the air was tinged with a gentle chill drifting off the water, and the cries of gulls could be heard over the ambient hustle and bustle of the city. There was a fork in the path here, leading to either a large park or a suspension bridge.

There was an informal farmer’s market that sprung up out of the dirt each morning in the shadow of the great suspension bridge. Temporary vendors lined the path, their wares displayed on rickety card tables or blankets strewn atop the well-trampled grass. Everything from homegrown produce to handmade jewelry was on display. Many of the exhibitors were simple hobbyists, who spend their workweek at their dreary day jobs, but gather on weekend mornings to share the fruits of the labours they are truly passionate about. Others were from the city’s poor population who could not afford to rent a commercial space, but would do anything to support their family. Many of these people were recent immigrants or refugees.

Ignis amused himself for some time, drifting from vendor to vendor to admire their wares and chat with the merchants. He stopped to ask a young woman with a display of crocheted chocobo toys
about her work, and the two shared pointers on the art of yarnwork. He lingered at a stall selling bundles of herbs that an old man had grown on the rooftop of his apartment complex. He wondered if he might be able to grow herbs on his balcony – it received excellent morning light. The old man was encouraging and helpful and Ignis was most grateful.

It was wonderful to lazily drift from person to person, stopping to admire that which caught his eye, rather than be forced to shadow Noctis and linger over that which interested the Prince (comic books and video games, mainly). All of the vendors were enthusiastic and kind, eager to discuss their works and to share any advice or recommendations. No one seemed bothered by his accent or his colouring, both of which marked him as an outsider, as foreign, as other. No one knew that he was the Prince’s advisor, no one knew him to envy or despise him for his position.

Ignis only realized that he’d spent several hours at the market, talking and shopping, when he happened to glance down at his wristwatch. He didn’t even know why he bothered to don the accessory today, he had no meetings or appointments, no schedule to keep. It was force of habit, a muscle memory that could not be supressed. Much like the instinctive reflex that had him checking his watch after awhile, discovering that it was already nearly noon.

His messenger bag was weighed down then by the addition of a bundle of fresh herbs, a bottle of homebrewed cleaning solution, and a new pair of gloves. He adjusted its weight over his shoulder as he turned to wander further down the path, heading towards the nearby park. The distant trees were lush and inviting, promising cool shade and perhaps a bench to rest on.

He walked until he found an unoccupied bench nestled in the shade of an ancient oak. Ignis sat with his bag tucked against his side, allowing his thoughtful gaze to rove over the passing crowds. As enjoyable as this morning had been – and sweet Shiva it truly had been – he found himself feeling lonely. It was odd, considering that he was surrounded by other people, and had spent the better part of the morning conversing with local vendors and craftspeople. Somehow though they’d failed to fill the empty void that he suddenly felt at his core.

Gladio’s words drifted back to him as if upon the summer breeze itself. “I’m at your beck and call.”

Dare he call Gladio? Would he be presuming too much? Gladio had already gone to the most extraordinary lengths to even allow Ignis this brief respite, even covering some of Ignis’s duties himself on top of organizing everything. It seemed selfish to request his company now as well.

Teeth gnawed anxiously on the inside of his cheek, he withdrew his phone from his pocket and stared at the display for several minutes.

Tapping delicately at the screen, Ignis called up his list of contacts. His gaze lingered upon the entry labelled Gladiolus Amicitia. A smile, unbidden, drew across the bow of his lips. Even just seeing the other teen’s name filled him with a sense of comfort and warmth – a feeling of home. But it wasn't enough. Ignis had gone from sipping from the cup of happiness to diving headfirst into a pool of bliss. He was beginning, feebly, minutely, to understand what he had been missing, and he craved more.

Fingers trembling, he called up his contacts and began tapping away.

11:56am Ignis: Gladio, do you have a moment?

11:57am Gladio: Of course. I said I was at your beck and call, didn’t I?

Ignis chuckled softly and shook his head. It seemed Gladio’s own words were as fixed in his own
mind as in Ignis’s.

11:58am Ignis: I was wondering if you might favour me with your company?

11:58am Gladio: Of course! Sup? You home?

12:00pm Ignis: No, I'm at Waterside Park, but I can meet you elsewhere if you prefer.

12:01pm Gladio: Nah that's cool. Be there in 20.

12:03pm Ignis: Splendid. I’m just down the path if you come from Bridge Street.

12:04pm Gladio: Got it. Btw you eat yet?

12:04pm Ignis: Not yet.

Laying the phone down in his lap, Ignis allowed his eyes to drift closed. Guilt teased at the corners of his mind. Gladio was one of many people assisting with the coverage of his usual duties, and here he was, selfish, terrible creature that he was, requesting yet more of Gladio's weekend be expended upon his behalf. His only consolation was that it was shaping up to be a truly glorious afternoon, with clear skies and warm sunshine. Surely it was a day well-suited to an afternoon outdoors.

While he waited for Gladio to appear, Ignis settled himself into the bench, one leg crossed comfortably over the other. He dug into his messenger bag for a moment, fingers skimming lightly over his recent purchases before unearthing his copy of *The Sky Pirate’s Treasure*. Removing the ribbon he’d been using as a bookmark, he resumed from where he’d left off, with the leading man thrown unceremoniously into an underground prison.

Gladio arrived within the half hour as promised, a smile on his tanned face and a large bag hefted over his broad back. Curious, Ignis lowered the book and quirked a brow at his companion.

"Hey," Gladio says by way of greeting. "Nice day, huh?"

A smile spread across Ignis’s features and he found for a moment that his breath went still in his chest. It was indeed a nice day, although nice seemed a paltry tribute to the day, or the one before. Glorious, wondrous, perfect all seemed more fitting.

Clearing his throat, he offered a serene "Yes, quite. And thank you for joining me."

Gladio managed to wave a hand lazily without upsetting the large pack he was carrying. "My pleasure. It’s way too nice out to be stuck at home. Anyhow, shall we go somewhere a bit more spacious? I brought some stuff," he said, rather unnecessarily hoisting his bag as proof.

"Of course!" Ignis hastened to his feet, cheeks heating with embarrassment. Just because you have a few days off, that's no excuse to completely forget your place or your manners, Scientia. For shame. "May I assist you with anything? That looks heavy." Fair brows creased in concern.

Gladio just chuckled. "Nah. It's big but it's light, no worries. Let's go down closer to the water, under those trees maybe. Don't want ya getting a sunburn on my watch." What Ignis could see of Gladio’s skin not covered by his track pants and tank top was gently bronzed, probably permanently tanned from spending so much time out in the training yard.

Unsure if Gladio was serious or joking, Ignis merely pursed his lips and bit back a correction regarding his ability to tan. He certainly could tan, he just didn't spend enough time in direct
sunlight to actually do so, and ended up looking like a ghost compared to most people by the end of summer.

"Shall we then?" Settling his own bag across his shoulder, Ignis fell into step alongside Gladio and the two made their way along the meandering gravel path, leading them past more benches and the odd picnic table, until it eventually tapered off in a little clearing. The green lawn stretched out before them, ending at the edge of the man-made lake that dominated the southeastern edge of the city. Beyond the shimmering waters Ignis could just make out a hazy beige blur that he knew to be the old wall.

Gladio led him to a majestic oak, its boughs offering some of the last bits of shade this side of the park. With great care, the older teen lowered his bag to the grass and began rummaging about in it. Ignis followed, curious but also anxious to help somehow.

There was a great clattering and banging but eventually Gladio pulled out a tartan blanket which he spread out across the shaded grass. He motioned for Ignis to follow him as he moved to sit down.

“C’mon down. And don’t worry about your shoes or whatever.”

It felt somehow wrong to let Gladio sit here. The Prince’s Shield continued to rise in Ignis’s estimation with each new day. He wanted to prop this man up against the softest pillows, elevate him atop the highest of pedestals. The ground seemed too humble for him, the blanket too thin and offering insufficient comfort. It was a rather silly thought and he knew this, knew that Gladio was a soldier, that he was made of iron grit, not spun glass. Still, he had to squelch the impulse to take off his shirt, fold it, and offer it as a makeshift cushion. He was idly wondering if there was a way to offer his own body up as a pillow without seeming odd when Gladio’s voice jolted him out of his thoughts.

“Yo! You still with me?”

Ignis blinked and shook his head smartly, banishing that ridiculous line of thought. He cursed his subconscious for choosing the most inappropriate times and ways of manifesting his insecurities.

“Apologies. Thank you.”

Ignis settled himself down on one edge of the blanket, his messenger bag settled behind him, feet hanging off the edge of the blanket regardless of Gladio’s insistence that it’s fine.

Ignis watched, amusement shining in peridot eyes as Gladio began unpacking a small portion of his bag’s contents. A few plastic bottles of juice surfaced, followed by a nylon moogle-themed lunchbag that Gladio definitely stole from Iris, and a package of store-bought chocolate chip cookies. The Shield unzipped the lunchbag, revealing a small pile of sandwiches shrouded in plastic wrap.

“Lunch is served,” Gladio said, gesturing at the items with a little flourish.

Ignis laughed, his earlier discomfort fluttering away like bits of dandelion fluff in the breeze. “My compliments to the chef.”

Gladio snorted as he handed Ignis a sandwich and a bottle of juice. “You can’t say that until you’ve eaten something. ‘Sides, it’s just a pb&j. I was sort of in a hurry.” Gladio smiled a bit sheepishly, shrugging his shoulders as if shrugging off the praise he didn’t feel he’d earned.

“Oh, how interesting!” Ignis couldn’t help the bright smile that engulfed his features. He nimbly unwrapped his sandwich and bit off one corner, chewing slowly, appreciatively. He’d never eaten
a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before. He’d certainly eaten its various components at one time or another of course, but he was surprised by the way the flavours and textures melded together, creating an entirely new and unexpected flavour and texture. It was more tacky than peanut butter, but less gooey than jelly, and both sweet and savoury at once.

“This is quite good! The sweetness of the jelly – what is this, ulwaat berry? – contrasts nicely with the salty and savoury nut spread.” Ignis hummed thoughtfully, considering. “The texture is quite pleasant, sticky without being gummy. And the whole grains in the bread provide a pleasant crunch to counter balance the filling.”

Ignis realized that Gladio was staring at him, his own sandwich half-unwrapped in his motionless hands.

“What is it?” Ignis asked his friend, only mildly alarmed at this turn of events.

Gladio squinched one eye at him and then the other. “Are you … is this your first time eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich?” His tone hinted at polite incredulity.

Ignis winced, and it was his turn to look sheepish. He knew that Gladio was not upset or disappointed, merely surprised. Ignis was aware that a ‘pb&j’ is considered a staple in most children’s diets, and is a food that many adults still cling to with nostalgic fervor. He fiddled with the plastic wrap still covering part of his sandwich and nodded. “Yes.”

“Huh.” Gladio finished unwrapping a sandwich and took a large bite, chewing it quietly. When it didn't seem that Gladio intended to press the subject further, Ignis continued eating his sandwich, pausing regularly to drink deeply from his bottle of juice. The sandwich was tasty, but it certainly made a person thirsty. He was relieved that Gladio didn't seize the opportunity to lament Ignis’s misplaced childhood. Stalwart and true as ever, Gladio was holding firm to his declaration that he didn't intend to pity Ignis or treat him differently.

They ate their lunch in companionable silence, content to appreciate their surroundings. The faintest breath of wind made the leaves above them hiss and stir. Sunlight shimmered atop the lake like a coating of diamond dust. Overhead birds cried out as they circled the endless expanse of cerulean blue. They were far enough away from the clamor and chaos of downtown that they could almost forget where they were, and who they were.

It was Ignis who eventually broke the silence, as if Gladio had been waiting patiently for him all this time, letting him take the lead without even realizing it.

“Thank you for lunch. I’m going to be so bloated by the time my vacation is over; I’ll need to have all of my suits let out.”

Gladio snorted. “If a few sandwiches are doing you in, you must be skipping more meals than I figured.” The larger teen scowled then, giving his ball cap a sharp tug, as if it had somehow offended him. Likely redirecting his disappointment in Ignis, or his frustration at the fact that Ignis didn't find nor make sufficient time to eat three square meals a day.

“I usually keep cereal bars in my bag, I’m in no danger of starving.” Ignis chuckled.

Gladio glared. Ignis wilted just a little bit. “You’d better eat more than a granola bar when you got training, though. You’ll cramp up if you exercise too much on an empty stomach. Or a practically empty stomach,” he amended.

Ignis held up both hands defensively. “You sound remarkably like the Marshal.” He softened his
expression with a smile. “Fret not, between the two of you I manage quite well.”

Gladio finally smiled as well, relief evident in bright amber eyes. If Cor the Immortal was already on Ignis’s case then there was nothing to worry about. No one got things done quite like the Marshal. “He give you the lecture about high-quality proteins and good fats?”

“Indeed.” Ignis paused, lips twitching before continuing. “I’d make a steak joke, but I’d probably butcher it.”

Gladio buried his face in his hands.

“What?” Ignis blinked, tone deliberately light and innocent.

“That was fucking terrible.”

“Come now. A good steak pun is a rare medium.” Ignis waited a few beats, eyeing Gladio expectantly. When Gladio just scowled, Ignis pressed him. “You’re supposed to say ‘well done’.”

“Really struggling to remember why I wanted to be your friend.”

“Goodness, you’re really grilling me here.” Ignis smirked

“Yup, making friends with you was a huge mis-steak.” Gladio grumbled, tugging his ball cap down to shield his eyes from view, but not before Ignis caught the flash of amusement there.

They both dissolved into laughter in unison, the tension evaporating as suddenly as it had first settled over them.

When they had calmed down, Gladio packed away the empty lunch bag and plastic bottles. Ignis fished around in his bag, unearthng a roll of rainbow-flecked white yarn and a case of crotchet hooks, sifting through until he found the size he wanted. Gladio, meanwhile, wrestled some ominous-looking contraption out of his bag. It took him a few minutes to contort the jumble of metal poles, screws, and plates into something that vaguely resembled a lap desk. Ignis had one for the unlikely event of him falling ill and needing to use his laptop in bed. Gladio’s was slightly different, the flat surface adjustable so that he could set a canvas or watercolour paper onto it. There was even a shallow tray attached to the bottom where he could store and mix paints, set down his brush, or dip it in a little tub of water. Ignis watched him, utterly fascinated.

“You had all of that in your bag?”

“Yup!” Gladio grinned as he fixed his paper into place, securing the corners beneath little clips. “My Dad got this for me a few birthdays ago. I figured since I’d gotten to hear you play violin, which I know was pretty personal and I’m still really sorry,” the older teen made a scrunchy, uncomfortable face but then plunged ahead with a smile. “I figured it was only fair if you were around sometime when I painted, yeah?”

A rush of warmth flooded Ignis, and it had nothing to do with the unseasonably hot weather. Gladio was trying to make light of the situation, shrugging off his discomfort, downplaying how personal it was to let someone else see his hobby. Ignis understood, though. He understood that Gladio was trying to level the playing field, trying to make amends by putting himself in a similar position. It was touching, and quite unnecessary. Ignis had half a mind to tell Gladio as much, but he stopped himself. He didn’t want to diminish the gesture, and well, he was also curious to see Gladio paint.

“I’m honoured. Thank you,” Ignis finally responded, teal eyes soft behind his spectacles as he
regarded his friend, watching him setting out everything he needed. Ignis shifted about so that he could see Gladio’s canvas in his periphery. He could crochet or knit without really needing to pay much attention to what he was doing, particularly the project he had planned for the afternoon, leaving him free to watch Gladio paint.

“Whatcha working on over there?” Gladio asked as he began working his brush against the paper. Ignis noticed that there wasn’t any paint on the brush, just water.

“Um, will I distract you too much if I talk?” Ignis asked in the hushed tone he usually reserved for libraries.

Gladio laughed, his lap-easel in danger of being dislodged. “Wouldn’t have asked you a question if it was a problem.”

Ignis huffed a quiet chuckle of his own. “Point to Amicitia. Very well. I’m going to crochet a bunny rabbit.” He could feel the burn of embarrassment in the tips of his ears already. “For the children. At the orphanage.” He felt that it was of dire importance that Gladio knew that the rabbit wasn’t for Ignis.

“Aww.” Gladio flashed him a brief, toothy smile. “Still can’t believe how damn nice you are.” The Shield scrubbed his brush into a depression in his mixing tray, loading his brush with green paint. Ignis watched, mesmerized, as Gladio dabbed the brush against the paper, where he’d previously wet it. Colour leapt from the bristles, seeping into the damp paper, the pigments flowing unbidden to fill in the shape that Gladio had previously drawn.

“Ahh, it’s nothing, really. As I’ve stated previously, I enjoy this, and it’s not as if I need most of what I make. I haven’t the time nor inclination to sell my work, so I may as well donate it to those who need it.”

Ignis was finding that his fingers were moving a bit more slowly than was typical for him. Watching Gladio work was distracting. His companion was dabbing more paint onto the paper, adding shading and texture to what Ignis now recognized as a series of leaves. He expected Gladio’s features to be tight with concentration, eyes narrowed at the page, but to his surprise Gladio looked calm, his expression soft, entire body loose and visibly relaxed.

“Where did you learn to knit, anyway?” Gladio was painting smooth lines of dark brown to connect the leaves, flowing together to form a tree trunk. The paper was dry beneath his brush, and the lines stood out sharp and crisp in contrast to the leaves, which bore a misty, ethereal quality, blurred at the very edges. It was a lovely contrast.

“Technically I’m crocheting,” Ignis corrected in a gentle tone. “And I’m mostly self-taught.”

“Ignis smiled wistfully. “My mother knit and I believe she crocheted as well. She didn’t teach me, though. I was too young when I left home. But I got the idea from her, from all of the nights we sat together with her knitting something, and me propped up against her legs reading. I may have subconsciously picked up a thing or two.”

Gladio laid his brush down a moment, staring at the paper in front of him. A few beats later he nodded and resumed his work. “S’nice,” he said gruffly. “Kinda makes you feel closer to her, huh?”

Ignis blinked, brow creased with concern at the thickness in his friend’s voice. “Yes,” he
responded, voice soft.

“You probably don’t believe me, but I understand.” More colour blossomed across the paper, curling tendrils of red and orange flower petals. A frown tugged Ignis’s features down, but after a moment his lips curled up in a gentle, knowing smile.

“I have a rather remarkable memory, Gladiolus.” A pause, a moment granted to them both to allow fragile composesures to be hardened. “You said that your mother painted?”

“Yup.” Gladio kept painting and they both ignored the fact that his ears had gone bright red beneath his cap. “I’d probably be better at oil panting or something, but mom always used watercolours and I just stubbornly refused to try anything else after we lost her. Figured someone had to keep the tradition going.”

“Did she teach you?” Ignis’s voice was gentle, but he was careful to keep anything close to pity out of his voice, knowing how much he disliked it when such useless emotions were directed at himself.

“A bit, but just the basics, I was real young, too. I think my style is similar to hers, though. I paint a lot of the same kinda stuff.”

“If I’m ever in your home will I see your paintings sharing wall space so I might compare?” Ignis smiled, before glancing down to check on his own work.

“Oh Six no way!” Gladio laughed, head shaking. “I’m not as good as her. Iris has a few things in her room, and my Dad has one or two in his study, but that’s it.”

Ignis canted his head to one side, quietly studying Gladio’s paper. His work looked fine to Ignis. More than fine, actually. His lines were crisp where they needed to be, but he seemed to have a knack for how to artfully blend and blur the paint, using both wet on wet and wet on dry techniques to their best effect.

“What do you do with your paintings, if I may?”

Gladio shrugged. “Give some away as gifts. Most of ‘em I just keep in an album under my bed.”

Ignis hummed thoughtfully. “That’s a shame. Your work is lovely.”

“Yeah?” Gladio peeked over, eyes cautious.

“Quite.”Ignis offered a reassuring smile. “I’m no art critic mind.”

Gladio chuckled. “Like you don’t know everything about everything.” A pause. “Really, though? You think this is worth hanging up?” He gestured at the half-finished painting, a majestic tree amid dancing petals. Ignis could all but feel the breeze that blew them about. It spoke to him of springtime, of sweet air, cool wind, and new beginnings.

Ignis laughed. “I do.” He hummed thoughtfully. “I appreciate that you may not wish to wallpaper your entire home in your paintings, but I’m sure they make lovely gifts for your friends. Also, you might consider donating some.”

“Huh, I dunno. Like a museum or something? ‘Cause I seriously don’t think I’m that good.”

Ignis shrugged. “I honestly can’t speak to whether or not your work is museum-worthy, though being the future Shield to the King, I’d imagine most galleries would be honoured to display your
work on that basis alone. That’s not what I meant, though.” In response to Gladio’s raised brows he explained. “I meant to charity. Such as the Refugee Aid Centre.”

Gladio looked down at his tray while he mixed some yellow paint with a drop of orange, creating a warm shade of amber that wasn’t dissimilar to his own eye colour. “Ignis,” he finally began to respond, his voice low, words coming out slowly, deliberately. “I don’t think that pretty pictures is what those people need. They need food, shelter, education, jobs … “

“They do,” Ignis agreed quickly. “And the Centre will happily accept physical and monetary donations towards those efforts. However, the people need something else as well.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” Gladio brushed clean water across wide swathes of his paper in preparation for the honey-tinted paint.

“Hope,” Ignis said simply.

Gladio’s brush went still, and he lay it down carefully. “Hope?” he repeated blankly.

Ignis set down his crochet hook and moved a hand to Gladio’s shoulder, His touch was light, tentative, poised to snatch his hand back at a moment’s notice if he was unwanted. “Hope, Gladiolus.” Ignis smiled. “You might be surprised by how much hope and inspiration may be derived from something as simple as a pretty picture to decorate an otherwise plain whitewashed wall. It would be a symbol, a promise of better days ahead, when their lives are more settled and they’ve regained more of what’s been lost.”

“Ignis…”

“I’ll admit that I cannot speak entirely from personal experience. I was recruited to Insomnia, I’ve always had a home and a purpose here. But I’ve spoken to the volunteers at the Centre, and seen the refugees when I’ve dropped off my own donations. These people need more than the bare essentials. They need hope, and they need to feel like people again. I can speak from experience when I say that this city has a way of making outsiders feel less than human. Having hand-painted art on the wall that someone cared enough to make and share would mean a great deal to many.”

Ignis squeezed Gladio’s shoulder briefly before releasing him. Slowly, as if unconsciously, Gladio’s hand drifted up to rest atop his shoulder where Ignis’s hand had just been, as if the other man could still feel the warmth and pressure of Ignis’s touch.

Gladio stared at Ignis for several long seconds. It was almost amusing, watching one emotion after the other flit over his features. Surprise, sadness, gratitude, and many more that came and went before even Ignis’s keen gaze could discern them.

“Just think about it.” Ignis concluded, turning his eyes downwards towards his yarn, deft fingers plucking up his crochet hook once more.

“Yeah,” Gladio murmured, finally resuming his painting as well with renewed focus. His tongue poked out between his teeth as he concentrated on getting his brushstrokes just right.

The afternoon passed happily from there, their little corner of the park a haven of tranquility. Gladio mustered up his courage to talk to Ignis about his mother, his memories of her, describing the paintings she had made just for him that now adorned his bedroom walls. They were childish paintings really, scenes ripped from his favourite bedtime stories. His mother had probably meant to update them over the years to be more age-appropriate but she had passed away when Gladio still read stories about talking animals and enchanted forests. Gladio swore he’d never take them
In turn Ignis shared his own childhood memories, describing his village, the schoolhouse he grew up above, quiet nights spent sprawled out on the floor reading while his mother knit and his father marked tests and essays at the table.

By the time evening came Gladio had finished his painting, and Ignis was almost finished with the toy rabbit. He just needed to add some detailing to it when he returned home. Both men felt closer to the other, through the exhibition of their respective talents, and the memories they’d shared of their formative years.

“Thank you for joining me, Gladio,” Ignis said as the pair began making their way along the twisting path that would eventually deposit them back onto a main street. “And for everything that you shared. Truly, I’m honoured.”

“Bah,” Gladio ducked his head down, which wasn’t terribly effective, given that he was a head taller than Ignis, so really, he just brought his blushed face down to Ignis’s eye level. “You’re welcome. Honestly this was the best day I’ve had in a really long time.”

“Shall we do it again?” Hope, precious hope began to swell in his heart.

“Anytime. I got a lotta work ahead of me if I’m gonna decorate all of the refugees’ apartments in the city.” Gladio’s cheeks were still pink with modest embarrassment, but he smiled and appeared as eager as Ignis was to continue this.

Ignis beamed, overjoyed that Gladio had taken his suggestion to heart, and seemed to recognize the value of his talent. Gladio had done so much for Ignis over the past months, it sent a giddy thrill of joy through him to think that he had in some small way returned the favour. There was so much more to Gladiolus Amicitia than even Gladio himself seemed to realize, and Ignis was determined to help his friend see it.

If he also felt a rush of pleasure at the prospect of spending more time alone with Gladio while they worked on their respective charitable donations, well, Ignis wouldn’t dwell on that.

Sunday dawned, gray and damp. Ignis shut his windows against the rain. He lit his scented candle, as if its meager flame could make up for the loss of summer sunshine. It didn't precisely smell like freshly-baked sugar cookies, but it was close, cloyingly sweet with a hint of vanilla. Perhaps he might bake an actual batch of sugar cookies and present them to Gladio as a token of his appreciation. His uncle as well deserved some form of compensation for the amount of extra work he’d taken on to allow Ignis this respite.

Vacation or not, Ignis had things to take care of in his apartment, so he didn't really mind the poor weather. He knew that if he left his chores and other responsibilities ‘til tomorrow he would regret it. Monday promised to be busy, both his physical and electronic inboxes likely overflowing.

Ignis busied himself for the day tidying his apartment while the television played old films from a generation ago. When that was done he had some readings to do and a paper to work on for some of the university courses he’d enrolled in – he had a writ from the King himself that made his actual attendance to any classes at the University of Lucis unnecessary, but he was still required to write his exams and turn in any papers that were asked for. He technically didn't need any formal degree to maintain his position, but His Majesty insisted that Ignis be given every opportunity and allowance needed to obtain as many degrees as he wished. In the unlikely event that he chose to leave service the King didn't want him to be unemployed without any formal qualifications.
Finally, he rounded out his long weekend by preparing a pot of garula and potato stew that should do for his supper for the coming week. And of course, several batches of sugar cookies.
Gladio knows that he’s heading straight down the pathway to his own doom. He knows it as surely as he knows that protecting Noctis is his life’s calling, that the sun rises in the east, and that he would do anything for Iris when she looks like she might cry.

For the past few months he’s been spending more and more time with Ignis. They both scrutinize their schedules, carving out as much time in their busy lives as they can spare to make time for each other. Granted, this typically falls to Ignis. Gladio is busy, but his schedule is more flexible than that of the young chamberlain-to-be who schedules his day right down to the minute. His evenings too. Somehow, though, they find the time. More often than not they meet somewhere, be it the park or one of their homes, and Ignis will knit or crochet while Gladio paints. Sometimes, if Ignis’s fingers are tired from excessive writing or typing he’ll read a book instead.

He’s taken Ignis’s advice in respect to donating his paintings. Back in late September he gathers a stack of his finest work, has them simply and tastefully framed in advance, and accompanies Ignis when he goes to drop off a box of knitted goods. Gladio hangs back, acting as if he was just Ignis’s musclebound buddy tagging along, helping his friend out with the heavy lifting. He’ll admit it now – he’d been too shy to present the donation directly. Instead he’d skulked behind Ignis like a coward, letting the brunette present the paintings. He can’t bear the hurt and embarrassment of being rejected, of being told ‘No I’m sorry, the refugees don’t need this.’ Or, ‘lovely idea, but we only accept quality goods.’ Not the finest moment in his career as a Shield.

Naturally, nothing of the sort happens. The harried-looking woman at the drop off counter is enthusiastic, bursting with praise. When she realizes that these were in fact hand-painted originals and not prints she’d actually staggers back, hand clutched to her breast and asks if Ignis is certain that it was okay to donate them and does he know who had painted them?

She had nearly gone catatonic with joy when Ignis had informed her that the Prince’s future Shield had painted them in his spare time, and that the young lord Amicitia had wanted to do something special on top of a generous cash donation to the cause.

Gladio has now thrown himself into his painting with an enthusiasm he’s not felt in, well, longer than he can remember. Suddenly he’s aware that each piece is destined for someone’s home. It’s likely to be one of the only – quite possibly the only – adornment the refugees allow themselves. He’s determined to put out his very best work. Each brushstroke is carefully considered, paints are mixed and blended until the colours are just right, and the subject matter of each piece is carefully considered to inspire peace of mind and hope in the heart.

He can paint by himself, and he does so often, but he prefers to paint alongside Ignis. The quiet sounds of Ignis turning a page or working with yarn is like the soundtrack to a film – subtle and understated, but there’s no atmosphere, no life in the moment without it.

For months now he has pushed aside his forbidden thoughts about Ignis, ignored the way his skin positively itches when he’s gone too many days without seeing his friend. He’s ignored the way his very soul seems to sing when they touch, be it an incidental brushing of limbs as they share space on a blanket to work on their projects in the sun, or one of the rare hugs that Gladio allows himself to dole out to the Advisor. He’s pretended to not notice the bitter flare of resentment whenever someone looks admiringly at the handsome young man. He’ll deny to his last breath the
fact that when his phone buzzes with a new text or email that his heart swells with the hope that it’s from Ignis, and then plummets in dismay when the majority of the time it’s not.

Initially he’d tried to brush his feelings off as his protective nature overacting. It’s difficult to not want to shelter and defend someone like Ignis who has gone through so much hardship and still managed to become such a beautiful person, like a flowering cactus in the desert. He thought that it was something akin to the way that he feels about Noctis, or even the warmth he feels towards Prompto, who has the aura of a sweet puppy dog about him. He’s finally been forced to acknowledge that there may be more to it, this may be different. He doesn’t want to kiss away Noctis’s frown lines, or physically ache for Prompto’s company when the kid’s not been around for a few days. Ignis is different.

Ignis saw past Gladio’s muscles and tough guy façade. He accepted and embraced the part of Gladio that loves to sketch and paint nature scenes, that reads poetry and sappy romance novels, and gets far too excited over homemade soup. He’s nurturing and encouraging that side of Gladio with more cooking lessons, and of course inspiring him to paint for the refugee aid centre. Gladio’s not accustomed to being valued for more than his muscles, his brute strength. He appreciates it more than Ignis could know.

It’s quickly becoming too much for Gladio. This need, this helpless, irrational craving is now his constant companion. He can no longer ignore it, or fail to put a proper name to it. Admiration. Infatuation. The fragile seeds of something that could be more. Something that could be beautiful.

Gladio knows that he can’t do this, that he mustn’t do this. He’s always regarded Ignis as his equal, regardless of the disparity in their socio-economic statuses. He doesn’t separate his world into rich and poor, noble and common, foreign and domestic. He can’t ignore the fact that he bears some measure of responsibility for Ignis, though. He’s been the one all this time, gently encouraging Ignis to come out of his shell, to live small pieces of his life for himself instead of others. He knows that Ignis holds him in great esteem, and not simply because of his title. Gladio has subtly fallen into the role of mentor or guide as Ignis begins to redefine how he sees himself. It’s a heavy responsibility, and one Gladio gladly bears. It does unfortunately complicate any amorous inclinations he may have, which is the problem.

Pursuing these illicit feelings of his may well end up with Ignis as his very own, but it would be an abuse of privilege, a misuse of the influence that Gladio has over him. How could he ever trust that Ignis accepted and returned his feelings in good faith? The man lived his life for others. Doing and being what his social superiors want has been his constant way of life. He has made progress, sure, but Ignis is still subservient and malleable; Gladio knows how easily that could transfer to Ignis’s love life.

Love. Yes, that’s the word he’s been looking for.

Gladio pushes those feelings deep, deep down, buries them and piles boulders on top. He pretends that he’s not falling in love with the Prince’s Advisor, and does his best to soldier on.

Ignis is in trouble, and he knows it. It’s far too late to do anything about it, though. He can see his doom looming in the distance – a distance that grows nearer with each passing day as his feelings continue to spiral out of control.

Over the course of the past three months Ignis has added a new addiction to his repertoire, bringing the tally to two: Ebony, and Gladiolus.

If someone had told Ignis a year ago that the Prince’s muscle-headed, arrogant, bully of a Shield
would become the balm that soothes Ignis’s daily woes, he would have laughed and booked that someone an appointment to have their head examined. Now Ignis is the one who thinks he may need an examination. His nerves tingle with giddy anticipation when he sees Gladio’s name in his calendar, his head buzzes the same way it does when he needs a caffeine fix when he hasn’t seen his friend for a few days. Definitely an addiction.

Ignis is ashamed of himself for so sorely misjudging the Shield. He had been blinded by the man’s privilege to the point that he’d not seen the fiercely loyal, intelligent, talented man beneath the muscles and the fancy uniform. Now it’s as clear as a summer’s day that Gladio is one of the finest people Ignis can ever hope to meet, and his mind is perpetually humming with forbidden hopes and wishes. More time spent together. More casual touches. More of those bone-crushing, soul-soothing hugs. More, more, more.

Sitting near the other young man as he paints is a simple joy, and one that Ignis is unable to deny himself when humanly possible. His schedule is analyzed, criticized, and torn to shreds to make room for their little crafting sessions.

It begins simply enough. Around October Ignis finally relents and, much to Noctis’s delight, has begun eating dinner with the Prince. Ignis will still find small ways to lower himself – less optimal cuts of meat, smaller portions – but still he’ll now stay and eat, which has several unexpected but welcome advantages. Firstly, after sitting across the table from each other to share a meal, Noctis becomes surprisingly more amenable to Ignis’s suggestions that he read his political reports, or work on homework. Secondly, it frees up more time for Ignis in the evenings as he no longer has to cook a second supper for himself when he returns home. Thus, he is able to justify allocating time in his day for Gladio when previously he needed that time to work on paperwork or schoolwork. Now he has a bit more time to do those things at home, so he schedules in time for Gladio while resolving to catch up on his work later that night or possibly the next morning.

It soon becomes apparent to Ignis that he has misjudged his time, or perhaps underestimated how ravenous his soul is for Gladio’s company. Ignis demands more and more from his waking hours. He begins to cheat. He meets Gladio in the park with a book in hand instead of yarn, claiming that his hands are stiff from writing a lengthy report so he’ll read while Gladio paints. The book will be a textbook or research materials for a report he’s been commissioned to write, but he allows Gladio to assume that it’s something that he’s reading for pleasure. He soon begins shaving time off of his sleep schedule. A half hour here, a half hour there. Is there really much difference between his previous five hours of sleep or the four he now aims for? Ignis tells himself that there’s not.

Ignis tries to tell himself that he’s not being selfish and stupid. He’s not blind; he can see how Gladio’s face lights up when he sees Ignis. He sees the way Gladio swells with pride when he drops off a new batch of paintings for the refugees. It’s obvious that Gladio is enjoying both their time together as well as the fruits of his labors. Ignis reminds himself that Gladio has done so much for him, transformed his self-image and his entire life in subtle but meaningful ways. A bit of lost sleep and additional stress as he struggles to meet his deadlines is a very small price to pay if it means repaying even a fraction of Gladio’s kindness.

Ignis almost believes that he does all of this for Gladio’s benefit. But the Advisor isn’t entirely stupid. He’s finally come to recognize this craving for Gladio that leaves him weak-kneed and desperate. It has not been scientifically proven that a person can be addicted to another – regardless of how delectable that person’s pheromones surely are. He knows that this is not a chemical addiction like his need for Ebony. It’s an infatuation, a combination of hero worship for the man who has saved him in more ways than one, and lust for the man who may as well have been sculpted from marble. Beautiful inside and out, and Ignis is hopelessly smitten.
Ignis lays in bed at night, eyes closed tight against the lamplight flooding his bedroom. He wonders if he might be able to turn the lamp off if a warm, strong body were curled up beside him.

Ignis knows better than to act on these feelings, beyond his current efforts to make time for Gladio. While Ignis’s self-worth may be slowly rising, he’s not so deluded that he thinks that someone like Gladio could possibly return his feelings. Gladio is everything that Ignis isn’t: handsome, wealthy, confident, and charismatic. Ignis is plain, poor, studious, and quiet. Gladio can have anyone he wishes, and it wouldn’t make sense for him to choose Ignis when there are far more worthy suitors for him to pick from. Even if Ignis ignores the fact that Gladio probably prefers women, there’s still the matter of his lineage. The Amicitia line deserves better than what Ignis can provide. His pedigree is non-existent.

So Ignis soldiers on, determined to be satisfied with Gladio’s friendship, content to fantasize and dream about more, without allowing himself to truly hope or wish for it.

December is in full swing and it is a challenging time of year for Ignis. There are preparations to be made for the Longest Night festival, and Noctis needs extra tutelage if he has any hope of maintaining his place near the top of his class. Ignis also has his own exams to study for, though with his eidetic memory he requires only a fraction of the study time that the Prince does. Ignis’s eighteenth birthday is also approaching, and he’s in the final stages of his Crownsguard training. Cor is pushing him harder than ever to ensure that he is ready. He has sufficiently mastered dual daggers, but he still needs to refine his technique with polearms to fulfill the requirements for a secondary weapon specialty.

Gladio is also busy, and has had to cut back on his time with Ignis. Despite this, Ignis is busier than ever, and many days he subsists on a mere three hours of sleep. He knows it’s only temporary, that life will return to normal once the semester ends and the holidays are past. Ignis is hardly the only young person in Insomnia currently suffering from lack of sleep and an abundance of work.

It’s a cool December evening, crisp and bitter as fresh green apples. Ignis spends the better part of the evening preparing Noctis for an English composition exam that the Prince will sit tomorrow. Afterwards, Ignis returns to the Citadel to type up a few reports, log some time in the training centre, and sort through the stack of correspondence that had been sitting on his desk all day. When he finally finishes it’s nearing eleven. He can’t quite make out the position of the minute hand on his watch; his eyes are too blurry with exhaustion.

When he pushes his chair away from his desk and moves to rise he sways dangerously. The room tilts alarmingly on its axis for a few seconds before Ignis blinks and his world rights itself again. “Bloody hell,” he complains to the shadows in his office. He has overdone it and he knows it. He woke up early to prepare a study guide and practice exercises for Noctis’s exam prep and now the missed sleep coupled with day after day of non-stop work has caught up with him at last.

Ignis considers just sleeping in his office. He can get up early, rush home and change his clothes before going to see the Prince. But his office floor makes a poor mattress and he hates the thought of spending the next day exhausted and suffering from a sore back on top of everything else. No, he needs to go home. He doesn’t trust himself to drive, though, not when he can barely walk. Even if he manages to not fall asleep at the wheel, his reflexes are poor and he doesn’t trust himself to respond appropriately to vehicle and pedestrian traffic around him. Luckily there are taxis to hail, and an all-night subway with a stop just past the Citadel’s main gates.

Ignis decides to leave his messenger bag with his laptop locked up in his office for the evening. He won’t need it in the morning, and it only makes him a tempting target for muggers when he’s in no
state to fend one off. He pats his pockets, verifying that he has his keys and his phone, and then he heads out, pulling his jacket off of the coat rack in the corner of his office.

The Advisor makes his way through the eerily silent Citadel. Ordinarily he would ride the elevator down to the underground parking garage, but tonight he passes through the lobby. By day this space is bustling with people—a mix of Citadel staff and common citizens all chattering happily or admiring the architecture with awestruck voices. But the Citadel has been closed to the public for hours now, and few staff remain, save the occasional guard, but most of them are positioned along the outer walls, watching for anyone trying to illegally enter the Citadel at night. The rest are stationed near the Royal apartments. It’s fine, though. Ignis’s security card activates the gates and he can come and go at will.

He steps out into the Citadel’s courtyard, an impressive space of glossy white marble between the inner and outer gates. By day the courtyard glows with an almost sacred radiance, with sunlight bouncing off of the polished white marble walkways, its reflection shattering into a thousand points of light in the broad reflecting pools that line the path. By night the place hums with a quiet magic. The sky is like crushed velvet, black at its base but shimmering with the reflections of the city lights hitting the Wall. The reflecting pools are still, a perfect mirror for the golden lamps that line the courtyard.

The chilly night air is bracing, and it helps to wake Ignis up enough that he’s fairly certain that he won’t fall asleep on the subway. He takes a deep breath, savouring the burn of fresh air, something that’s been in short supply with his recent workload. He smiles, tells himself that there’s only another week until Noctis is on winter break, and another week after that until the festival comes and goes for another year. His exhaustion will all be worth it when both he and Noctis receive their grades, and when the people have had an enjoyable festival. Then Ignis’s life and go back to normal, to long but manageable days, with time wrestled from his schedule to devote to Gladio.

In the meantime, though, he’s still exhausted, with feet dragging lightly against the marble path, his eyes blurry even with his glasses, brain muddled and slow as it begs for sleep.

Which is why Ignis doesn’t notice. The man who prides himself on being observant and keen-eyed doesn’t hear the whisper of footsteps behind him, or the flicker of another long shadow slowly converging on his own. He doesn’t notice anything until it’s too late.

There’s a sharp and sudden pressure against his shoulder blades that knocks him off balance. He flails, arms windmilling uselessly at his sides. Ignis pivots, dress shoes squeaking against the polished stone as he tries to turn about to face whoever or whatever plowed into him. He can just make out a hooded figure bundled against the cold. He reaches for them, fingertips just skating the edge of the other person’s coat buttons.

It’s not enough. He’s too off-balance, and was shoved with too much force. Ignis’s world tips sideways again as he tumbles off the path and into the nearby reflecting pool. A sharp pain lances through his head as his skull crashes against the bottom of the pool, and then a moment later there’s pain everywhere, every nerve in his body screaming in shock and then agony as the cold water surrounds him. He can just make out a familiar pig-like snort of laughter before his senses are all muted by unconsciousness.
Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry! Well no, not really sorry.

Next chapter will be from Gladio's POV again. I'm sure he handles everything REALLY well. *makes the a-okay sign* Expect lot more dialogue next time. I don't think Ignis swearing at himself counts.

As ever, thank you so much for sticking with me and my crazy story. I'm going to be rather busy beginning next week, but I'll do my best to still put out weekly chapters.
The Amicitia manor is quiet, save for the rhythmic ticking of the antique clock on the mantel, and
the occasional rustle of paper when Gladio turns a page in his novel. Iris is in bed, and has been for
hours. Jared retired to his rooms half an hour ago after wishing Gladio a good night. Glancing
down the hall, the Prince’s Shield can see a thin line of golden light seeping out from beneath
Clarus’s study door.

Gladio sighs. He’s curled into his favourite armchair, dressed down to his boxers and an old tank
top. He would have gone to bed when Jared had, save for the fact that he wants to wish his father
good night first. It’s silly, superstitious even, but Gladio hates going to bed without seeing both his
father and Iris at some point in the day. With Iris that’s simple enough, but his father works long
hours, and there are nights like this when his father sequesters himself in his study with
confidential reports for hours on end.

Gladio looks up from his book and squints. There’s only the one light on in the sitting room – the
floor lamp in the corner behind his chair. It makes it difficult to see the clock; the light doesn’t
quite reach. He thinks it’s close to midnight. He’s debating whether or not he should knock on the
study door just to wish his Dad a good night when a persistent beeping demands his attention.

He looks around in confusion. It sounds like the microwave going off, but it’s coming from there in
the sitting room. It seems to be echoing from down the hall as well. It takes his weary mind a few
beats to finally register that it’s his phone set on the coffee table. Except this isn’t his usual
ringtone. It’s a shrill, insistent noise that stirs up panic in his consciousness.

The novel is flung carelessly to the side, his place unmarked in his haste to seize his phone to see
what’s going on. The display is black, but the little light near the top of the screen that usually
flashes green or blue when he has a notification is currently flashing yellow, and ominous white
letters are flashing at him from the screen.

“Beta Protocol Activated.”

Three simple words that say so much. Far too much. Fear-fuelled adrenaline pumps through
Gladio’s veins and he’s on his feet by the time Clarus has flung open the doors to his study, having
received an identical alert.

“Gladiolus!” his father barks, all business despite the fact that he’s currently wearing the bright
green cactuar slippers that Iris bought him for his birthday. “Put some clothes on. I’ll inform
Jared.”
“Yes Sir,” Gladio grunts out, despite the fact that Clarus has already marched out of the room, on his way to let Jared know that he and Gladio will be out of the house for an unknown period of time, so that he knows to look after Iris. It’s an automatic response, all part of his training. Even the way that he firmly tamps down his fear and channels his nervous energy into performing his duties is part of that training.

Gladio hurries up the stairs and into his bedroom. Flicking on the light, he scans his surroundings briefly, just long enough to spot a clean-enough uniform draped over the back of his desk chair. He struggles into his clothes, trying very hard not to think too hard about what caused the protocol to be activated. Instead he focuses on putting his pants on the right way around, grabbing his keys and wallet off of his dresser, and then grabbing his emergency go bag from underneath his bed.

His heart is beating fast – almost too fast – and his muscles are shaking with nervous energy that’s just begging to be unleashed upon this nebulous threat currently hanging over him. Beta Protocol is bad. Not as bad as Alpha Protocol – an attack or threat against a member of the royal family – but it’s bad enough. It means that something’s happened to someone in close proximity to the royal family which may or may not indicate an eventual threat to the royals. There are only so many people who warrant a Beta, and Gladio knows each of them personally, knows them well. He himself is on the list, as is his father, along with close attendants to both the King and the Prince and the leaders of the Crownsguard and Kingsglaive. Anyone who could be used as a gateway to the King or Prince.

Gladio’s heart is screaming at him to find out what’s happened, to check on his friends and colleagues. His carefully trained soldier’s mind is screaming different orders at him, and his body obeys the latter. Beta Protocol means that he needs to get to Noctis right away and stay with him. It would actually be ideal if he could construct a time machine so that he could be at his charge’s side ten minutes ago, in fact.

He passes his father in the hallway and they simply nod to each other. They’re going their separate ways – Gladio to Noctis’s apartment and Clarus to the Citadel. There’s no need to wait for each other, so Gladio hurries out the front door while Clarus is still making his own hasty preparations.

Gladio unlocks his car and hops into the driver’s seat, tossing his bag onto the passenger seat beside him. His phone is docked and ready. He’s expecting a call at any moment from someone who’ll give him more information. In the meantime his standing orders are to get to Noctis and that’s exactly what he does, backing out of the driveway and turning off onto the street in the general direction of the Prince’s high-rise.

Gladio makes it two blocks before his phone chimes with an incoming call which he accepts. A familiar voice echoes from the car speakers in tones that are gruff even by the Marshal’s standards.

“Gladio?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Good. Hold while I get Drautos.”

Gladio drums his fingertips impatiently against the steering wheel. The line goes silent while Cor calls the leader of the Kingsglaive. Generally taciturn, it’s not surprising that Cor would prefer to make one and only one phone call, rather than have to repeat the same information over and over again.

While the line is muted Gladio can’t stop the wheels in his mind from turning, running through the list of Beta ranked personnel and ticking Cor and Drautos off it. They’re safe. So who? He runs the
names over in his head. When his mental checklist lands upon Ignis’s name he can practically feel his blood grow chill. If by any chance anyone has hurt or even threatened to hurt Ignis, Gladio will kill them, and that’s not a figure of speech. It’s a promise he makes to himself.

Within a minute the line buzzes to life again. Gladio can hear muted footsteps on one end of the call, the background droning of traffic from another participant. Somewhere an engine roars to life as someone else begins driving.

“Okay, we’re all here,” the Marshal begins. The tension on the call is practically palpable. Gladio can envision his colleagues, some with their phones pressed to their ears as they speed walk to their destinations, others like him in their vehicle, trying to drive as quickly as possible while sitting on the edge of their seat in tense anticipation.

“Amicitias, you’re en route to your charges?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Correct.”

“Good.” Cor exhales into the line. Gladio can see in his mind’s eye his surrogate uncle rubbing his face tiredly. “Hopefully this is an unnecessary precaution, but as I’m sure you’re all aware now, we’ve activated Beta protocol.” No one responds beyond a quiet hum of agreement. There’s no point, of course they all know, and no one wants to slow Cor down, they’re all as anxious as Gladio to know who.

“It is unlikely that there is a viable threat to either the royal family or anyone else in their periphery.” A miniscule amount of tension eases from between Gladio’s shoulders, though he does not allow himself to relax just yet. They activated the protocol for a reason after all, and an unlikely threat is not the same as a non-existent threat. Also the way Cor said ‘or anyone else’ implies that someone already has been threatened. He can feel cold dread settling into his stomach like a lump of ice.

“We’re still investigating the matter. Preliminary reports will be sent within the hour with updates as they become available.” Cor pauses, as if steeling himself. “It appears that someone attacked Scientia on Citadel grounds this evening, at 2255 hours.”

Gladio exhales a long, slow breath that fogs the air in front of him; in his haste he’d neglected to turn on the heat. His fingers clench the steering wheel tightly enough to leave permanent indentations in the padded leather. No, Gods please, no. Not Ignis. It shames him, but Gladio can’t help nurturing the small hope that perhaps it’s Ignis’s uncle who has been attacked. Not that he’d ever wish ill upon the man; he likes the guy, actually. But the thought of Ignis being attacked chills him to the marrow. Ignis has already been put through so damn much in the name of service to the Crown. It’s just fucking unfair for anything else to happen to the guy.

As if reading Gladio’s thoughts, Cor clarifies. “Ignis, I mean. Not Alsius.”

A chorus of sharp inhalations and grunts echo over the line as everyone reacts to the news. Hopefully no one notices the strangled cry that escapes Gladio before he has a chance to regain a measure of control. Realizing that he’s shaking, Gladio quickly pulls over, not caring that he’s blocking half of the lane. Unless the next words out of Cor’s mouth are ‘they attacked him with hugs and armfuls of kittens’ Gladio is going to be sick. He buries his face in his hands and tries to listen to the discussion.

“What do we know?” Clarus demands. Only those who know the man well would recognize the
absolute rage in his voice. To anyone else he merely sounds as gruff and detached as ever, but Gladio knows him too well. Clarus is pissed, both because of the fact that this happened on Citadel grounds, and because it’s Ignis, whom Clarus has always respected for his steadfastness and dedication to his duty. His Amicitia-ness, one might say.

Cor responds in a soft monotone that masks his own anger, and he sounds as if he’s reading off of a printout, which he very likely is. “We’re still investigating,” he warned, “but what we know so far is Ulric left the Citadel after a late workout and spotted a body in one of the reflecting pools. He radioed the officer on duty for backup and pulled Scientia out. This was at approximately 2320 hours.”

Gladio’s ears are ringing, and all that he can focus on is the way Cor said ‘a body’. Unbidden, his mind does the simple arithmetic, deducing that Ignis was lying in the pool for close to half an hour. The pools are shallow, only ankle deep, but if he were face down … Moisture prickles in Gladio’s eyes, turning the streetlights around him into indistinct blurs. He can’t erase the mental image of Ignis lying there, injured or worse, alone in the chilly reflecting pool. If ever there was a person who absolutely does not deserve that, it’s Ignis.

Someone on the conference call swears quietly – Gladio’s unsure who it is – and he forces himself to pay attention to what’s being said. Cor is still relaying what information he knows. “Scientia was unconscious. Luckily he was on his back, so he didn’t drown, but he was unresponsive and cold as Shiva’s unmentionables, according to Ulric. They sent him straight to Queen Rosa Memorial Hospital. Ulric accompanied him. I received a notification from the Glaive about five minutes ago that they’d arrived and that Ignis is currently being treated.”

Gladio slumps forward, forehead coming to rest atop his now dented steering wheel. They’re treating Ignis. Thank each and every one of the Gods for that. He’s still a person to be treated and not a body to be claimed. Gladio doesn’t stop trembling in his seat, though he does manage to swallow back the urge to vomit.

“According to the surveillance footage of the courtyard, an unknown hooded figure approached Ignis from behind. Looks like he was deliberately pushed into the pool. There was a brief scuffle and Ignis landed hard, hitting his head.”

“Almost sounds like a practical joke gone wrong,” comes Drautos’s voice.

Cor snorts, but it’s not an amused sound. The Marshal is furious. If Gladio doesn’t tear Ignis’s assailant to shreds then Cor surely will. “Almost, except they walked away. Didn’t hang around to gawk, or you know, make sure Ignis got up. If he hadn’t twisted around at the last minute he could have drowned, Drautos.”

“Hence the Beta Protocol?” Clarus interjects before Drautos can work his way onto Cor’s hit list.

“Correct.” Cor’s voice is still thin and cold as a sheet of ice. “The footage indicates that it was deliberate, and the fact that they abandoned Scientia shows malice. And while it is likely an isolated attack, until we’ve identified Scientia’s attacker and ascertained his motives, we can’t be certain.”

“Better safe than sorry, Can we not identify the guy based on the tapes?” Clarus asks.

Cor’s voice is grim. “Not yet. We’re still working on that. The angle’s not great and he had his hood up.”

“What are our orders, Sir?” Monica asks, crisp and efficient as ever but even she sounds like she’s
swallowing back her own fury.

“Drautos, head to the command room when you arrive at the Citadel. Help Dustin and his team review the security footage, see if we can identify the guy. I don’t know when Ignis will be awake to give a statement, or if he got a good enough look at the guy to identify him. Elshett, you get statements from the Guard members who were on duty. Find out what they know, which probably isn’t much.”

“Understood.”

“Yes Sir.”

“I’m going to want a report by end of day tomorrow on how we plan to address the apparent gaps in our after-hours security.”

“I’ll take a copy of that as well,” Clarus snaps.

“Likewise,” Drautos chimes in.

(Of course,” Cor agrees. “In the meantime, I’m heading to the hospital. I’ll send updates on Scientia’s condition and a copy of his statement as soon as possible.”

“What about Alsius?” Monica asks.

“I’ll call him as soon as we’re through.” Cor answers with a heavy sigh. “If there are no further questions?” Cor waits a few beats. “Alright, keep in touch.”

Realizing that he’s no longer shaking like a damn leaf, Gladio pulls back out into the street and continues towards Noct’s apartment.

Gladio pulls into Noct’s reserved parking space in his building’s underground parking garage. He yanks the key out of the ignition and is out of the car before the engine can even cool down. He desperately needs the distraction that protecting Noctis will provide.

His mind is still reeling with the knowledge that some subhuman piece of fucking garbage had the audacity to lay hands on Ignis and then just walk away without even making sure that he’s okay. Gladio will be the first person to admit that Drautos almost had a valid point, this does sound like a prank gone wrong. He can easily imagine some of the dumber Crownsguard and Kingsglaive recruits shoving each other into pools. It happens. But you always give enough of a shit about your buddy to stick around, make sure they’re okay and, you know, laugh good-naturedly at their soaking wet ass.

This feels less like some of the training pranks Gladio was involved in, and much more like the night Lord Flavinius broke Ignis’s hand – it’s that same level of careless cruelty that has no place in a civilized society. And while Ignis may have been content to let that shit slide in the past, now it’s gone too far, and too many powerful people who actually give a damn about Ignis are involved – including Gladio, though he suspects he may need to get in line behind Cor if he wants to have a go at whomever did this.

Gladio jabs the elevator call button over and over until it finally arrives in the garage.

The elevator ride is slow, though that in itself may be a blessing. His thoughts are still scattered, his nerves are still frayed to nothing, and Noctis doesn’t need to see Gladio like this. Gladio is the Shield – the pillar of strength that Noctis is supposed to lean upon. He mustn’t crumble to pieces
The apartment is dim, but not the pitch-black void that Gladio would expect with it being past midnight on a school night. Aside from the omnipresent glow of the city skyline flooding in through the living room windows, there’s a faint golden glow radiating from down the hall. Noctis still has a light on.

Gladio frowns. It’s probably just Noctis being a little shit, staying up late to play mobile games with Prompto or something. Still, it’s his job to make sure the shit’s actually safe. Stepping lightly as he can, he makes his way through the apartment, ears perked up, straining to hear if there’s anyone else here.

Gladio makes his way carefully down the hall towards Noctis’s ajar bedroom door through which the light is emanating. When he’s close enough he peers through the gap and as expected, finds His Irresponsibleness sprawled across his bed on his stomach, cellphone in hand, his royal nose almost touching the screen. He sighs in relief, and the soft sound of the exhalation alerts Noctis, who immediately bolts up onto his knees, glaring at the door.

“Who the hell’s there?” Gladio has to give the kid some credit. His voice only wavers a little bit. Anyone who didn’t know the Prince might miss the note of uncertainty lacing his words.

“Just me,” Gladio quickly explains as he pushes the door open. “Hey Princess.”

Noctis arches a dark brow. “Gladio? What the fu-?” Noctis frowns and Gladio can practically see the kid putting two and two together. His initial frustration at being intruded upon is slowly giving way to the realization that Gladio would not violate Noct’s privacy in the middle of the night just for shits and giggles. His Shield is there for a reason – presumably to shield him from something. The Prince presses his lips into a thin line before he shifts gears to ask, “What’s going on, what’s wrong?”

Gladio sighs. He’d kind of been counting on the fact that Noctis would be asleep already. Then all he had to do was stand guard in the living room while the kid slept. The situation with Ignis is likely to be resolved by then, and Noctis need never know that Gladio was there. Gladio need not explain to him that some dickless wonder hurt his chamberlain, hurt his friend. Well, if wishes were chocobos we’d all ride.

Gesturing towards the double bed that Noctis is still crouching on, Gladio asks “May I?”

Noctis merely nods and shifts to one side to make room for his rather large bodyguard. Midnight blue eyes remain fixed on Gladio’s face, as if trying to glean from his expression what’s happening.

“Thanks,” Gladio perches himself on the edge of the bed, balancing lightly on one hip, as if a casual demeanor might trick Noctis into relaxing. As if he might trick himself into relaxing, too. He suddenly doesn’t know what to do with his hands, and he shoves them into the pockets of his hoodie, where Noctis can’t see his knuckles turn white as he clenches his fists too hard.

“I don’t want you to freak out,” he begins, which earns him an immediate eye roll from the Prince.

“Wow, big guy. You’re really crap at this. Telling someone not to freak out is basically code for ‘holy shit, it’s time to panic.’”

Gladio winces. “Sorry. You’re right, I am crap at this sorta thing.” He manages an apologetic smile. Ignis would be so much better at this. He’d probably come prepared with warm cocoa and
cookies and know all the right things to say. He lets out a long breath and plunges ahead. If he can’t do this in a gentle Ignis-style, he’ll just have to go full Gladio-style – honest and clumsy.

“There was an incident at the Citadel – not your dad,” he hurriedly adds before the Prince can start down that hideous train of thought. ‘I’m here to keep an eye on you ‘til everything’s sorted. It’s probably not necessary honestly, but it’s procedure, and better safe than sorry, right? Besides, it means you get my lovely company. Lucky you.” He flashes his toothiest smile.

Noctis pointedly does not smile back, but continues to regard Gladio with a fierce kind of scrutiny that’s almost uncomfortable. Gladio has to fight the urge to look away.

“Who?”

“Huh?” The smile slips from Gladio’s face.

“If not my dad, then who?”

Gladio is tempted to hide the truth, be vague and evasive, but Noctis will find out soon enough anyway. He may as well be upfront. Brutally honest Gladio, that’s him. “Ignis.”

The Prince’s eyes go wide and Gladio can feel something crackling in the air around them, like too much static electricity. It tingles uncomfortably, and he wants to pull away from Noctis and the ball of raw fury that’s welling up inside of him. When he finally speaks, each word is spit out sharp and bitter, as if they’re acid on the Prince’s tongue. “What. Happened. To. My. Ignis?”

Gladio takes a hand out of his pocket and lays in gently on the other boy’s shoulder, despite the fact that Noctis looks ready to explode on the first likely target. “Ignis is okay,” he assures him. He will be right? Oh Six, please. “He’s in the hospital now.” He roughly explains what happened, though he omits certain details that Noct really doesn’t need to know about, such as how long Ignis was lying in the pool, half-frozen and unconscious. Noctis doesn’t need that stress. He does have to impress upon Noctis the deliberate nature of the attack, so that the Prince will understand why it warranted his Shield’s presence. He hates the heartsick look on the boy’s face when he has to explain that someone intentionally hurt Ignis, who is the epitome of polite and proper and as inoffensive as it’s possible to be.

When Gladio finishes explaining Noctis has deflated somewhat, thin shoulders sagging beneath Gladio’s hand, the air no longer humming and buzzing with tangible anger. Now he looks small, his midnight blue eyes wide and swimming with sadness. “This doesn’t make any sense, though. That doesn’t sound like the beginning of a master plan to get to me or my Dad, or even a shitty botched kidnapping attempt. It sounds like the kind of dumb shit the kids at school do to people they don’t like.” He pauses and his voice fades to something barely above a whisper. “Except people don’t usually get really hurt.”

Gladio purses his lips and regards Noctis. The kid’s shrewd, he has to give him credit. He’s absolutely right. Gladio’s willing to bet good money that this is another case of some asshole who thinks that they can bully Ignis because they’re jealous of his fucking perfection, or irrationally hateful because of his heritage. Ignis would flay him alive and turn his organs into pâté if he had that conversation with Noct, though. He swore to not discuss any of that with Noct or anyone else. Instead all he says is “It’s still being investigated now. There’s security footage, and Ignis is gonna talk to Cor later. They’ll get to the bottom of things, don’t worry.”

Noctis shrugs, dislodging Gladio’s grip form his shoulder. “Don’t tell me not to worry! Specs is in the fucking hospital, Gladio. I’m gonna worry ‘til he’s back where he belongs, and whomever did this to him is bleeding on the ground begging for mercy.”
Gladio’s torn. He knows ignis would want him to chastise Noctis for his foul language and aggression. It’s unbecoming of a future monarch. Gladio personally agrees with the Prince wholeheartedly, and would happily volunteer to help Noctis hide the body. He settles on some safe middle ground.

“Sorry. That was stupid of me. Of course you’re gonna worry. I’m worried, too.” He casts his charge a knowing look. “And I’m pretty pissed off. Ignis is my friend, too. But the best people are handling things, and we gotta let ‘em do their jobs.”

Noctis huffs out a long sigh that ruffles his unruly bangs. “Yeah.”

Gladio smiles at his charge. “Any chance I can convince you to go to bed? It’s pretty late.”

Noctis looks at Gladio as if the man just sprouted a pom-pom and began talking in Mooglese. “Uhh no.” Noctis slides himself off of the bed and begins rummaging around in a basket of neatly folded laundry that Ignis hasn’t had time to properly put away yet. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“Woah there!” Gladio hops up off of the bed, a large hand shooting out, grabbing at the black denims and t-shirt Noctis has in his hands. “No can do.”

“Excuse me?”

“I got orders. We’re supposed to stay here until Cor or someone clears us. S’why I’m here.” Gladio grimaces apologetically because he understands how Noctis feels, he really does. He himself wants nothing more than to rush to Ignis’s bedside, wrap his friend up in his most secure embrace, hold him and never let go. Well okay, maybe he can let go for a few minutes. Just long enough to beat the shit out of whomever did this. But then never letting Ignis go. Definitely never letting go.

Noctis just snorts, for once adopting the air of a royal bratling who is accustomed to getting exactly what he wants. “Yeah well, I’m going to the hospital. With or without you.” He crosses his arms across his narrow chest. “What do you think’ll piss your superiors off more? Me and you showing up at the hospital together, or me turning up alone, unprotected, in the middle of the night?”

Gladio sucks his teeth. “Noct, you’re not being fair.”

The Prince rolls his eyes, exasperation wrought in every word. “Oh for the love of-! Gladio just tell ‘em I threatened you with violence, or exile, or whatever. Geeze.” Huffing mightily, Noctis snatches up another pair of jeans and t-shirt and stomps off to his bathroom to change, pointedly slamming the door shut between himself and his Shield, forcibly ending the debate.

In the end Gladio relents and drives Noctis to Queen Rosa Memorial Hospital. The fact that nothing short of violence against his royal person would’ve stopped Noctis is a small comfort. Maybe, just maybe, Cor won’t have his ass for this.

There is a small, private ward in the back of the first floor. Devoid of windows and behind several layers of security, it’s for the exclusive use of the royal family and those connected to them. It’s the closest hospital to the Citadel and they frequently treat members of the Glaive and Guard who require more than the basic first aid and curatives available at the Citadel. Noctis and Gladio make a beeline for the private ward, ignoring the shocked expressions on the hospital staff whom they breeze past. Even in his casual clothes, with his hair mussed and uncombed, Noctis is immediately recognizable as the crown Prince, and his presence is all the authorization that they need to get in.

There’s a small waiting area, with sterile white walls and thin grey industrial carpeting underfoot. Uncomfortable plastic chairs line one side of the room, and Gladio idly wonders why no one
thought to put more effort into making the private ward more comfortable. It feels like being in a prison cell. The Shield shivers involuntarily.

Three of the back-breaking uncomfortable torture chairs are already occupied. Gladio recognizes Cor and Ignis’s uncle, Alsius. The third man he assumes is Nyx Ulric. He’s seen the other guy from time to time in the training centre, but doesn’t really know the guy beyond a friendly greeting. Despite that, he’s tempted to run over and kiss the man all over his stubbly face for rescuing Ignis.

As expected, Cor’s customary frown tugs down into an even more severe scowl than usual when he looks up from his phone and lays eyes on his Prince and the young Shield. All it takes is one arched brow for Gladio to inwardly shrink. His shoulders hunch and he desperately wishes that the hoodie he’s wearing could just swallow him up.

Noctis, in a rare display of perceptiveness, glances between the scowling Marshal and his wilting Shield. Heaving a sigh, he drones out in a dry, deadpan voice, “Blame me, I threatened him with violence, or execution, or whatever.” The Prince crosses his arms and has the balls to glare at Cor for a solid three seconds before shifting his gaze away. It’s enough, though. Cor lets out a dark little chuckle as exasperation and admiration vie for dominance in his expression.

“It’s fine … this time.” The Marshal glares at Gladio and the Amicitia understands all that goes unsaid. ‘You get a pass this time, but pull this shit again and I’ll flay you myself and parade your hide around as my new boots.’

Grateful, both Gladio and Noctis drop themselves into chairs. Noctis beats him to the punch, turning to both Cor and Alsius to ask, “How’s Specs?”

The older men exchange glances. Ignis’s uncle closes his eyes as if too weary to speak. Cor gallantly picks up the slack. Alsius is an economic advisor; hardly accustomed to being summoned from his bed in dead of night to deal with matters such as this, hardly expecting his nephew to be attacked.

“The doctors are still in there,” Cor explains, nodding towards the double doors to their left, beyond which is a short hallway containing private examination and acute care rooms. “He woke up en route from the Citadel, so that’s good.” He offers the closest thing to a comforting smile that he can. It looks like it hurts but that might just be how Cor’s face is.

They wait in an uneasy silence. Nyx continues to stand guard in the corner, quiet and stoic, one eye on the Prince at all times for which Gladio is grateful. His own concentration isn’t what it should be and he knows it; he knows that he shouldn’t allow so much of his focus to be consumed by Ignis. Cor is staring at his phone, occasionally tapping out a message to someone. Noctis shifts restlessly in the chair beside him, tired and impatient. Alsius seems to be staring off into space, lost in his own thoughts, as cerebral as his nephew.

Ten minutes or so later the doors sweep open and a doctor walks into the waiting area. He does a double-take upon seeing the Crown Prince and his bodyguard but turns to address Cor. The Marshal stows his phone in his pocket and rises to greet the doctor, Alsius at his side. Gladio quickly shoots an arm out, pressing Noctis back into his seat before he can bounce up. With a slight shake of his head he silently communicates that Cor is in charge.

“How is he?” Cor asks softly.

The ghost of a smile flits across the doctor’s face, probably the best bedside manner he can manage after a long shift. “Mr. Scientia is doing nicely. He was moderately hypothermic when he was brought in, but we’ve been gradually raising his temperature and he’s progressing nicely.”
A collective wince passes through them all. The thought of Ignis lying in a pool of frigid water is going to haunt all of them. Gladio balls his hands into fists and has to will himself to not go tearing through the ward in search of Ignis. The need to comfort and protect the other man is a tangible ache like nothing he’s felt before. His fingers are itching to touch the other’s cool skin, let his own warmth seep into Ignis. He can’t bear the thought of Ignis being cold when he has so much warmth to give.

“Other than that,” the doctor continues, and Gladio forces himself to focus. “He has some superficial scalp lacerations and a concussion. He seems perfectly cognisant, though, so there doesn’t appear to be any lasting damage. I’d like him to remain overnight for observation just as a precaution, though. It’s standard procedure.”

Cor nods. “That’s fine. I know it’s late, but is he allowed visitors?”

The doctor frowns, dark eyes skimming over the group again. It’s late and Ignis needs to rest, but they make for a rather imposing entourage. The doctor eventually nods. “That’s fine, but no more than two at a time, please. Also he needs to rest so please don’t push him too hard.”

“I understand. Thank you.” The Marshal murmurs quietly.

The doctor excuses himself amid a chorus of thanks, and then the Marshal turns to them all. “Apologies, Highness, I know you want to see Ignis, but I need to speak with him first.”

Noctis scuffs the toe of one sneaker into the carpet. He’s the poster boy for broody teenage angst, but he nods anyway, knowing better than to argue with Cor. “Alright. Don’t be long, though?”

A muscle in Cor’s face twitches and Gladio thinks that it might be the barest hint of a smile. “Of course.” He bows slightly before turning to go. With a light touch to the shoulder he signals for Alsius to accompany him, leaving Gladio and Noctis in Nyx’s care for the time being.

“He’s gonna kick both of our asses,” Gladio grumbles under his breath as soon as the doors have clicked shut behind the older men.

Noctis casts him a shifty sidelong look. “Who? Cor?”

Gladio snorts. “No. Well yeah, him too. We’re double-dead, ‘cause I’m pretty sure Ignis is gonna flay the both of us once he finds out you’re here.”

Noctis makes a face, not dissimilar to his reaction to a bowl of salad. “Yeah well, excuse me for thinking Specs is more important than some dumb exam.”

“Huh. I should kick your ass myself for not taking your schoolwork or your personal safety seriously enough,” Gladio stares at his Prince with thoughtful honeyed eyes. “But honestly, I’d be more pissed at you if you didn’t care about him enough to insist we come here since he spends every waking moment caring about you. I’m halfway proud of ya.”

The tips of Noct’s ears turn pink as he slumps down in his chair. “Ugh, dude, don’t get gross and sappy. Please.”

Gladio chuckles and goes back to quietly waiting for their turn to see Ignis.

The wait drags on. Noctis grows impatient and begins fidgeting, tugging on a loose thread on his t-shirt. Gladio grows impatient as well. He pulls his phone out of his pocket, checking it every few seconds for an update or a message.
He nearly drops his phone when it pings loudly, a notification flashing across the screen indicating that the Crowsguard has called off Beta Protocol. A few seconds later Cor and Alsius return to the waiting room. The Marshal’s face is a master class in stoicism. Whatever he’s feeling, he’s got it buried down deep. Alsius on the other hand is sporting an expression that could curdle fresh milk.

“Get some sleep, Alsius,” Cor encourages the King’s attendant. “You’re welcome to crash in my apartment if you want some company tonight.”

“Thank you, Marshal, but I don’t want hinder your work.” Alsius bows his head. “I’ll be fine.” The slump to his shoulders and the lines of distress in his brow say otherwise. Cor frowns, casting his gaze about until it lands on Nyx in the corner. The Marshal lifts his brows at the Glaive, who nods.

“Sir? I was going to grab a cup of coffee on my way home, or maybe something stronger. I’d welcome the company.”

Alsius looks over at Nyx with a weak smile and a knowing look in his eye. “Very well. Thank you.”

They each make their bows to the Prince before taking their leave, the Glaive with a protective hand at the small of Alsius’s back.

Cor shakes his head sadly as he watches the pair’s retreating backs, before turning to regard Noctis and Gladio. “You two can go in. I’ll wait out here until you’re done, then we can all leave together.”

Gladio shadows his Prince and together they enter Ignis’s room. His heart twists at the sight of his friend. Ignis looks so small and sad, lost amid a jumble of wires and monitors. A thick, stiff blanket is tucked around him - they’re still working to bring his temperature up. For some inexplicable reason he’s wearing his glasses and Ignis is glaring at the pair of them through his lenses.

“Hey Specs.” Noctis slides into the chair beside the bed, heedless of the withering look they’re both being cast. Well okay, upon closer examination most of Ignis’s ire is directed at Gladio.

“Hey Ignis.” Gladio lifts a hand in greeting and tries to smile.

“Highness. Gladiolus.” An elegant brow twitches upwards. “I would ask why you’re not getting a good night’s sleep ahead of your examination,” he directs at Noctis. “And I would ask what you are doing enabling him, and during a security alert no less,” he fires a volley at Gladio. Both Prince and Shield cringe. “But I haven’t the energy for lectures at present.”

“Don’t worry. My Dad’s gonna have my ass when I get home.” Gladio grimaces at the very thought of the righteous fury that’s about to come crashing down on him for this little stunt of Noct’s. “Worth it, though,” he assures them both.

Noctis nods in fervent agreement. “Dude, how was I going to sleep knowing you were in the hospital? What kind of a dick friend do you think I am?”

“No language, Highness.” Ignis frowns gently. “And I needn’t remind you that I am also your chamberlain. My welfare doesn’t merit royal attention. You seem to have our positions confused. You should be far more concerned with getting your rest, and doing well on your exams.”

Noctis shoots Ignis a glare that could rival his own. It makes sense, Gladio muses. The kid’s probably picked up on all of Ignis’s best moves through the years. He half expects the Prince to start pushing up an invisible pair of glasses. “Shut up, Ignis. Just shut up with that bullshit.” Ignis flinches at the Prince’s potty mouth, but doesn’t bother correcting him again. “Six, I thought we’d
gotten past that. You merit my attention, and I’m royalty, so I call super double bullshit on that. And you are way more important than any test, or missed sleep, or whatever.”

Gladio doesn’t know when Noctis grew a backbone made of pure adamantium, but damn.

“Highness--“ Ignis attempts to interject, but Noctis shoots him down. His eyes are glassy with unshed tears that the kid is trying desperately to contain.

“When will you get it through your head, Ignis? Is it my fault? Have I been such a royal pain in your ass that you didn’t think you matter to me? Because you do. A lot. And I’m sorry if I’ve somehow made you feel like you don’t matter or are less than everyone else because that’s just not true and it literally hurts when you say stuff like this.” Noct’s voice is tight with pain, and it’s obvious to Gladio that he’s genuinely upset that Ignis thinks so little of his own importance to the Prince.

A crushing silence blankets the room, broken only by the occasional sniff from Noctis and the beeping of medical equipment. With obvious effort Ignis finally says “Highness, no, Noctis. I’m sorry. No, of course it’s nothing you’ve done. And irresponsible and reckless as it was, I’m flattered that you’re both here.” Ignis lets himself sink deeper into his pillows, eyes fluttering closed for a moment as if a few seconds of rest can sustain him through the rest of their visit.

“Apologies for worrying you.”

Heedless of the wires and monitors around him, Noctis flings himself at Ignis. He can’t get his arms all the way around his chamberlain, but he manages to press himself against the other man’s chest in a reasonable approximation of a hug. “Don’t apologize!” Noctis growls out from where his face is buried against Ignis’s chest. “Just get better, okay? And never ever scare me like this again. I’ll make it a royal order if I have to!”

A surprised Ignis extricates an arm from beneath the warming blanket, draping it gingerly over Noct’s back, holding the sniffling Prince against him. He locks eyes with an equally startled Gladio, before the Shield has the grace to turn away, affording the younger men some privacy.

“Such matters are not always within the realm of my control, Highness, but I shall endeavour to follow your instructions to the best of my ability.”

“That’s so you, Specs.” Noctis laughs wetly.

Gladio drifts quietly towards the door, giving the others some actual privacy. The security alert’s been called off, there’s no need to hover over Noctis’s shoulder. Ignis needs to hear every wonderful thing that Noctis has to say about him, needs every affirmation of his worth and his value, and every reassurance that he’s not alone. And for his part, Noctis needs to know that his oldest friend sees himself as more than just a servant and advisor, but as the friend that Noctis needs above all else.

The Shield waits in the hall for another fifteen minutes until the door to Ignis’s room whispers open and a familiar head of messy black hair peeks out at him. He lifts a hand in silent greeting to his charge, who flashes him a shy smile.

“Hey big guy, just making sure you didn’t ditch me, seeing as you’re my ride.”

Gladio grins. “Thought about it. It’d serve you right, seeing as how I’m probably on my Dad’s and Cor’s shit list ‘cause of you.”

Noctis sticks his tongue out, blows a raspberry, and says “I’m sorry, but I’m also not. Anyway,
thanks for, y’know, giving us some space. Umm, Specs wants to talk to you before we leave, if that’s cool?”

Gladio nods his assent, and Noctis steps aside so he can enter the hospital room again. With a soft “Night Specs” he excuses himself, heading back down the hall towards the waiting area where Cor will keep an eye on him.

The door clicks softly shut behind the Prince leaving Gladio alone with Ignis. Monitors beep and hum gently, a mechanical symphony in the background. With soft footfalls Gladio approaches Ignis’s bedside and the chair that Noctis recently abandoned. With a deft movement he flips the chair around so that the padded vinyl back rests against the side of the hospital bed mattress and straddles it. He props his chin upon strong arms folded overtop the chair and gazes at Ignis, who is now close enough to him that he can count every single one of his impossibly long eyelashes, mark each freckle and blemish on the other man’s face, and see the dark circles sitting like ink smudges beneath weary green eyes.

“Hey,” Gladio rumbles quietly, as if fearful of waking other non-existent patients in the private hospital wing.

Ignis smiles faintly in greeting, first one corner of his mouth and then the other tilting upwards, as if he’s too tired to coordinate his facial muscles. “Ahh, Gladio. Hello again.”

Ignis carefully pulls his glasses off, folds the frames neatly, and moves to set them on the bedside cabinet. Gladio helpfully intercepts his friend’s weakly trembling hand, plucking the spectacles from his grip and safely setting them down for him.

The Shield stares into those tired green eyes, his own sharp gaze tracking the lines of exhaustion marring his friend’s face, the paleness of his skin, the tension straining at what he can see of Ignis’s neck and shoulders. Guilt gnaws at his insides, wondering for how long his friend has been so fatigued, if he’s been spreading himself too thin without Gladio noticing.

Gladio swallows hard and clears his throat. “Noct said you wanted to talk to me? If you want to yell at me for taking Noctis here, I can come back in the morning, let you go at me on a full tank of gas.”

Amusement sparkles behind Ignis’s eyes as he weakly shakes his head. “Hmm, a tempting offer, but likely unnecessary. If your father and the Marshal don’t thoroughly scold you, do let me know, and I’ll lecture you in their place then.”

Gladio barks a gentle laugh. “Will do, but I’m pretty sure Cor’s going to tear me a new one as soon as we’re clear of the hospital.”

“You’ll deserve it.”

“I know.”

“I appreciate it, though. Truly.” Ignis shifts carefully onto his side, dislodging the stiff warming blanket. On impulse, Gladio reaches out, carefully tucking it around Ignis’s shoulders once he’s settled and comfortable. “Anyhow, that’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

Gladio smooths the blankets over Ignis once more before returning his hands to their folded position over the back of his chair. He can still feel the memory of Ignis’s body against his palms, warm, solid, and reassuring him that Ignis is here and that he seems to be okay.

“What can I do for you?” Gladio inquires, curious.
Ignis takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly. Discomfort twists his features. The man looks like a stranger in his own skin, and Gladio is sensible that it’s taking a lot out of him to say whatever it is he’s going to. “I wanted to thank you, and let you know that I’ve given the Marshal my statement regarding what happened.”

Gladio nods quietly, waiting expectantly for Ignis to continue.

Ignis sighs. “I wasn’t going to, you know. I was going to shrug this off like I shrug off everything. Just one more in a long series of unpleasant incidents.” A rueful smile quirks his lips, bitter, sour, lacking the other man’s usual humour. “And before you say it; yes Gladio, I’m aware that this could have been worse, how easily it could have been worse.” It goes unsaid, the fact that Ignis could have died had he not been found sooner, or had he breathed in the chill water of the pool, had he not fallen face up. They’re both frighteningly aware of all of this.

“I don’t like to draw undue attention to myself,” the young chamberlain explains soberly. “In the past I’ve found that in the end it’s far less painful to lie down and quietly be their doormat, rather than stand up to them, a challenge to be conquered and subdued. I’m more or less left alone that way.”

Gladio’s hands curl into fists beneath his chin, blunt nails digging painfully into his palms. “You shouldn’t have to do either,” he grinds out through gritted teeth.

A genuine smile finds purchase upon Ignis’s lips, softening his taut features. “I know, but I don’t make the rules, I merely abide by them, and historically the rule has been that more attention means more problems for me, that being noticed leads to being hurt somehow.”

“But not this time?”

“Not this time,” Ignis confirms.

“Why? What’s different?”

“You,” Ignis responds simply.

Gladio can feel the heat rising up his neck and into his cheeks. “Me?”

“Mhm.” Ignis shifts in the bed, letting the pillows absorb more of his weight, too tired to hold himself up. “You. You’ve paid attention to me, and you’ve not hurt me or used me.” Ignis pauses, shivering giddily, as if he’s breaking some long-held sacred rule and getting away with it, as if he’s somehow being naughty for allowing himself to have a friend in Gladio. “You gave me hope.”

Gladio’s breath hitches. His heart is in utter tatters, knowing that Ignis has suffered countless injustices and abuses over the years, unchallenged and unpunished, because that was the easier, less painful route, because the man had no faith in the system to be his champion nor protector.

His words echo hauntingly in Gladio’s mind ‘you’ve not hurt me or used me.’ Is that what Ignis’s life has been? A series of people who’ve been civil when they had a use for him, and cruel when they didn’t? Gladio’s mind flashes back to their various encounters through the years, the bare minimum of civility laced with impatience he showed the young chamberlain when he wanted Ignis’s help with Noct’s training or schedule, and the way he’d otherwise ignored the young man’s existence, treating him like no more than background noise, functional and stoic, like a piece of furniture in Noct’s apartment – something to be ignored until it was needed, and then used without consideration. Once Gladio finally pulled his head out of his ass and actually got to know Ignis, he had come alive, like a wilting plant finally given water and sunlight.
“Oh Ignis,” Gladio sighs. Unthinkingly he reaches out, one large palm cupping Ignis’s cheek, the pads of his fingers grazing his cheekbones, absentmindedly tracing the dark circles that stress and overwork have branded into his skin. “I would never hurt you. Even before we were really friends. I would never.”

Ignis sighs and nuzzles his cheek into Gladio’s hand, too tired to care about propriety, too overcome by a rare bout of selfishness to resist soaking up the other man’s offered warmth and affection. “I know,” he murmurs. “And when Cor told me that Noctis had dragged you here, and that he’d activated Beta protocol for me—which is absolutely mortifying and I begged him to cancel it immediately—it all made me realize that maybe I’m not as alone as I’d imagined.”

Callused fingers work their way across Ignis’s cheekbones and into the tousled hair feathering across his temples and brow, smoothing it back in a gesture that he hopes is soothing. “You’re not,” Gladio states fiercely. “I have your back, and so do a lot of people. Everyone on that Beta call tonight was itching to get their hands on whoever did this. And not because you’re useful to us.”

Ignis smiles blithely up at him. “I know. Which is why I told Cor who it was, and while it wasn’t an easy decision, in the end I even agreed to let him pursue charges. I… I want to trust in my friends to help me.”

Pride swells in Gladio’s chest. He knows how difficult that was for Ignis, and what a momentous occasion it truly is. Gladio is under no illusions that he’s aware of every horrible thing that’s happened to Ignis in the name of prejudice and for the sake of his duty, but he’s aware of enough to know that he’s chosen to not trust in the past, chosen to bear his burdens quietly and alone. The fact that his friendship with the Advisor played any part in him realizing that he has a safety net of people to rely on is incredible.

“I’m real proud of you.” Gladio smiles as Ignis works a hand free from the heavy blankets, seeking Gladio’s fingers as they comb through his hair. Their fingers lace together in friendship and solidarity and Gladio squeezes gently before asking. “Who was it, then?”

Ignis squeezes Gladio’s hand back, fingers trembling slightly. “Lord Flavinius’s aide. Percy is his name.”

Amber eyes narrow to slits as he hisses. “Fucking bastard. I knew it, I knew I should have just pounded him and that old asshole into the floor last summer. I knew it.”

Ignis winces. “Speaking of…”

Gladio snaps out of his angry reverie, a brow cocking quizzically. “Yeah?”

“I did discuss some of my … past history with Lord Flavinius and Piggy—I mean Percy.” Ignis’s cheeks flame red with embarrassment even as Gladio snorts with laughter. Ignis rolls his eyes. “Yes I know, quite drole of me. Anyhow, I wanted you to know, as Cor may ask you about the incident you witnessed. I apologize for any inconvenience this causes you, but it seemed prudent to establish a pattern of behavior.”

“Hey, I told you I had your back on that. Meant it then and mean it now,” Gladio reassures him firmly.

Ignis smiles up at him. “Thank you, Gladio. For everything.” With a final squeeze he disentangles his fingers from Gladio’s and clutches the blanket instead. Weariness lays heavily upon his features and Gladio knows that Ignis is pushing himself too hard, as usual. “Anytime. Get some rest, okay?”
Ignis murmurs his agreement, his eyes drifting shut mid-sentence. “Yes, sleep sounds marvelous. Do leave the light on, please?”

Quietly Gladio rises. Impulsively he leans in, the softest brush of his lips grazing Ignis’s brow. “You’re not gonna be alone. I promise.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY!!! I feel like I haven't updated in forever!

This chapter is supposed to be waaaaay longer, but heckin' heck, I'm going to cut it here and save the rest for next week. I don't want to rush the remaining part, and hopefully when you read to the end and see what's happening next you'll agree that it requires lots of attention and careful handling. It's going to be freaking amazing!

I cannot thank you guys enough to sticking with me and being so dang supportive of both this fic and my real life. You're amazing and wonderful and I'm so happy that I stumbled into this fandom face-first.

(And for those wondering, yes, my internship is going very well. They want to keep and have arranged for me to sit a provincial examination next week. I'm terrified of failing it, but it's the next step on this journey so full steam ahead!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fragmented images and the ghosts of sensations – shards of memories assault the hazy edges of Ignis’s conscious mind. Cor’s worried glower. A sharp pain crackling in the back of his head. The Prince shouting at him through a veil of tears. A cold so deep that his bones ache. The warmth of soft lips pressed to his brow. A sterile white room with beeping machinery. His uncle’s face, pale and pinched. A bone-deep exhaustion weighing him down. Callused fingers tender against his cheek. Someone telling him that they’re proud of him. Someone else apologizing. Shivering in the back of a car with someone who looked oddly like the hero Nyx Ulric.

With all of the subtlety of a sledgehammer the disjointed memories coalesce to form a cohesive retelling of the previous night’s events and Ignis isn’t quick enough to suppress his groan of embarrassment. Oh, Sweet Shiva save him. That had all truly happened.

He had confessed to both his uncle and to Cor what had transpired with Piggy. He’d recounted a brief history of his dealings with Flavinius and his aide in recent years, up to and including Flavinius cracking the bones in his hand beneath his heel. The look of raw agony on his uncle’s face was forever seared onto the backs of his eyelids, he can’t chase the image from his mind – and it was exactly why he’d always resisted telling anyone about the cruelty of some of his peers and superiors. Yet despite the hurt that he knew he would inflict he had indeed, for once, spoken his truth and let some of the hurt be spread a bit thinner, shouldered by the people who care about him.

Noctis had hugged him, sobbing into his chest and declaring that Ignis was like a brother to him. He had been thoroughly scolded for working too late and running himself ragged in a display of compassion that Ignis is both proud of Noctis for, but also mortified at being the recipient of it. The Prince had even fluffed his pillows and fretted over the scratchy, rough quality of his blankets. It had been touching, if slightly disconcerting to be the one being tended to for a change.

And then there had been Gladio. Sweet, selfless, tender hearted Gladio, who had braved the ire of his father and the Marshal to bring Noctis to him. Who had handled him with a gentleness that stood in sharp contrast against the man’s prodigious strength and size. Who had been the catalyst
for his transformation into someone who, just this once, is standing up for himself, secure in the knowledge that at least one powerful person, one person who actually matters in the grand scheme of things will support him.

Not that he had needed Gladio in his corner when he’d spoken to Cor and his uncle. He still couldn’t believe that the Marshal had actually sworn like a sailor when Ignis had explained what happened, and briefly outlined the series of abuses that both Flavinius and Percy had inflicted upon him in the past. Part of him wonders if perhaps that part of his memory is muddled by exhaustion and pain medication, because surely that hadn’t happened. And his uncle definitely hadn’t punched the wall in a fit of righteous anger. Definitely.

Another groan falls from chapped lips as the mortification of what happened and what he’s set into motion washes over him anew. And much to his surprise his groans are met by hushed voices whispering not to him but seemingly to each other. Very familiar voices, whose owners never fail to instill the fear of the Six in him.

“The dear boy, he sounds like he’s in pain.”

“Shh, you might wake him.”

“If your heavy mouth breathing hasn’t woken him yet nothing will.”

“The hallway to your chambers is drafty. I caught a cold guarding them.”

“You’re growing frail in your old age.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“I make middle age look good. All of the gossip rags say so.”

A huff of laughter mingles with an indignant grunt

His eyelids feel as if they’ve been cemented shut and it takes considerable effort for Ignis to crack first one and then the other eye open. A pair of blurry figures hover to his right, one seated in the hard vinyl chair near his bedside, the other looming just behind and to the right of the seated figure.

Ignis’s heart plummets straight down to settle somewhere in the vicinity of his knees as Lord Clarus and His Majesty himself come into focus, both of whom turn to him with identical expressions of concern and solicitude.

Ignis lets this sink in, lets it simmer and settle. Regis is here, at his bedside. The King is sitting in the world’s most uncomfortable chair, hardly worthy of the honor to bear his liege’s weight. He has foregone most of his usual ornamentation and finery, looking for all the world as if he has nothing more important to do than sit at Ignis’s bedside while the young chamberlain sleeps. Behind him Clarus looms, eyes ringed in shadows, clad in a hodgepodge of clothing, as if he’d thrown on the first shirt and pair of trousers he’d found. The tip of his aristocratic nose is tinted pink in a sad testament to the fact that yes, he really does seem to be coming down with something.

Ignis gasps, suddenly feeling as if he’s all arms and legs as he tries to extricate himself from the blankets.

“Ignis?” The King asks, green eyes pulled wide with concern as the young chamberlain fights with his diminished strength to push the bedding aside.
“Your Majesty, My Lord,” Ignis murmurs in a voice made ethereal from weakness. He finally manages to swing his long legs over the side of the bed until his feet touch the cold linoleum floor. He pushes himself to stand despite his body’s protests. It simply will not do for him to lounge in bed in the presence of either of these two great men, even if his legs feel like jelly with all of the coordination of a baby anak finding its legs for the first time.

Two pairs of concerned eyes track his movements, taking in his trembling limbs, the dark circles still embedded beneath startled green eyes, and the hospital gown that does little to conceal the thin frame beneath it.

“How may I be of service, Your Grace?” Ignis asks softly. His mind is reeling, working overtime in an effort to deduce why they’re here. A soft voice whispers in malevolent tones from the darkest shadows of his mind. You’re in trouble. You were wrong. They’re here to punish you for speaking against your betters. You’re about to lose everything.

A pained whimper falls from his lips at the prospect of being dismissed from service or otherwise punished by two men whom he has the utmost respect for and who hold nigh on unlimited power over him. He fists his hand over his heart and inclines at the waist into what he intends to be graceful bow, a gesture of humility, a wordless acknowledgment that he has not wholly forgotten his place.

“Ignis, please relax-.” The King begins.

It’s as if the world around him continues to sway and dip beyond the depth of his bow and before Ignis knows what’s happening the floor is rushing up to meet him. Only Clarus’s quick movement and strong arm across his chest prevents him from kissing the linoleum. Instead he merely smashes his knees against the floor.

“Woah there,” the elder Shield murmurs as he steadies Ignis.

“Ignis, are you alright?” Regis asks as he leans forward in his chair, concerned eyes raking up and down Ignis’s form.

“A-pologies, I’ll be fine just as soon as the floor stops moving,” Ignis says with a grimace. He closes his eyes against a world that continues to swirl dangerously around him, threatening to pull him down to the floor. He can feel Clarus’s strong arm holding him up and then the other arm circling his shoulders, hoisting him back up onto the bed as if he weighed nothing.

“Clarus, would you fetch the doctor?” Regis asks once Ignis has been safely set against his pillows.

“Yes, Majesty.” With his eyes closed Ignis can just discern the telltale rustling of fabric that indicates that Clarus has bowed, followed by the heavy tread of his retreating footsteps.

“Oh! And bring back a cup of something to drink. The nurses should have a supply of something, preferably ginger ale.”

“Of course,” Clarus responds, before the door clicks shut behind him.

The world seems to have settled, but still Ignis resists opening his eyes. With his eyes stubbornly shut he can pretend that he is alone in the darkness and not, in fact, with the King, dressed in naught but a flimsy hospital gown, having nearly fainted in his presence. The mortification, it seems, never ends.

“Are you alright?” the King asks, voice soft and low, as if wary of aggravating the headache that he rightly guesses Ignis is suffering from.
A wince contorts Ignis’s features. He can hardly dwell in oblivion when his King directly addresses him. He was asked if he’s alright and, is he? He mentally catalogues his injuries: the back of his head is throbbing, he appears to have dizziness if his recent tumble is any indication, oh yes his knees ache something fierce now as well, his limbs feel weak and uncoordinated, and he has somehow managed to feel nauseas while also being aware of how hungry he is.

Forcing his eyes open, he averts his embarrassed gaze and murmurs “Yes, Your Majesty. I apologize. I seem to have moved a tad too quickly,” because really, the King has better things to be concerned over than the Prince’s Advisor having a headache and upset stomach. It’s nothing that a cereal bar and a few painkillers won’t cure. “I’m fine. I apologize, I shall resume my duties as soon as I’m permitted.”

Regis tuts softly at him. “There’s no rush. You need to rest.”

Ignis hangs his head, lean shoulders slumping beneath the weight of all of the expectations that he’s set for himself and he feels as if have all come crashing down around him, on him. No rush? Of course there’s a rush. At this very moment his inbox is filling with emails, paperwork is accumulating on his desk, meetings and appointments are breezing past unattended to. It took hours of frenzied planning on Gladio’s part, not to mention a dozen favours, to secure Ignis a long weekend once. Yet here the King is, casually declaring that there’s no hurry, Ignis can laze about in a hospital bed for all he cares. Is he perhaps less indispensable than he’d thought? Is his work so unimportant that it can be neglected? These worries gnaw at the corners of his mind like rats to cheese.

Reading the misery in his posture, the King scoots his chair closer to the bed, until he can easily rest a hand atop Ignis’s leg, just shy of the bruise he can feel forming. “What is it?” he asks gently.

Ignis looks up, long lashes partially obscuring his view of the King. Despite the physical contact it’s somehow still not quite registering that this is happening, that his Majesty is touching him with such ready affection. He stares at the hand, made wrinkled and thin with premature aging, as it rests atop his knee. Quietly he murmurs, “I just want to get back to work. I didn’t mean to cause any inconvenience. I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Regis sighs sadly and pats Ignis’s leg. “No inconvenience at all, and you’ve no reason to be sorry. If anyone should feel sorry it’s I.” Regis presses on, despite the strangled noise of protest Ignis makes. “I’ve never liked Flavinius or any of his aides. I wanted to show them all the door years ago, but the paperwork is a nightmare, and the protocols can take forever to work through without the correct justification for dismissal,” he trails off and silence falls heavily around them for a few seconds before the King resumes his train of thought. “If I’d only made the effort … Six above, the report that Cor drew up this morning, it could have all been avoided. I had no idea what he was doing, Ignis.”

“Apologies,” Ignis says for what feels like the hundredth time since he awoke a scant ten minutes ago.

The young Advisor curls into himself slightly. He hasn’t seen the report in question, of course, but he knows what it contains. Ignis’s account of his unfortunate tumble into the reflecting pool, Flavinius breaking his hand, and the assorted times through the years when the Councillor or his aide have accosted him, either verbally or physically – though last night and the incident with his hand were certainly the worst incidents. Now that the stark light of day has been cast upon the scene – metaphorically at least, since the private hospital wing has no windows as a security precaution – Ignis can see just how pathetic he must appear to the King, how inept, utterly incapable of managing his own affairs, needing to go crying to Cor Leonis for help. He braces
himself, fully expecting a stern reprimand or a lecture on how he’s let Regis down.

The lectures and reprimands never come. Instead Regis’s voice is subdued as he says “I wish you had said something sooner, but I fault you not. It’s obvious how difficult this has been.”

Ignis nods, peridot gaze firmly averted.

The King squeezes Ignis’s thigh gently before slipping his hand away. It’s a small thing, really, and quite possibly done without conscious effort on Regis’s part, but that simple gesture fills Ignis with enough warmth and reassurance that he feels fit to burst.

“Ignis,” the King continues, his voice firm and enriched with warmth. “I hope you know that if you ever need to speak with me, my door is open to you. Or you may speak with a senior member of the Crownguard if you prefer.”

With monumental effort Ignis forces his meek gaze up to meet the King’s, striking green finding green. “Sir?” Ignis inquires lamely.

Regis’s lips shrink into a thin line of tension before he elaborates. “I hope there’s never any need to, but if there’s anything else you need to…” he trails off for a moment and Ignis can feel a faint prickling and tingling in the air, a hint of something raw and powerful, beyond his mortal comprehension. As suddenly as the strange feeling comes it’s gone, and the King has regained his composure enough to finish his thought. “If there’s anything else you need to report, now or in the future, I want, no, I need you to know that the crown will listen.”

Ignis sucks in a sharp breath, feeling it become trapped in his chest. Oh sweet Shiva, he could fill whole volumes if he ever sat down and detailed all of his grievances – from the abuse of the Citadel caretakers, the way the chief of staff garnishes his salary, to the constant barrage of shoves, kicks, and insults that greet him on a near daily basis. He simply cannot, though. It would only cause the few people who care about him unimaginable pain and will change nothing. The past cannot be undone and his future path not made easier by being a tattletale. His hand was rather forced with Piggy and Flavinius – for the best, he knows. Their abuse has been particularly unkind in recent months, to the point where they’ve become a genuine threat to his safety and ability to perform his duties.

The hope that Gladio has planted in his soul is still too fragile to withstand the ordeal of a full unloading of his burdens. Perhaps he can face his future as it comes, he thinks he may be strong enough for that, but he’s simply not ready to turn his attention to the past, to the demons he’s too busy outrunning to actually vanquish. For now.

The words come too readily, an easy dismissal, hollow reassurances meant for the other’s benefit. “Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you. I will keep that in mind.” He will, admittedly, cherish and covet the memory of his King’s kindness and solicitude. He has no intention of acting upon it, though.

The door to the hospital room swings inwards, admitting the hulking form of Clarus Amicitia, a paper cup held precariously in his powerful grip. With a slight bow he approaches the King, who reaches for the cup. Ignis can hear its contents fizzing and popping quietly.

“Ginger ale?” Regis clarifies with an approving smile.

Clarus nods. “Indeed. And the doctor should be on his way in a few minutes.”

“Excellent.”

Ignis watches, mesmerized, as Regis holds the cup of soda in one hand and holds his other hand
just above it. Elegant fingers swirl through the air amid a halo of soft blue light. It’s incredible, the way the King so casually transforms the commonplace beverage into a magic-infused curative that teems with the power of the Crystal.

“Here you are, dear boy. Drink this,” Regis holds the cup towards the Prince’s Advisor.

Ignis stares into the pale golden liquid that fizzes away happily, as if oblivious of the otherworldly metamorphosis it’s undergone. With trembling fingers he accepts it, because truly what choice does he have? It’s not his place to remind his liege that he, Ignis Scientia, son of a village schoolmaster and seamstress, hardly merits even the nominal effort required to create this potion or elixir. When your King hands you a drink, you drink it, whether it’s to test for poison or imbibe a curative he graciously prepared.

“I don’t know how much help it will be,” the King says, a note of apology creeping into his voice. “Potions are best used on torn flesh and bone, but it may help with your head,” he smiles kindly at Ignis.

“Thank you, Majesty.” Ignis finds himself unable to say more for fear of his voice betraying the sudden surge of emotion welling up inside of him. Instead he obediently turns his attention to drinking the potion, which still tastes like ginger ale. At the very least the drink should help settle his stomach. To his pleasant surprise it does seem to ease the throbbing in the back of his head and in his knees.

Clarus takes the empty cup from him, disposing of it in the trash can across the room.

The doctor arrives moments later, and the King and his Shield retreat to the far side of the room, allowing the physician room to work. The two most powerful men in Lucis watch as Ignis’s cognition and reflexes are tested and the scalp lacerations are inspected to ensure they’re healing properly. After that there’s a string of blood tests to go through. Apparently he has an iron deficiency and his albumin and glucose levels are low. He’s prescribed painkillers and supplements, and given what is probably the usual spiel about not overdoing it, presenting himself for medical attention should he develop new or worsening symptoms, yadda yadda. He’ll add his medications to his daily routine, and perhaps make more of an effort to eat something more substantial in the course of a day than a cereal bar and soup. No promises are made regarding not overdoing anything.

The doctor finally excuses himself with a bow towards the King, leaving Ignis with a small pile of prescriptions and a copy of the discharge paperwork he signed. He’s free to leave, though the doctor requested that he stay long enough for a nurse to bring him some breakfast.

As if knowing the young Chamberlain a bit too well to believe that he’ll abide the doctor’s orders to rest and recuperate, Regis nudges Clarus with an elbow.

“Call Gladiolus, why don’t you. Tell him we’ll suspend any punishment he may be facing for Noctis’s little excursion last night, provided he keeps that one from doing anything that looks like work today.” He jerks a thumb in Ignis’s direction for emphasis.

Clarus lets out a snort of laughter. “As you wish.” He casts Ignis a sidelong look. “Take care of yourself, Ignis. But by all means, feel free to give my idiot son a hard time. He’s earned it.”

A genuine smile dawns across Ignis’s features. He should feel guilty that Gladio is being saddled with babysitting him. He ought to be offended that the King even thinks he needs looking after as if he cannot be trusted to take care of himself – well okay so he had no intention of following some of the doctor’s more ludicrous instructions, but that’s beside the point. In the end, though, all he
can feel is a sense of warmth and gratitude, and giddy anticipation at the thought of an entire day with Gladio. An entire day to bask in the other man's warmth and compassion, an entire day to watch the other man paint, or listen to him read aloud from one of his fantasy books, an entire day to watch old movies and eat noodles together.

An entire day to gauge whether or not he's reading too much into that sweet touch of lips to his brow, or perhaps, dare he hope, not enough.

Chapter End Notes

Get your insulin pumps handy. It's gonna get sickeningly sweet up in here real soon.

Apologies for any errors. I'll read this through again later and correct what I find.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to say THANK YOU so much for being so incredibly patient with me over the past month or so. I know that updates have been slow and less satisfying than previous.
You guys have also been incredibly kind and supportive in respect to my internship and government exams. It really means so much having people rooting for you. <333

And we now return to your regularly scheduled Gladnis smooshfest.

Ignis prods the jiggling off-yellow mass on his tray. He suspects that it began its life with aspirations of being some sort of omelette, and it’s now destined to end its life as a bit of discarded sludge at the bottom of a trash bin. He would feel sorry for it, if it weren’t so disgusting. Wrinkling his nose, he turns his attention to his slices of toast and the little fruit cup that Clarus has been eyeballing ever since the nurse brought him his breakfast.

Clarus and Regis are lingering in his hospital room, as if they don’t quite trust the young Advisor to not bolt and make a run for his office at the Citadel the moment he’s left unsupervised. As if he could. The hospital gown he’s wearing does his modesty no favours, and the clothing he was wearing last night is a wrinkled, damp mess crammed into a bag. He is a veritable prisoner until Gladio arrives with a change of clothes for him.

Other than the covetous way that Clarus eyes his fruit cup, he’s finding that he’s rather enjoying having the two older men with him. There’s a certain brand of warmth and strength radiating from both men. It reminds him somehow of his father, though he can hardly imagine why his brain is making that particular correlation. It would be presumptuous to think that either man regards him with fatherly affection, but there is something to be said about the way Regis casually smooths Ignis’s long bangs away from his eyes, or the approving nod Clarus aims at him when he takes a tentative bite of his breakfast.

All Ignis knows is that his rattled nerves are finally settling, and he feels safe.

He spoons some chunks of pear into his mouth, wincing at the sickly sweetness of the syrup they’ve been floating in. He forces a few more bites, though, because it seems to make Clarus and Regis happy to see him eating, nourishing himself. And he has to concede that whether he cares for the taste or not, his body needs to be fuelled and he knows that he’s been doing a miserable job of it. Perhaps he needed to see his blood work in black and white to finally recognize the damage that his self-sacrifice and neglect are causing.

He makes it halfway through the fruit cup before pushing it aside with a small shake of his head. Like a bird of prey Clarus swoops down upon him, snatching up the abandoned peaches and pears.

“Waste not, want not!” The elder Shield declares solemnly.

Ignis laughs, which inspires a broad smile to Regis’s face, deepening some of the wrinkles already carved into his features.
“No need for a garbage disposal when you have an Amicitia around, eh Ignis?”

A tentative smile tugs at the corner of the young Chamberlain’s lips. Feeling jovial, emboldened by the King’s warmth and kindness, he pokes at his pseudo-eggs again, casting a pointed look at the elder Shield.

Clarus rolls his eyes. “Even I have my limits. Sorry, kid.” A thoughtful look sweeps his rugged features. “I bet we can make Gladio eat them, though. What do you say?”

“A hundred gil says he won’t,” Regis smirks.

“It’s a bet. You in, Ignis?” Clarus grins with a flash of white teeth.

Ignis scrunches himself down behind his breakfast tray, ears tinting a deep pink. He’s definitely not ready for this. None of his etiquette lessons prepared him to be drawn into a bet with the King and his Shield. None. Voice squeaking in a most undignified manner he practically pleads “Shouldn’t I remain a neutral observer? To officiate?”

Twin bursts of laughter fill the room, drowning out the sound of approaching footsteps.

One of the Astrals is on Ignis’s side today. The door swings open, admitting Gladio into the hospital room. Clarus and Regis shush each other furiously before adopting matching expressions of pure innocence.

“Gladiolus,” Clarus nods gravely.

“Good morning, Gladio. Thank you,” Regis smiles.

Gladio performs a quick obeisance before approaching the small gathering. Ignis smiles at his approach. Already his heart is doing happy little pirouettes at the mere sight of his friend. Gladio sets down the small duffel bag he’s carrying and turns to greet everyone.

“Your Majesty, Dad,” Gladio nods to the elders, his features a mask of stoic professionalism. Ignis cringes inwardly. It’s obvious that Clarus or someone read him the riot act when they found out that he whisked Noctis off to Ignis’s bedside during a security alert.

“Good morning, Gladio,” Ignis smiles shyly, contrition written in his eyes. He didn’t ask Gladio to break protocol, of course, but he’s secretly pleased that he did. He feels indirectly responsible for whatever verbal dressing down he received, and whatever punishment awaits him if he fails to meet the King’s standards when it comes to caring for Ignis today.

“Hey Ignis,” Gladio’s expression instantly softens as he regards his friend. Approval flickers in concerned eyes when he takes note of the half-empty breakfast tray.

In the end Clarus is forced to slip Regis a 100 gil coin when Gladio dumps out the remnants of Ignis’s breakfast without helping himself to anything. Perhaps it was the unholy stench of the eggs, or perhaps the younger Shield is simply trying to be on his very best behavior.

“Look after him for me, Gladio,” Regis smiles at them both in parting. “And Ignis, please seek me out if you’re ever in need. And do try not to give poor Gladio too hard of a time today.”

Clarus snorts, clapping both young men on the shoulder. “Behave, both of you. And Ignis, be as hard on my idiot son as you like, he’s all yours.”

As soon as they’re alone, Gladio picks up the chair that Regis recently vacated and spins it around
so that he can straddle it like he did the previous night. Chin propped atop folded arms, he stares at Ignis, openly appraising him.

“I’m fine,” Ignis offers before Gladio has a chance to ask. “You don’t really need to worry about looking after me today.” He sucks on his lower lip briefly, gaze averting. “Although I’ll always welcome your company.”

A huff of laughter escapes Gladio. “Well lucky for you I’m under very strict and very specific orders from His Majesty. Unless I want 6:00am drills and nightly cleaning duty for the foreseeable future I gotta keep you comfortable and happy today.”

Embarrassed heat rises in Ignis’s cheeks as he continues to look anywhere but at Gladio. As eager as he is to spend time with his friend he still balks at the idea of anyone looking after him. It’s too severe a divergence from the norm. “I’m sorry. Please don’t go to any trouble on my behalf. Just let me know what I need to do to ensure you escape their wrath – justified as it may be.”

Cautious fingertips comb through Ignis’s hair. He sighs, leaning into the touch. His scalp tingles delightfully in the wake of Gladio’s touch, sending waves of relaxation through his otherwise tense body.

“Shh. Stop that,” Gladio murmurs as his fingertips drift down, blunt nails grazing the sensitive skin along the side of Ignis’s neck. “You’re no trouble. I feel like the King is actually rewarding me for my brashness.”

Tired green eyes drift closed as Ignis languishes in the soothing gesture. His guilt and reservations melt away a little more with each touch. Gods, but even if he’s dared to dream too much and completely misread Gladio’s earlier affection, he’ll live a happy life so long as he can share in the occasional hug or friendly touch from him.

“Thank you,” Ignis murmurs. “You’re a truly wonderful friend.”

“Right back atcha,” Gladio ruffles Ignis’s hair before shifting back a bit.

“Did you bring a change of clothes? I can be dressed and ready to leave momentarily.”

“Yup.” Gladio bends down to pick up the duffel bag he brought, giving it a good shake for emphasis. “Right here. You need any help?”

Ignis shakes his head furiously, ears burning bright red. “No! I-I can manage, thanks.”

In hindsight he probably should have accepted some assistance. It wasn’t so long ago that he’d nearly fallen face first at the King’s feet. But he has some food and a potion in his belly and he feels stronger and better oriented already. Taking it slowly as a precaution, he swings his legs over the side of the bed and carefully rises. Gladio hands him the bag which he takes in one hand, using the other to shyly tug down the hem of the hospital gown. Ever the Shield, Gladio follows him as far as the bathroom door. He can feel the warmth of Gladio’s hand hovering at but not quite touching the small of his back – a gentle reassurance that Gladio is there for him if he’s needed but he won’t intrude, won’t force it.

He manages to change into the borrowed clothing without incident. Gladio has brought him a Crownsguard training kit – dark grey sweats, t-shirt and matching hoodie. It’s all rather big on him, but he rolls up his cuffs and makes do, appreciative of the fact that the clothing is warm and dry. The fact that it smells faintly like Gladio doesn’t hurt any, either. Gladio either forgot or couldn’t find shoes that would fit Ignis, so he puts on a pair of dry borrowed socks and slips into
his damp dress shoes.

When Ignis is as presentable as he can be, given the circumstances, he exits the bathroom to find Gladio waiting for him. Golden eyes survey him critically, taking in the way the hoodie hangs down well past Ignis’s hips, to the way the sweatpants billow around his more slender legs. Ignis thinks he looks foolish, but Gladio’s gaze is fond, expression appreciative. If Ignis weren’t so modest, he’d think that Gladio found him rather endearing in his clothes.

Hope flutters anew in Ignis’s chest.

“You good?” Gladio rumbles. The larger man clears his throat, chasing away some of the husky quality that’s suddenly pervading his tone.

“Yes, thank you. Let me just get these and we can be off.” Ignis picks up his discharge paperwork and prescriptions, folding them neatly and tucking them into the duffel bag. Gladio picks up the bag containing Ignis’s still slightly damp clothing.

They exit the hospital to be greeted by weak wintery sunlight filtering down to them through wispy clouds. Gladio hovers so close to him that their arms brush together with every other step. Instead of recoiling as he might have done this time a year ago, Ignis simply smiles, cherishing the incidental contact.

Despite the presence of the human space heater at his side, Ignis finds himself shivering against the chilly December wind. It seems to slice through his borrowed hoodie and top like a knife. A frown tugs harshly on Gladio’s features when he feels Ignis’s body trembling beside him and he casts a remorseful gaze his way.

“Shit, sorry. I forget that other people mind the hot an’ cold more than I do.” A strong hand grips Ignis’s shoulder, forcing him to stop in the middle of the hospital’s parking lot. “Here,” the Shield says, and Ignis watches in stunned silence as Gladio unzips and shrugs out of the light jacket he’s wearing.

“Gladio, no, you’ll catch your death, Six above you’re only wearing a t-shirt under that.” Ignis protests. His stomach twists itself into knots at the proposition of wearing Gladio’s jacket – guilt mingling with desire. Is he simply being the eternally self-sacrificing Shield? Or does he somehow, impossibly, harbor feelings that mirror the secret longing in Ignis’s own heart? Isn’t sharing a jacket supposed to be one of those ridiculously saccharine tropes straight out of tacky romance novels?

Gladio waves off Ignis’s protests. “I’m fine. I’m mostly only wearing the jacket ‘cause the pockets are handy for my phone and keys and stuff. I’m really not cold.” Heedless to any further protests, Gladio drapes the jacket around Ignis’s shoulders. The Advisor huffs an indignant sigh as he slips his arms into the comically large sleeves.

“I look ridiculous,” Ignis finally says once he’s zipped into the jacket, which like the hoodie hangs down to his mid-thigh, with sleeves that completely obscure his hands. The material floats and billows around a lean body that lacks the substance to properly fill out the garment. Embarrassed, he glances up at Gladio, green eyes silently begging him to get him out of here before someone sees him looking so sloppy.


“Absolutely not!” Ignis huffs indignantly, shrinking down deeper into the layers of oversized
“I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” Gladio reassures him. “And anyway,” he brings a finger to his temple, tapping gently. “I got the sight of you drowning in my clothes immortalized right here.”

“Ugh, this is going to be a long day,” Ignis deadpans. Only years of protocol training keeps him from doing a celebratory backflip. *Is he flirting? This is flirting, right? He called me cute!*

Gladio just chuckles and presses a hand to the small of his back, gently coaxing Ignis to continue walking in the direction of his car.

Even though he’s carrying Ignis’s bag of damp clothes, Gladio heads to the passenger door first to open it for the Advisor, before moving to the trunk to store the bag, and then finally the driver’s side door.

Gladio turns the heater on high and warm air rushes to fill the vehicle. Despite the heat Ignis is content to burrow into his borrowed clothing, clothing that smells wonderfully of sandalwood and sage – Gladio’s cologne most likely. Ignis sighs. It’s been months since Gladio bearhugged him in his office. Snuggled into his jacket, with his scent and lingering body heat permeating his senses, this is almost as good. Almost. His touch-starved body still aches for more, and his affection-starved heart continues to very cautiously hope.

They drive to a nearby pharmacy first, to have Ignis’s prescriptions filled. The young chamberlain blushes with self-conscious heat when he sees Gladio eyeing the array of supplements he’s been prescribed along with the painkillers. Gladio is nobody’s fool. He doesn’t need to be privy to Ignis’s blood work to know that something is wrong, and he knows the Advisor and his habits well enough to know that lack of food and rest are the likely issue and not some congenital issue beyond Ignis’s control.

They return to the car with a white paper bag of medication and Gladio pulls out into the street. Silence blankets the car as they drive for a few blocks. Usually Gladio will turn on the radio, or regale him with stories about his little sister’s antics, or some ridiculous training mishap. Ignis sees the way thick fingers clench the steering wheel too hard, turning his knuckles white. He sees the twitch in Gladio’s jaw telegraphing the way the other is clenching and unclenching his jaw.

Gladio emits a strangled noise and flicks his turn signal with a bit more force than strictly necessary. They pull over into an empty parking space with the engine still running.

Ignis looks over and his heart aches at the closed-off look on his friend’s face. Gladio looks like he’s about to step foot onto a battlefield. With Ignis.

“Ignis,” he begins in a voice kept carefully neutral, volume moderate, devoid of inflection. Devoid of any of his usual warmth, too.

Fingers curl into fists that the other man cannot see, lost within the too-long jacket sleeves. “Yes?” he asks softly.

Gladio lets out a long, slow breath before launching into the speech he’d probably been preparing for the past few blocks.

“I know that you’re an adult, and you don’t want me or anyone else telling you how to live your life.” *Oh Six, here it comes.* “But I can’t keep doing this. I can’t stand silently by watching you run yourself ragged anymore. It kills me seeing those fucking shadows under your eyes that tell me you don’t get nearly enough sleep. And when I see you racing from appointment to appointment,
or busting your ass in the gym, and I know you’re doing that on a practically empty stomach? Gods, Ig. It’s fuckin’ torture. I can’t do it anymore.”

Ignis blinks several times. That was both exactly what he expected to hear, and simultaneously the last thing he expected. He expected the lecture about his lack of sleep and his eating habits – these are fields Gladio has studied extensively as part of his duties and the man probably feels a professional obligation to scold Ignis. He did not expect the emotional weight that transforms his words from the harsh slap of a wake-up call and into the world-shattering punch to the gut that Ignis suddenly aches from.

He didn’t expect that Gladio would be so hurt by his self-neglect. Ignis doesn’t mind his own suffering overmuch, but someone else’s? Gladio in particular? The ache of the realization steals his breath, he feels like every single one of his ribs has cracked and splintered, little fragments of bone that shred his organs.

“Gladio, I…” he means to apologize, to make excuses, to swear oaths to do better, but Gladio is having none of it. He has more to get off his chest and he cannot be dissuaded.

Around the idling car the city continues to hum with activity, but the two sit in their little bubble of privacy, tinted glass obscuring them from the gazes of curious passersby and muffling their words.

“Look, Ignis, before you even say it, I know that you’ve been doing better. You’re eating some meals with Noctis and I’m so proud of you for that, I know it wasn’t easy for you to break such an old habit. And gods, I can’t even find a word for how it felt when you told Cor about Flavinius and Percy. Proud doesn’t even come close, but I’m not as smart as you are and it’s all I got. So I want you to know how proud I am of you for how far you’ve come in even just the time we’ve been friends. I do see it and I respect the hell out of you for it.

But it’s not enough. I’m sorry, but it’s not. You should never be so exhausted leaving work that you’re not fit to drive home. Last night shouldn’t have happened for a shit ton of reasons – and one of them is you. You never should’ve been in that courtyard. And you never should’ve been so out of your head exhausted and probably starving that you couldn’t fend that idiot off – I’ve seen you in the gym, I know what kind of reflexes and natural agility you have. And you shouldn’t have to take a handful of pills to make up for the nutrients you’re not getting because you’re either skipping meals or eating really inadequate meals.”

Ignis sits in stunned silence, letting Gladio’s words rush over him like the tide in the middle of a storm. They batter him but do not break him.

“And, fuck, I sound like an asshole, like I’m blaming the victim or something. You probably think I’m a big stupid jerk and if you end up hating me after this, then I can live with that just so long as I get through to you. But shit, I need you to get it through your head that you need to take better care of yourself. You can’t look after Noct or anyone else if you’re falling apart at the seams.”

That stings, he implication that his self-neglect might actually impact his duty to Noctis. All of his sacrifices and struggles have been for the Prince.

“If you need help you need to say something,” Gladio continues. “The King doesn’t want you working yourself into an early grave, you know. He cares about you a lot. If you have too much on your plate I’m sure some stuff can be delegated to someone else at the Citadel.” Ignis opens his mouth, about to protest and stake a firm claim on each and every one of his duties, but Gladio raises a hand, silencing him with a gesture and a glare. “Ignis, you’re probably the youngest Advisor in recorded history. No one has ever tried to perform your duties while also managing their own schoolwork. Plus, I know all of that domestic stuff you do for Noct isn’t usually part of the
job. There might not be enough hours in the day for any one person to do all of it, not without sacrificing food and sleep, which clearly you’ve been doing.” His voice gentles considerably as he says “You’re not a failure if you ask for help, you know. You’ve only failed if you need help but are too stubborn to ask for it.”

That stops Ignis short and he wonders why he’s never noticed just how wise Gladio is. Wise and caring, and fearless enough to say the things that need to be said, no matter how much they may hurt.

Gladio is looking at him expectantly, evidently having said everything that he’d been bursting to say since leaving the hospital – or perhaps longer. Ignis nods, bowing his head modestly.

“You’re absolutely correct,” he simply says. “Blunt and a tad crude, but correct.”

Gladio snorts. “I know. S’why I said it all.”

Ignis can’t help smiling at that.

“So what are we gonna do about it?” Gladio lifts a dark brow and stares expectantly at Ignis.

Ignis sucks on his bottom lip. What indeed. He’s loath to relinquish any of his duties so he doesn’t see how he can squeeze any more sleep out of his days. He may be able to do something about his eating habits, though. If he reworks his budget somehow, maybe he can afford to buy more food, and better food. He subsists off of oatmeal, cereal bars, and vegetable-based soups and stews. Plus whatever he allows himself to indulge in at Noct’s. He can make more of an effort to add more protein and quality carbs.

“I don’t know,” he says simply. “I can perhaps relax my university coursework after this semester. I don’t technically need any more degrees. And I do intend, somehow, to improve my diet.”

Gladio narrows his eyes skeptically. “I do!” he says defensively. “Between your lecture and seeing my blood work there in black and white, the scientific evidence that my body isn’t being sufficiently maintained – I can’t argue with that.” He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, buying himself a few precious seconds before he’s forced to admit, “But it’s not easy. I still haven’t much time, nor is it easy to maintain a balanced diet on limited funds, when certain foods are bloody expensive.”

Ignis slumps back against the passenger seat, wishing that the padded leather could swallow him whole. His cheeks feel fit to burst into flames, he’s blushing so fantastically.

Gladio’s eyes widen in surprise before narrowing to suspicious slits. He leans slightly towards Ignis, as if not quite believing that it is, in fact, Ignis seated next to him. The Prince’s Advisor, a man who holds one of the most prestigious positions in the kingdom, admitting that even if he had all of the time in the world to cook and eat, he actually can’t afford to feed himself properly. Ignis knows how little sense it makes. It’s the height of irony that someone who spends a sizeable portion of his time working on the refugee crisis and anti-poverty planning for the Council is himself barely able to keep himself fed and sheltered.

“I’m sorry,” Gladio says, speaking slowly, as if his brain is having difficulty processing. “I feel like an ass for touching on another sensitive subject but I can’t let that slide. What do you mean limited funds? I know I live at home and don’t pay rent so maybe I’m just out of touch with how other people live, but shouldn’t someone with a job as important as yours be making enough to feed himself?”

A laugh, soft and bitter, passes Ignis’s lips before he can stifle it. “Yes,” he answers.
When ignis doesn’t elaborate Gladio just frowns and stubbornly pushes the conversation further. “But you don’t?”

“No, I don’t.” Ignis sighs and with some effort manages to free a hand from the depths of Gladio’s jacket so that he can pull his glasses off. He rubs his eyes, not looking at Gladio, and elaborates. “My salary is perfectly generous, but His Majesty’s chief of staff has seen fit to garnish my pay to compensate for a variety of benefits I receive.”

Gladio frowns, visibly confused. “Like what?”

Ignis replaces his glasses and shrugs. “Oh this and that. There are deductions for the car and its maintenance, deductions for my uniforms, medical care and tuition, and deductions for the various Citadel facilities I have access to, such as the kitchens, the gym, and the quarters that are still reserved for me as the Prince’s future Chamberlain. My take home pay is perhaps one fifth of my actual salary.”

Gladio gapes at him, shock etched into every feature. “What the fuck?” he finally whispers. “You do realize that’s not normal, right?”

Ignis laughs again, the sound lacking anything resembling humour. “Indeed, I’m aware. The deduction for the car is reasonable, but the rest is rubbish. His Majesty’s chief of staff has never been particularly fond of seeing the royal treasury siphoning money to an outlands urchin like yours truly. So he got rather creative with the payroll. I did file an appeal with the admin office to have my pay reviewed, but they sided with the chief of staff.”

“Does His Majesty fucking know?” Gladio demands, fury beginning to overtake his earlier look of shock.

Ignis shakes his head. “Oh Six no. And I’ve learned to make do. I have no desire to burden His Majesty with this.” He turns an imploring gaze towards Gladio. “Most people think I live where I live because I don’t need much space – which is quite true – and that I’m saving money for the future. They don’t know that it’s not exactly my choice. I trust you to not betray my confidence, Gladiolus.”

“You’re so damn stubborn,” Gladio growls. “How the hell do you expect me to carry on, living my comfortable life, surrounded by other people living equally comfortable lives, when you – you work ten times harder than anyone else and for next to nothing?”

Ignis frowns, shifting in his seat to face Gladio more directly. The seatbelt digs uncomfortably into his neck but he ignores it. “What would you have me do? Petition the King? Lodge a formal complaint with the Crown?”

“Oh, fucking yes!”

“And then what?” Ignis asks. “What do we tell his Majesty? That it was an innocent accounting error? But oh wait, no, I requested a review with the admin staff already and they verified everything, no one would ever believe it was a simple accounting error after all that. Questions will be asked that I don’t have answers to – or at least not answers that won’t hurt the people around me and won’t likely lead to more digging into my personal life.”

Gladio flinches and he nods with understanding. “I get that. I get that you don’t wanna open those floodgates or whatever because fuck knows what all will come out in the end. But it’s like we were saying before, yeah? You need to take better care of yourself, and if this salary bullshit is part of the problem then we gotta do something about it. And that something is not gonna be you moving
into a cheaper, shittier place, or sacrificing something else in order to buy food. That’s just swapping one problem for another."

Ignis frowns and squeezes his eyes shut. If he could just think clearly this would be so much easier, but he’s so tired, and the noise of the city around them is swelling until it fills most of his consciousness, and the jacket he’s snuggled into still smells so sweetly of Gladio and all he wants to do is sleep surrounded by that scent.

“Let me help you,” Gladio asks so softly that it sounds like he’s begging, and Ignis feels the scrape of callused fingers against his cheek. “Please? I can’t… I can’t know that this is happening to you without doing something about it. I can’t. I care way too much about you.”

There it is again, that faint stirring in his chest of something warm and fluttery that feels remarkably like hope.

Eyes still firmly shut, Ignis tilts his head into Gladio’s fingertips, until he feels a warm palm cupping his cheek. He’s too tired, too hungry, too cold, and too lonely. He has no way of resisting everything that Gladio is offering.

“Okay,” he says in a voice thin and strained. “Okay,” he says again more firmly.

There’s the metallic click of something and a dull snapping sound. Ignis’s eyes snap open, fuelled by curiosity. He’s just in time to see Gladio’s seatbelt snapping back into its holder before suddenly Gladio’s filling his entire field of vision, half-crawling over the center console until he’s practically in Ignis’s lap. With a choked sob he wraps his thick arms around Ignis and hugs him tightly.

“Thank you,” Gladio whispers, his breath tickling his cheek – Gladio is still on top of him and seems in no hurry to give Ignis back his personal space. Ignis is completely fine with this. He fumbles with his own seatbelt, which is difficult with Gladio draped overtop him, but he manages it and awkwardly wraps his arms around the wonderful gentle giant he’s lucky enough to be friends with.

“No, thank you,” Ignis murmurs, trying to squeeze Gladio a bit tighter, desperately absorbing as much warmth and affection as he can before the moment slips away from him again.

“We’ll figure this out together.” Gladio promises him as he finally eases back and into his own seat, his cheeks pink with heat.

Ignis nods, smiling shyly. “What’s the first order of business?”

Gladio smirks over at him as he grabs his seatbelt, re-fastening it. “I’m still under orders to take you home and make sure you rest. No plotting and planning today. Give your brain a rest. Heck, give all of you a rest and let me take care of you, ok?”

Ignis nods. “Very well.”

Gladio finally pulls back out into the street, and Ignis re-fastens his own seatbelt. They drive the rest of the way to Ignis’s apartment in comfortable silence, each lost in his own thoughts.

When they arrive Gladio snaps into action like a good soldier, grabbing the bag of medications and retrieving the bundle of clothing out of the trunk. Together they then ascend to Ignis’s apartment. Ignis relinquishes Gladio’s jacket at last, but stubbornly refuses to change out of the old training uniform.

“It’s very comfortable,” he defends his decision. Gladio just shrugs and winks at him.
“Fine by me, you’re still cute as hell in my stuff.”

Ignis smiles more than he probably has any right to upon hearing that. He barely feels the ache in his back, the dull throbbing in his head, or the uneasy lurching of his stomach. He feels light as air and deliciously floaty inside.

Gladio wastes little time in installing Ignis on the couch for the day. Despite the warm layers he’s wearing, Gladio fetches a soft knitted blanket and drapes it over Ignis. He also retrieves a pillow from Ignis’s bedroom, using it to supplement the small collection of throw pillows behind Ignis’s back as the younger man reclines.

“This feels so incredibly wrong, you know,” he huffs irritably as Gladio hands him a cup of tea he’s just prepared. “You’re my guest, and here I am taking up the entire couch and you’re bringing me tea.”

Gladio chuckles and settles cross-legged on the floor with his own cup – at least the tender-hearted idiot had the sense to fix himself a cup while he was at it. “Don’t think of me as your guest. I’m under the strictest of strict royal orders. I’m pretty much your slave until you’re feeling 100%.”

Ignis rolls his eyes, equally amused and alarmed. “Oh come, I sincerely doubt His Majesty condones nor endorses slavery.”

“No but my Dad does,” he snorts into his tea. “If I don’t wait on you hand and foot I’ll be running 6am drills and cleaning the training rooms every night until I’m thirty.”

Ignis hums thoughtfully as he takes a drink. “I can be a rather needy and demanding master. You might be better off accepting your punishment from your father.”

Gladio stares at him over the rim of his teacup, golden eyes wide with open disbelief. He coughs, almost choking on a mouthful of tea. “What!? No way!”

Ignis laughs, carefree and happy for the first time in weeks, not since he’s become so unbearably busy. “Oh Gladio, for the love of the Six, it’s me. I’m teasing you.”

Gladio scowls but quickly joins in on the laughter. “Heh, yeah. Actually I honestly wouldn’t mind. You deserve to have someone else taking care of you for a change. I don’t mind if it’s you.”

Gladio’s cheek burn crimson and he tries to hide behind his teacup again. Ignis gapes. Gladio was being serious, and now he is seriously blushing. Ignis really shouldn’t be surprised – Gladio did just offer to help him figure out a way to solve his financial woes without simultaneously dragging his other problems into the light. He really would do most anything for Ignis, and do it gladly. He feels the same way about Gladio – but those feelings, he’s come to realize, are fuelled by something slightly less innocent than simple friendship and human kindness.

Ignis clears his throat, because Gladio is still looking there embarrassed, as if Ignis just caught him doing something illicit. He longs to wipe the embarrassed look off of the other man’s face and replace it with one of those easy grins he usually sports.

“Hey Gladio?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you mind bringing my medication over here? I think I’m due for another dose.” Hopefully giving the other man something useful to do, if only for a minute or two, will give him a chance to recover his composure.
Like a flash Gladio is on his feet, fussing about with the paper pharmacy bag. “Yeah of course. Are you sore? Where does it hurt? Maybe there’s something else we can do, too. Do you have a hot water bottle or anything?”

A self-satisfied smile eases across Ignis’s face, pleased to see how quickly Gladio does forget his embarrassment when given a chance to be helpful. “My head hurts, and my lower back. And I’m queasy, which I think it just from the medication, but it’s better than having a splitting headache. And ahh no, no I don’t have anything like that.”

“Hmmm,” Gladio skims Ignis’s medication instruction and begins opening bottles, selecting a few pills and bringing them over for Ignis to take and chase down with a mouthful of tea. “I have an idea. Wait here, ‘kay?”

Ignis chuckles. “I don’t want you running sunrise drills until you’re thirty. I’ll behave.”

“Good.” Gladio sets the medication bottles aside, neatly arranging them in what Ignis presumes is the order in which he needs to take them – Gladio is quite good at this. He must have experience looking after Iris.

The Shield pads into the kitchen. Ignis can hear cupboards and drawers opening, and then the curious sound of his microwave running for a few minutes.

“What are you up to?” Ignis asks, insatiably curious.

“You’ll see,” Gladio calls from the kitchen. “Little trick Jared showed me.”

A few moments later the microwave dings and Gladio returns to Ignis’s side, one of Ignis’s tea towels in his hand, folded and tied off to form a bundle.

“Lean forward a bit for me?” Gladio smiles encouragingly as Ignis obeys, leaning forward away from the plush backrest of pillows Gladio made for him. Once there’s room, Gladio slips the bundle into the space between Ignis’s lower back and the cushions.

“Oh!” Ignis exclaims, and immediately sighs in pleasure. A most splendid heat rolls off of the bundle in waves. He shifts slightly so that it’s positioned right over the worst of the back pain.

“Not bad, huh? All you need is a towel, some uncooked rice, and a microwave. Boom, instant heating pad.”

“Oh Gladio you’re truly a wonder. Thank you.” Ignis smiles up at him, feeling and looking more relaxed than he has in quite awhile. Between the pillows, oversized clothing, blanket and heating pad he’s never felt so cozy, and with Gladio’s reassuring presence at his side he’s never felt so safe and cared for, not since leaving his first home to come to Insomnia.

“You’re welcome,” Gladio smiles as he reaches down to smooth Ignis’s hair back. “Here, lemme get those for you,” he taps one of the arms of Ignis’s glasses, and he willingly obliges, pulling them off and handing them over so that Gladio can set them aside on the end table.

“Thank you for that as well,” Ignis smiles. “Now will you please do me the kindness of relaxing for a few minutes? I’m feeling perfectly cared for, you can relax.” He takes a deep drink of his tea.

“You’re a real hypocrite, you know that?” Gladio scowls but does relent, moving to sit on the floor beside Ignis.

Gladio turns the television on, setting the volume low so that it won’t disturb Ignis if he ends up
falling asleep. They argue good-naturedly about what to watch – there’s a documentary about Old Solheim but Gladio thinks that watching it is too much like work. They finally settle on a silly gameshow that neither of them typically have the time or ability to watch as they’re both usually too busy at this hour of the afternoon for such things.

It doesn’t take long before the warmth and comfort become too overpowering, and Ignis feels his eyelids becoming heavy. Gladio takes his empty teacup away, setting it aside with his glasses.

“Rest, Ignis. I’ll be here when you wake up,” the Shield promises.

Once more Ignis feels the gentle brush of lips against his brow and Gladio’s breath hot against his skin as he murmurs soothing words that Ignis can’t quite make out through the haze of sleep that’s quickly engulfing his senses.

*No!*

A stubborn voice echoes in his head. He doesn’t want to fall asleep now – *not again! Not again! Stay awake!* Not when Gladio is lowering his own defenses, pouring out more tenderness and affection than Ignis has known since he was a child.

He focuses on the fingertips carding through his hair, the soothing scrape of blunt nails against his scalp, and the chapped lips moving tenderly against his brow. He grasps at the bits of sensation like an anchor and allows himself to be pulled back to consciousness. The words that moments ago with inaudible become sharper until he can finally make out what Gladio is whispering to the man he thinks is asleep.

“-ish you knew how I feel. But I’m a coward.”

Ignis blinks his eyes open, peridot meeting stunned topaz. The Advisor swipes the tip of his tongue across dry lips and whispers “How is it you feel?”

It’s almost comical, the way Gladio staggers back, tripping over his own feet and landing on his ass with a thump that makes the entire living room shake.

“Gladio?! Are you alright?” Eyes wide with alarm, the sight of Gladio toppling over is enough to drag Ignis the rest of the way to being fully alert. The adrenaline will fade in time and then the medication and his body’s needs will take over again, but for the moment he’s wide awake.

Gladio groans, furiously blushing features hidden behind a hand. His voice is muffled by his own palm as he responds. “Yeah, nothing wounded but my pride. Ugh you scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” Ignis whispers.

“S’fine. You okay?” Gladio squints at him, frowning. “I uh, thought you were asleep.” He rubs the back of his neck sheepishly.

One corner of Ignis’s lips twitch upwards into a wry half-smile. “Apparently.” He takes a deep breath. On the inside he’s a mess – a trembling, fluttering, nervous mess. Maybe he doesn’t want to find out what Gladio was trying to say to him. Maybe it’s not what he’s been thinking and hoping. He has to know, though. One way or another this ridiculous pining has to stop – either because Gladio shoots him down and squashes his silly fantasies, or because Gladio shares his feelings and he can move on beyond the realms of dreams and fantasies.

Ignis forces himself to sit up a bit straighter, lest he nod off at an inopportune moment. Clearing his throat to get Gladio’s attention, he asks again. “How is it you feel? You didn’t answer me.”
“Ignis….” Gladio trails off awkwardly.

Ignis bows his head, studying the pattern of the knit blanket. He can’t quite meet Gladio’s gaze. He can feel his ears turning red with embarrassment. *This was a mistake.*

“I think I might be in love with you,” Gladio murmurs so softly that even awake and alert it’s difficult to hear him.

Ignis slowly lifts his head. His heart is suddenly beating furiously, a frantic staccato against his breastbone. He thinks for a moment that he misheard Gladio, or imagined the whole thing. Surely those words hadn’t fallen from those perfect lips, surely they weren’t meant for his unworthy ears.

Gladio is looking at him, dark lashes lowered in an uncharacteristically shy gesture. The apples of his cheeks are stained red with embarrassment. He certainly looks for all the world like a man who has just confessed his feelings.

“Gladio, forgive me, but-.”

“Naw it’s cool, Iggy, Ignis I mean.” Gladio cuts him off, stumbling awkwardly over his words. “It’s okay, you don’t have to say anything. I, y’know, wasn’t really gonna say anything – uh, not when you’re awake anyway. I don’t want you to feel weird around me or like you’re obligated to do anything, and I mean a-n-y-t-h-i-n-g that you don’t want to. Obviously you don’t feel the same way and that’s okay, it really is. With all that’s happened I don’t expect you to, y’know…” Gladio takes a deep breath and looks like he’s ready to launch into another awkward speech.

Ignis can’t stand it, can’t stand the sight of Gladio looking so awkward and unsure, can’t stand hearing Gladio trying to reassure him that he doesn’t expect Ignis to feel the same way – which is madness, since Gladio has been the sun brightening and warming his entire world for months now.

Throwing the blankets aside, Ignis tumbles inelegantly off of the couch, spilling into Gladio’s lap. They become a messy tangle of limbs, Gladio’s arms slide into place around Ignis to keep him from sliding onto the floor. Ignis wraps his thin arms and legs around Gladio’s bulk, clinging desperately, hands fisting into the material of the other man’s t-shirt, as if the added pressure will give his words more weight, force them to sink in more quickly.

“Would you be quiet so that I can tell you that I think I’m in love with you too?”
It takes Gladio a few heartbeats to fully appreciate what’s happening. Somehow Ignis, who he thought was sound asleep due to exhaustion and prescription painkillers, is wrapped awkwardly around him, trembling fingers digging painfully into the muscles of his back. With instincts that come as naturally as breathing, Gladio wraps his arms around the smaller man, heedless of the way his right leg is going numb beneath Ignis’s awkwardly distributed weight. His own comfort is easily secondary to Ignis’s and he tightens his grip in an effort to ensure that the other doesn’t slip onto the floor.

“Would you be quiet so that I can tell you that I think I’m in love with you too?”

It takes more than a few heartbeats for those words to sink in, but they do. They pierce through the endless layers of doubt and denial that his subconscious has erected until they crash into him with all of the force of a rampaging behemoth.

He’s fantasized about a moment like this more times than he cares to admit, even to himself. In his fantasies, though, they’re set against some ridiculously romantic backdrop like a candlelit dinner with a string quartet. In his fantasies he showers Ignis with lavish gifts of flowers and gourmet chocolates. In his fantasies poetry flows from their lips as they each wax lyrical about how the other makes their soul sing.

In his fantasies they’re not sitting in an awkward heap on Ignis’s living room floor, with nothing but an old television showing a rerun of some gameshow to add to the ambiance. And in his fantasies Gladio definitely doesn’t respond to Ignis’s confession of love with a lame “Uh, you what?”

That is most unfortunately exactly what is happening.

Gladio blinks and shakes his head in an effort to clear the confusion muddling his brain.

“Umm, I think I might be in love with you?” There’s a sudden tentativeness to Ignis’s voice that tears Gladio’s heart to shreds before painfully tying itself back together again with a series of intricate knots.

This is exactly what he’d hoped but also feared would happen if Ignis ever realized the depths and heat of Gladio’s feelings for him. Of course he would meet Gladio’s declaration with one of his own. This is Ignis Scientia – the most selfless soul Gladio has ever met, whose entire life revolves around being subservient and amenable to his social superiors, or basically everyone. How can Gladio possibly trust that Ignis truly means what he’s saying and isn’t simply trying to appease Gladio?

Astrals above, but he wonders if Ignis is even capable of recognizing and returning romantic love. By all accounts he’s lived a rather lonely and harsh life since coming to Insomnia—working himself to exhaustion, denied many of the basic comforts and kindnesses that other people take for granted, deprived as a child of love and affection in favour of conditioning and training for his role, often berated for no reason other than where he was born and to whom.

He doesn’t know what he’s saying, he can’t mean it, he doesn’t know how to differentiate between friendly and amorous feelings. Damnit, Gladio.

Gladio’s brain is screaming at him to open his big stupid mouth and say something. With each
second that passes in silence Ignis’s cheeks turn redder and hotter with embarrassment, and he seems to shrink in Gladio’s arms, curling into himself. Frantically Gladio tightens his grip on Ignis, pulling the lean man into the warmth and protection of his broad chest. Large hands rub soothingly up and down Ignis’s slender back, trying to convey without words just how much he means to Gladio because words seem to be failing him at the moment. Because as many doubts as he has surrounding Ignis’s declaration, he knows in the core of his being that he loves the man, helplessly attracted to both his inner and outer beauty and he hates himself right now for the obvious discomfort he’s inflicting upon Ignis.

Slowly and cautiously as a spring thaw, the tension in Ignis’s body eases and he relaxes against Gladio, resting his forehead against the Shield’s shoulder. Smiling, Gladio rests his chin against the top of Ignis’s head. They sit like this for a few minutes, Gladio scrambling to piece together the shattered remnants of his composure and imagining that Ignis is doing much the same.

Finally, Gladio speaks in a voice held carefully soft and low. “Ignis, do you mean it?”

Ignis pushes back against the muscular arms that restrain him, and Gladio lets his grip go slack, allowing Ignis to lean back so that he can look into Gladio’s eyes. Their faces are still scant inches apart, close enough for Ignis’s breath to tickle his nose, close enough for Gladio to guess at what kissing Ignis Scientia tastes like – like perfection, probably, like a trip to the land of milk and honey.

“Of course I mean it. How could I not?” Eyes like a stormy sea stare at him, and it’s as if a veil has been lifted. Where once he would have described Ignis’s eyes as soft with thought or dull with weariness. Now they’re bright, shining with open adoration. There’s a reverence in Ignis’s gaze that both thrills and terrifies Gladio.

Gladio lets out a slow breath. He needs to handle this with the utmost delicacy. Ignis’s heart is a fragile work of spun glass and it’s currently resting in Gladio’s big, dumb, clumsy hands.

He doesn’t want to hurt Ignis, nor does he want to take advantage of his inexperience and malleable nature. Either act would be unforgivable and he has about five seconds to figure out what to do before his silence freaks Ignis out. He’s standing on the edge of the proverbial blade and he needs to decide which way he’ll fall – and his success hinges on his ability to gauge whether Ignis truly loves him, or if years of abuse have left him confused and a little bit desperate.

“‘I dunno,’” Gladio mumbles. Fuck but this would be so much easier if Ignis weren’t still curled up on his lap, so warm and soft, adorably swimming in Gladio’s clothes. The guy’s distracting as hell. “I figured you’d be more into the scholarly type, y’know, to complement that sexy librarian thing you have goin’ on.”

Ignis laughs and it’s such a pure, wholesome sound that Gladio swears he just has seasonal allergies, those definitely are not tears blurring the edges of his vision.

“Clearly you don’t frequent libraries as often as I do. I’m fairly certain that being a sour-faced, foul-tempered old hag is a requirement for the position. Sexy librarian is quite the oxymoron in my experience.”

Gladio chuckles softly. “Now that you mention it, I do remember being chased out of the romance section of the Citadel library by some fat old broad who looked like a garula’s ass.”

“Ahh yes, I believe that’s Madam Brahne. She’s certainly Exhibit A in the case against librarians actually being sexy.”
Gladio smiles. This is exactly why he loves Ignis – or one of the reasons, at least. He’s clever and witty when he’s not trying to make terrible puns, and he’s so easy to talk to when given the chance.

“Okay, okay. But still, I would’ve thought you’d be more into the smart, bookish type. Someone you can discuss current events and classical literature with over fine wine. Someone who can actually tell fine wine from cheap chocobo piss, too.” He bites his lip, adopting a self-deprecating smile. “You deserve someone smart enough to keep up with you.”

“Oh Gladio…” Ignis smiles at him, and something that looks suspiciously like pity clouds his expression. “Do you really imagine that I would spend so much of my precious free time with you if I didn’t find you sufficiently interesting company?”

Gladio shrugs, though he’s careful not to let the motion displace Ignis from his lap. “I dunno. Maybe? Probably not?” He frowns and chooses his words carefully, sensing an opening to probe at Ignis’s psyche a bit. “Sometimes I think we’re only friends ’cause you’re too nice to tell me to go away.” Because you don’t know how to say ‘no’ to people.

Ignis frowns, and his grip tightens against Gladio’s back again, threatening to stretch and tear the shirt he’s wearing. When Ignis speaks his voice is like biting into a fresh apple – crisp and so tart it stings. “If I have ever behaved in a manner that would lead you to believe yourself to be anything other than exquisite company, Gladio, I heartily apologize and am most unworthy of the affection you just professed. Please, accept my assurances that you are, in fact, quite wonderful company. So wonderful, even, that I’ve gone to great lengths to make time for you.”

Gladio can feel the tips of his ears absolutely burning with embarrassment at having such praises lavished upon him. He opens his mouth, wanting to reassure him that no apologies are necessary and that he knows he’s being a touch dramatic, but Ignis stubbornly keeps speaking, clearly not finished being way too nice.

“Your wit is as sharp as your blades, you’re well-read, and you’re thoughtful. It is truly a pleasure to converse with you on any number of topics, or to even sit quietly and watch you paint. You’re a brilliant, insightful, and talented man, and no one ever tells you these things, do they?” Ignis’s frown deepens and sadness dulls his vibrant eyes. “The world sings your praises for your physical strength, but how often are you praised for your intellect or your art? Not enough, I’d say.”

Gladio’s blush has worked its way into his cheeks and down his neck by this point. How on Eos has this happened? All he wanted to do was press Ignis a bit, testing the waters to make sure there really is some substance behind the feelings he claims to have. He hadn’t expected this rush of praise delivered with such pinpoint accuracy against all of his areas of self-doubt. Yet another reason why he loves this man so much – Ignis’s own self-worth has been so battered and bruised over the years, yet he still has an enormous capacity for kindness and empathy.

“I don’t deserve you,” Gladio murmurs. “I don’t know if anyone does. You’re better than the rest of us, you know.”

Ignis scoffs. “Hard work and perhaps a bit of cleverness. I’m nothing special.”

Bracing a hand against Ignis’s back to keep him steady, Gladio brings his other hand up to gently cup Ignis’s cheek, a callused thumb tracing the high curve of his cheekbone, where his glasses would normally rest. He knows ignis was just saying that to be coy, knows he can’t possibly believe it, but he just can’t let a comment like that slide by unchallenged. He narrows his eyes, topaz piercing into emerald and says with as much authority as he can muster, “No. Don’t say that. You’re incredibly special. And if… if you really feel something for me, if you and me become an
us?” Gladio makes a face, feeling horribly clumsy. “I’ll make sure you never forget how special you are. I’ll remind you every single day.”

Ignis groans and turns his face into the coarseness of Gladio’s palm, as if the Shield can’t feel the heat of the blush the other is so valiantly but futilely trying to hide. Soft lips brush against Gladio’s palm when Ignis speaks, and the touch sends a thrill down his spine. “You really are so kind,” Ignis mumbles against him. “One of the many reasons I enjoy your company.”

“Right back atcha.”

Ignis laughs and peeks around Gladio’s hand, which the Shield gently slides down Ignis’s back again, marvelling again at how small he feels beneath the borrowed hoodie. Too small, too lean. A reminder that Gladio needs to find a way to help him.

“So,” Ignis pauses, even white teeth ravaging his bottom lip for a moment as he seemingly gathers his thoughts, or perhaps his courage. “Is there an us now?”

Gladio hums thoughtfully. He’s confident in his own feelings. He’d gladly erect a stone monument with the words ‘Gladiolus Amicitia Totally Loved Ignis Scientia’ etched into it. And for his part Ignis seems to have really gotten to know Gladio – the real Gladio, the man beneath the big muscles and fancy title, and he seems to really care for him. But still, that bit of spun glass in the shape of Ignis’s heart is still there, so fragile and pure, so easily crushed and misused. He still needs to be cautious. Ignis’s happiness is far too important.

“Do something for me?” He asks, dark brows lifting imploringly.

Ignis nods silently, teeth once again worrying at his lower lip.

Gladio forces his features into his softest smile, the kind usually reserved for his sister’s eyes only. “I need you to be sure. I need to know that you’re not saying all of these beautiful things in the heat of the moment, or because you’re too nice for your own good, or because you’re shaken by what happened last night.”

“I’m not--.”

Gladio shakes his head gently and presses a finger to lips made plump and tender from being bitten. “Just sleep on it, okay? Sleep on it and in the morning when we both have clear heads and aren’t swept up in the moment we can reassess, make sure we both still feel the same way.” Gladio smiles. “I need to make sure that when the reality of all of this sinks in that you still want me.”

Ignis is quiet for a long moment, a faraway look in his eyes. He eventually nods, a rueful smile curling full lips. “That’s actually a very prudent suggestion. May I ask you something, though?”

Gladio nods. “Anything.”

Ignis turns his head slightly, until he’s regarding Gladio with only one of his piercing green eyes. Side eye. He’s fucking giving me side eye. Gladio is equal parts terrified and aroused.

“I don’t doubt your sincerity, even if you thought that I was asleep.” Ignis smirks. “I’d been wondering, suspecting, and hoping for some time.” Gladio’s heart skips a beat and then flutters happily to compensate. “You don’t appear to be extending me that same courtesy. Why?”

Gladio flinches as if struck. Damn, but Ignis really is too clever for his own good. His heart no longer feels light as a feather and fluttery. Instead he feels the lead weight of guilt weighing him down.
“It’s not that I doubt you per se…” Gladio trails off, taking a moment to compose himself, mentally cursing himself for not being as eloquent as Ignis. “I just don’t want to take advantage of you, y’know? I didn’t set out to be your friend ‘cause you’re cute and I wanted some. I don’t want you to feel like you have to like me back…”

With a world-weary sigh Ignis pushes back against the powerful arms that are cradling him, and once again Gladio relaxes his hold without a fight. Ignis slides off of his lap and onto the floor, putting a few inches of space between them. Gladio’s thigh tingles with pins and needles now that Ignis’s weight isn’t awkwardly squishing it. A frown tugs at his rugged features, watching his friend and the object of his desire retreating from him. The few inches between them feel like a mile. Feeling suddenly very small and incredibly nervous, Gladio studies his lap, where he can still feel the lingering warmth of Ignis’s body.

“Gladiolus Amicitia, look at me,” Ignis demands. Wide-eyed, the Shield obeys, looking up at Ignis. He’s greeted by a small, sad smile. “I need to know that if I sleep on this as you suggest, and if in the morning I still feel myself to be in love with you, that you will believe me.”

Gladio nods. “Yeah. Of course.”

“I mean it,” Ignis persists. “I believe I understand where your caution stems from, and I do appreciate your concern. But this can never work if you can’t trust me to navigate my own feelings.”

“I understand,” Gladio murmurs, somewhat abashed.

Ignis’s expression melts into something so tender that it makes Gladio’s chest ache just to witness it. “You’re such a gentle giant. I’m glad we’re friends.”

“Aww geeze. Stoppit. If I blush anymore my head’s gonna combust.”

Ignis laughs and begins standing up. Despite the slight cramp in his leg Gladio jumps to his feet first, scrambling to help Ignis up, supporting some of the smaller man’s weight when he sways unsteadily.

“Let’s get you to bed, yeah?” Gladio presses a hand to the small of Ignis’s back, supportive but undemanding.

“It’s mid-afternoon,” Ignis protests, shooting a pointed glare at the balcony doors through which the dull gray light of a winter’s afternoon floods the room.

“And you’re exhausted. Sleep.” Gladio insists.

Ignis scowls, but dutifully begins walking towards his bedroom. “A brief nap won’t do any great harm to my sleeping schedule,” he concedes.

Gladio smiles and grabs the extra pillow he’d brought to the couch for Ignis, returning it to the bedroom where he’d found it.

With a weary sigh Ignis slides into bed, shifting the pillow beneath his head. Unable to resist, Gladio reaches for the soft blue blanket, pulling it up and over Ignis’s shoulders, tucking him in.

“No, thank you though,” Ignis murmurs, heavy lids already drooping. Gladio hopes the nap will
help lighten the shadows beneath Ignis’s eyes.

“Sleep tight then,” Gladio leans down to press a chaste kiss to Ignis’s brow. The younger man smiles in response to the gesture that is quickly becoming Gladio’s favourite thing. “I’ll be here when you wake up, okay?”

“How. Make yourself at home,” Ignis mumbles, apparently unable to fend off sleep now that he’s tucked into his bed.

Gladio smiles fondly, lingering at Ignis’s bedside. He watches, transfixed, as Ignis succumbs to exhaustion, his chest rising and falling with the steady rhythm of his breaths. He looks so soft and peaceful in sleep. Gladio hopes he dreams sweetly.

He’s tempted to stay, to perch on the edge of the bed, rubbing Ignis’s back until he’s so boneless and relaxed that he sleeps clear through until morning. Or he could squeeze himself into the space between Ignis and the wall, letting himself be used as an object of warmth and comfort. But no. He can’t ask Ignis to sleep on the idea of them becoming more than friends if he climbs into the guy’s bed. Kinda defeats the point of insisting that Ignis get a bit of space and clarity.

Tiptoeing so as not to break the flimsy hold that sleep has on Ignis, Gladio creeps over to the desk at the foot of the bed. He picks up the digital alarm clock and sets it face down, so that if Ignis wakes he won’t be able to look at the time and fret over the hundred and one things he thinks he ought to be doing. He then switches off the lamp and tiptoes out of the room, gently closing the door behind him.

Once he’s clear of the bedroom and in little danger of waking Ignis, he begins pacing the small confines of the apartment. He’s tired, having been up most of the night. Even when he’d seen that Ignis was fine, it had been impossible to shake the mental image of Ignis lying in that hospital bed, or how he imagined Ignis had looked lying in the pool, head bleeding and body freezing. Sleep had been a cruel and elusive mistress and probably would remain so until Gladio’s body gives out on him.

It’s tempting to curl up on Ignis’s couch and nap as well, but he still has a duty to ensure that Ignis rests and remains comfortable. If he’s caught napping on the job Ignis is liable to sneak some work in while Gladio’s snoring away. The King might actually have Gladio beheaded for treason if that happens.

Instead Gladio chooses to pass the time by making himself useful to Ignis. He might not be as good at these things as the young Chamberlain, but he more or less knows how to clean. There are directions on cleaning supplies anyway, right? He pads towards Ignis’s storage closet, finding an assortment of cleaners in spray bottles and aerosol cans, sponges, cloths, and a mop. He grabs a spray bottle at random and starts reading the directions, nodding to himself as he reads.

He has at least a few hours before Ignis wakes up. He’ll let him sleep until evening while Gladio cleans his apartment for him, and then he’ll see to it that he has a proper homecooked meal – somehow. Gladio frowns and sets down the cloth he’s been using to wipe down Ignis’s kitchen surfaces – in slow circular motions just like the directions on the bottle said.

Abandoning his cleaning for just a moment, he sets the rag down on the counter that’s currently only half-polished. His earlier conversation in the car with Ignis is still weighing heavily on his mind, particularly now that he’s not understandably distracted by Ignis confessing his love.

Quietly as he can, he opens cupboard after cupboard in Ignis’s small but tidy kitchen. To his dismay the shelves are barren, a far cry from the cupboards in his own home, perpetually
overflowing with enough food to feed a small army. Ignis has some oatmeal, a supply of cereal bars and a box of rice. Another cupboard houses a small collection of spices and baking necessities. In the fridge he finds a jug of milk and a carton of eggs, with some onions and carrots in the vegetable crisper. His freezer is the only thing that appears to be well-stocked, it’s half full of neat rows of Tupperware dishes full of what appears to be homemade soup.

Gladio closes his eyes, allowing himself a moment to quiet his mind, to cool the flare of temper he can feel threatening to explode. He’d known that Ignis hadn’t been exaggerating about his finances or the state of his pantry, but still, seeing it for himself, comparing it against his own prosperity – it makes him feel sick. He has half a mind to race over to the Citadel right this second, find the King’s chief of staff and throttle him to within an inch of his life. Or better yet, force him at the end of his blade to go before the King and confess what he’s done to Ignis, lay bare the shame of his prejudices.

With shaking hands he pulls his phone out of his pocket. He fumbles with the number pad, continuously going back to erase the numbers his trembling fingers keep accidentally hitting. Finally he manages to enter the number properly and listens as the line rings three times before a familiar voice picks up.

“Master Gladio?”

“Hey Jared,” Gladio sighs and leans back against the counter. “Do you have time to do me a favour?”

“I’ll certainly try. What do you need?”

“Can you go to the market for me?”

“Ahh, certainly. I was planning on visiting the grocer before dinner anyway, we’ve run out of Miss Iris’s favourite fruit punch. What do you need? Not more of those foul noodles, I hope.”

Gladio chuckles warmly. “No, not Cup Noodles, although I mean, I won’t say no to some spicy shrimp flavoured.”

Jared huffs indignantly, but Gladio can sense the old man smiling.

“But no, in all seriousness,” Gladio continues in a low tone, careful not to wake Ignis. “This might sound weird but can you get, I dunno, a bit of everything?”

“Everything, Sir?”

Gladio scratches the back of his neck, frowning thoughtfully. “Uh, well maybe not everything. It’d be a waste if stuff went bad, yeah?”

“Indeed.”

“Just, I dunno, can you pick up a few weeks’ worth of groceries for a person? Maybe extra of stuff that won’t go bad?”

“I suppose so.” Jared pauses and he can hear the concern lacing the steward’s words. “Is everything alright? Forgive me, this is a rather unusual request.”

“Yeah, just fine,” Gladio assures him. “Just trying to help someone out. I’ll text you the address if you don’t mind dropping the stuff off when you’re done. And charge it all to the House … so feel free to splurge on the good stuff, yeah? This guy really deserves it.”
A few hours later, Ignis’s apartment smells pleasantly of lemon and pine, and its surfaces sparkle after liberal applications of cleaner and elbow grease. His cupboards and fridge are overflowing and Gladio can breathe a bit easier now, seeing that Ignis has more substantial options than soup and rice. He’s pretty sure the guy’s not a picky eater, and he’s confident that he’ll be fine with everything Jared bought. He may not be so fine with Gladio’s meddling, but he’ll face Ignis’s wrath with open arms if it comes to that.

Gladio wishes that he could do something to help with Ignis’s duties to the Crown. He knows that in the morning he’ll be back to running himself ragged, possibly moreso than usual in an effort to make up for whatever he may have missed today.

Curling up on the couch, with one of Ignis’s handknit blankets tucked around his lap, he pulls out his phone again, intending to send a few texts and emails to a few choice individuals to see if he can’t somehow make tomorrow a bit easier. He’s just sent a text to Noct, reminding the Prince that he’d better not use Ignis’s absence to slack off on his homework when a sudden burst of sound from Ignis’s bedroom demands all of his attention—it sounds suspiciously like a scream.

The blanket goes flying, and his phone sails out of his hands—he’ll worry about finding it later. His legs can’t carry him to Ignis’s bedroom door fast enough, even though he crosses the distance in only a few strides. Panic-induced adrenaline courses through his veins, and when he pushes the bedroom door open it’s with more force than he intends. He hears the cracking and splintering of wood but he pays it no mind—if he’s broken anything he’ll pay for the repairs.

The light from the kitchen spills into the bedroom through the open door, painting a luminous golden stripe that cuts through the darkness. Gladio blinks, taking a moment for his eyes to adjust to the reduced light. When the shadows dissolve and the world comes into focus he sees Ignis and his heart shatters.

The Advisor is sitting up in bed, the sheets kicked into a tangled mess on the floor. He’s curled up on the edge of the rectangle of light with his back pressed to the wall, hugging the fine line between the darkness and the light. Gladio can’t see his face, it’s hidden behind the knees he’s hugging tight to his chest, but he can see the way his entire body heaves, wracked by silent sobs.

“Ignis?” he whispers, taking a tentative step forward. He has no idea what he’s supposed to do right now, he only knows that he has to do something.

Ignis doesn’t respond, not even a change in the cadence of his breathing or the twitch of a finger. It’s as if he’s not even aware that Gladio is there.

Hesitantly he takes a few steps forward, until his knees hit the edge of the mattress.

“Ignis? Hey, it’s me,” he tries again, and again Ignis doesn’t react.

Panic roils in his gut, and he can taste bile in the back of his throat. Hardly daring to breathe, he perches himself on the edge of the mattress, which dips in response to his weight. He doesn’t know what’s wrong with Ignis, let alone how to fix it. All he knows is that his friend—the man he thinks he could spend his life loving—is hurting and all he wants to do is take the hurt away. Even if it means taking the hurt onto himself. Gladio would gladly bear whatever burdens are currently crushing Ignis if it means sparing him from this pain.

Tentatively, as if the smaller man is made of something as delicate and ethereal as tissue paper, Gladio reaches out a hand, fingertips grazing one of Ignis’s knees. And just like that whatever spell Ignis is under is broken. His slender frame goes slack and he slumps sideways where Gladio’s
willing arms are there to catch him.

“Hey hey, I got you, I got you,” he soothes Ignis. Propriety be damned, Gladio pulls himself up onto Ignis’s bed, his body wrapping around Ignis’s like a shield against whatever torments the darkness was hiding.

“Gladio…” Ignis whimpers, turning to press his face into Gladio’s chest.

“It’s okay. I’m here, I’m so sorry.” Gentle hands rub at Ignis’s arms and shoulders where he can feel the muscles taut as a drawn bow. He pulls Ignis closer to him, encouraging him to lean his weight against him, a hand comes up to card soothingly though his hair.

Ignis’s distress is palpable, he can feel it in the tears soaking through his shirt and the sweat that leaves tawny hair slick under his fingers. It reminds him of the nights his sister used to wake up screaming about the monsters living under her bed.

“Did you have a bad dream?” Gladio asks gently, relentlessly combing his fingers through Ignis’s hair, desperate to soothe him.

Ignis’s breath catches, his lean body growing eerily still against Gladio.

“It was dark,” he finally murmurs, voice only slightly muffled against Gladio’s chest. “I woke up and it was dark.” Oh fucking shit. Ignis is afraid of the dark? Was he supposed to have known this? Frantically Gladio digs through his memories but he doesn’t remember anything. Doesn’t matter, though, not really.

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry,” Gladio murmurs, squeezing Ignis just a bit tighter, tucking his chin down ‘til he can press a kiss to the top of his head. Fuck, he feels like such an asshole.

Ignis shakes his head slowly, shifting so that he can look up into Gladio’s worried, grief-stricken face. “Not your fault,” Ignis reassures him. “And I’m okay now.” He takes a deep breath and smiles weakly. “I’ll accept your apology for not knowing to leave the light on if you’ll accept mine for giving you such a fright.”

Gladio chuckles and murmurs thickly, “Yeah, deal.” He presses a series of kisses to Ignis's brow. Ignis needn't know that each kiss is a silent apology. He still hasn't forgiven himself for the overnight, even if Ignis claims to have done so. "Is there anything I can do?" he finally murmurs. "I can go turn the lamp on for you.”

Ignis shakes his head, graceful arms sliding around Gladio's broad back. "No, please. Just stay here with me for a few minutes? Just until the shaking stops?" He clings to Gladio's back in a silent plea to not let go of him, even for the scant seconds it would take to reach the lamp.

"Yeah, of course, gorgeous," Gladio wraps his arms more securely around Ignis, pouring all of his affection into the gesture. The smaller frame against his continues to shiver, though gradually Ignis's shaking subsides until he rests comfortably against him, body still and lax with comfort. Gladio smiles with endless relief, and Ignis, tentatively, shyly, returns the smile.

Ignis sighs, and his smile falters slightly, becoming a few shades dimmer. “Thank you. And er, I understand if this embarrassing display of mine has changed the way you feel about me…” he trails off awkwardly, gaze averting uncertainly.

Gladio clucks his tongue, tsking at Ignis. “If by that you mean love you even more? Then yeah. Yeah it did.” And he means it. Confronted with the harsh reality of what Ignis’s upbringing has done to him, it only highlights how brave he is for overcoming so much hardship, how remarkable
he is for his kindness and generosity. “You’re fucking incredible, Ignis. You really are. You’re the strongest person I know.”

A blush paints Ignis’s cheeks with a healthy glow. “Right back atcha,” the Chamberlain quips, echoing Gladio’s words from earlier. Gladio beams at him.

Ignis carefully pushes himself up into a proper sitting position, with Gladio’s arm braced against his back for support, just in case.

“Think you can manage to eat some dinner?” Gladio asks.

Ignis hums thoughtfully, and before he can properly answer his stomach gurgles.

They both laugh in unison and the lingering tension in the air melts away. Gladio pushes himself to his feet, a hand extended to help Ignis up.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Here, come with me, I wanna show you something.”

Together they step out into the main living space, Gladio’s arm a gentle reassurance around Ignis’s shoulders as he’s led into his newly stocked kitchen.

To his immense relief Ignis accepts Gladio’s interference with good grace, thanking him profusely for his kindness and generosity. He does, however, insist on a copy of the receipt so that he can repay Gladio once his salary is sorted out. Gladio would have ordinarily refused, but he’s so overcome with relief to hear Ignis talking about his future paychecks with such certainty of them being corrected that he lets it slide.

He installs Ignis on one of the stools at the kitchen counter with a mug of tea, insisting that he cook them dinner.

“Cooking counts as work,” he reminds Ignis with a smug smile. “You can supervise, though. Deal?”

“Deal,” Ignis smiles.

There are still hours to go until they sleep, and hours beyond that before morning will come, but it’s a pretty safe bet that the sun is going to rise on the dawn of a new relationship. Not even The King and his Shield with all of their juvenile competitiveness would be willing to bet against that.
Chapter Notes

*peeks in shyly*

Hi! I'm sorry for the delay! My life's been just a teensy bit bananas. I'm not even busy, just stressed out of my mind. Bleh. It's all good, though! Life marches on and all that! And so does this story.

This is a shorter chapter, because I just really needed to get something out to you guys, and it wound up being not a bad place to stop, even if not much actually happens. It's just a nice place to stop and linger, roll around in the Gladnis fluff, y'know. <33

When Ignis was small he used to tumble into his bed above the one-room schoolhouse, exhausted and content after a long day of studying, doing his chores, and playing outside. His bed may have been a humble affair, with bits of straw poking out of the mattress to scratch an unwary sleeper, and a coarse blanket that was inadequate protection against the northern chill, but he slept soundly in it every night and woke up feeling refreshed every morning.

This is the first morning since moving to Insomnia in which Ignis awakes feeling alert and well-rested, and he knows that it has nothing to do with his soft mattress and plush blankets. It has everything to do with the man currently asleep on his couch, whose simple presence suffuses Ignis’s home with an aura of safety and comfort.

Gladio had flatly ignored Ignis’s protestations that he would be fine until morning if Gladio wanted to go home and sleep in the comfort of his own bed. He hadn’t even dignified Ignis with a response. The Shield had then scoffed at the suggestion that he take the bed while Ignis slept on the couch or the floor. After seeing Ignis tucked cozily into his bed for the night, with the desk lamp switched on, Gladio had retired to the couch with a spare pillow and an armful of blankets.

Quietly, Ignis gets himself ready for the day. On tiptoes he crosses the hall from his bedroom to the bathroom, a suit draped over one arm. Every effort is made to not wake Gladio, whom he can hear quietly snoring from the living room. A smile twitches against Ignis’s lips. Even the man’s snoring is soothing, a gentle rumbling, a reassurance that he’s not alone. A small, treacherous part of Ignis’s brain had half expected Gladio to wake up through the night and flee the apartment in terror, remembering what they had both confessed the previous day and how pathetically Ignis had behaved in the throes of a night terror.

Ignis manages to shower and change into his suit without disturbing Gladio’s rest. If he could, he would linger at home longer. He doesn’t know when Gladio went to bed, or how well he slept, but he has a sneaking suspicion that the other man was probably up half the night keeping watch over Ignis. Shame curls around Ignis’s insides as he remembers what he can of his panic attack. He must have given Gladio an awful fright. Possibly enough to frighten him away from any amorous ideations he’d held, though Ignis hopes not.

Padding quietly upon socked feet, he makes his way into his kitchen. The least that he can do is make Gladio a lavish breakfast to thank him for all of his kindness and care. He tries not to dwell on the fact that Gladio paid for virtually everything currently in his kitchen, his guilt somewhat
assuaged by the knowledge that he has the receipt and will absolutely be paying him back.

Ignis works quietly but efficiently. For once his refrigerator is well-stocked with fresh vegetables, so he prepares omelettes with diced tomato, mushroom, peppers, and onions. He also fries a hearty portion of bacon. Finally, he grates potatoes and fries them in the leftover bacon grease. It is a sumptuous breakfast feast, on par with the fare he cooks for the Prince in the morning. Somehow ignis wishes that it could be more.

Ignis is just beginning to plate his meal when the tantalizing aroma of fried bacon finally lures Gladio out of dreamland. The other man’s snores dissolve into a series of soft sighs and a yawn as Gladio casts his blankets aside and rises. He stretches, the motion punctuated by a series of sharp cracks. Guilt nibbles fresh and sharp at Ignis’ s gut, realizing that Gladio is too tall for the couch; his back is probably tied up in knots now. One more thing to make amends for, he chastises himself brutally. Not that Gladio is one to keep a running tally.

“Good morning,” Ignis calls gently from the kitchen.

“Mornin’. Something smells really good.”

A smile, tentative and shy, finds purchase on Ignis’s lips. “Thank you.” He intends to simply acknowledge the kind compliment towards his cooking, but the floodgates are opening and his gratitude flows freely upon the tide. “Truly, Gladio. Thank you for everything. For taking such good care of me, and for all of this.” He gestures at his kitchen, which is full to bursting with groceries.

Broad shoulders roll in an easygoing shrug. “Don’t worry about it. ‘Sides, if you made me bacon we’re more than even.” Gladio flashes a smile that immediately disarms Ignis.

Ignis chuckles, and somehow, despite the fact that he was cooking for two, every piece of bacon manages to find its way onto Gladio’s plate.

Gladio leans casually against the counter, peering curiously into the cramped kitchen, stealing glimpse at what Ignis has made. Ignis busies himself with pouring them glasses of juice and finishing plating.

“So,” Gladio’s voice breaks the sudden silence, “did you sleep okay?”

“Indeed. Likely better than you.” Ignis clucks his tongue as he sets out a pair of placemats and cutlery for them.

“I’m fine,” Gladio deflects easily.

“Hardly. That couch did a number on your back. Be a good lad and add a backrub to my current tab.”

Gladio snorts. “Nothin’ a hot shower won’t fix.” Ignis catches the faintest hint of pleasure sweeping across Gladio’s chiseled features. He’s not nearly as disagreeable to Ignis laying hands on him as he lets on. They smile at each other.

“I’m afraid my mind is quite made up on the matter.”

Gladio’s smile trembles, and something vulnerable glistens behind his eyes. “You don’t change your mind easily, do you?”

Ignis presents his full attention to Gladio, sharp sea foam gaze taking the man in. Suddenly they
are no longer talking about Ignis’s desire to massage Gladio’s sore muscles and they both know it. He notes and catalogues every silent cue he can read in Gladio’s body language, from the way his pupils are beginning to eclipse amber irises, the nervous twitching of his index finger, to the way his body curls forward as if drawn towards Ignis.

Angular features soften as Ignis smiles. “No, I don’t change my mind easily.”

Relief wrought into every feature, Gladio returns the smile.

“One moment,” Ignis holds a beseeching finger up.

When Gladio nods, Ignis turns back to their breakfast. He dashes some salt and pepper onto their plates, and then grabs the bottle of ketchup on the counter. Tendrils of embarrassment and anxiety attempt to lick at his consciousness because Astrals above this is almost too silly for words, but he firmly tamps down on them. Hoping that Gladio actually likes ketchup, and hoping that he likes foolish romantic gestures, he carefully paints the outline of a ketchup heart onto the omelette before sliding the plate onto the placemat in front of Gladio.

Any possibility of Gladio overlooking the subtext of their earlier discussion flies out the window when faced with affirmation of Ignis’s affections in condiment form.

Shy eyes peek out at Gladio through a fringe of tawny brown hair, watching as twin patches of heat bloom in his cheeks. Gladio’s smile is almost blinding with its brilliance and for a moment he looks like he might vault over the counter separating them. The larger man seems to think better of it, though, and instead he turns and races around the corner, to where the actual entrance to the kitchen is.

The refrigerator shudders against Ignis’s back as the pair crash into it, with one of Gladio’s hands protectively cradling Ignis’s head before it can slam against the metal door. The breath is knocked from Ignis’s lungs but it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters, not the sudden ache in his shoulder, not the muffled clattering of glass jars falling over in the fridge. All that matters are Gladio’s strong arms wrapping around him and the frantic press of lips against his brow and temples.

Ignis melts against the comforting press of Gladio’s chest against his. His arms are pinned to his sides and he longs to wrap them around Gladio, to return a fraction of the love and affection being lavished upon him. He settles on breathlessly whispering. “I love you. I really love you.”

Gladio pulls back a fraction, just enough to allow Ignis to gasp in a greedy lungful of air, and just enough for Ignis to wind his arms around Gladio’s broad back and squeeze. Ignis has months worth of suppressed feelings that he’s aching to let out and he tries to infuse the embrace with every last one of them. All of the admiration, the love and affection, the countless times he’s fantasized about Gladio embracing him as something more than a friend.

And Ignis can feel the same from Gladio. His powerful arms tremble as they hold Ignis. Gladio’s joy is palpable and infectious and Ignis finds himself laughing in a pure, uninhibited expression of happiness.

After a few minutes spent frantically clutching each other, Gladio carefully disentangles himself from around Ignis and takes a step back. Ignis watches, brows knitting in confusion, as Gladio sinks to the floor with a thud that makes Ignis’s own knees ache in sympathy.

Large hands, rough with calluses and dark with a permanent tan, reach for Ignis’s. His hands seem pale and fragile in comparison, and Gladio holds his hands with such gentleness that it’s as if the larger man is truly afraid of hurting Ignis. The Chamberlain smiles faintly at the excessive care. It
should irritate him, because he’s by no means a delicate flower, but it’s Gladio, and that makes all
of the difference. He can live with being treated like spun glass as long as he’s Gladio’s bit of spun
glass.

The Shield peers up at him, golden eyes so soft and earnest that it nearly breaks Ignis’s heart to
look into that adoring gaze. He doesn’t feel as if he deserves to have anyone look at him the way
that Gladio looks at him now. It’s a look of such veneration, a look that should be reserved for the
Gods. Everything about the man before him screams adoration, from his humble position kneeling
at Ignis’s feet, to that reverent gaze that makes Ignis feel so unworthy, but so grateful.

Gladio squeezes his hands gently and clears his throat. When he speaks it’s like sinking into a
warm bath. “Ignis, you are the single most remarkable person I have ever had the privilege of
knowing. You deserve so much better than what you’ve been given, and an entire lifetime devoted
to your happiness wouldn’t be sufficient to give you all you’re due.”

Gladio pauses and lifts their joined hands to his lips, kissing the back of each before continuing.
“But I swear to you here and now, I may be sworn to protect Noct’s life with my own, and nothing
will ever change that, but I make a second vow to you now. You will be an extremely close second,
and I will guard your heart and your happiness with equal devotion. I will always put your wants
and needs before my own, and your happiness will be my highest priority and dearest wish.”

When he finishes, Gladio bows his head, pink-cheeked with embarrassment. Ignis stands there a
moment, trembling as if he can feel the waves of Gladio’s devotion crashing against him like the
sea. It’s exhilarating and overwhelming, and most of all it’s humbling.

He suspects that Gladio was up half the night preparing this little speech, and he wishes that he
could resent the other man for the opportunity he’d had to rehearse it. Ignis knows his own words
will come out clumsy and unpolished by comparison.

Still hand in hand, Ignis folds his legs, bringing himself to kneel down at Gladio’s level. Holding
himself above Gladio, after such a beautiful declaration, would be obscene and unforgivable.

“Oh Gladio,” he sighs and surrenders to a dreamy smile. “I don’t know which Astral’s favour I’ve
earned to be blessed with you, but I thank them all every single day for you.” Ignis exhales a
shuddering sigh and is vexed to find that a thin veil of tears obscures his vision. He blinks, sending
wet trails down his cheeks. “I’ll strive every day to be worthy of you. An impossible task, but I
shall make a valiant effort.”

Gladio shakes his head and chuckles thickly. It’s difficult to tell through the mist that’s fallen over
his own gaze, but he thinks Gladio may be crying too.

“You’re such a dork, Iggy.”

Ignis starts at the nickname. He lets the sound of it roll around and around in his head. Iggy. Hmm.
He likes it, if it’s Gladio who says it.

“You’re a dork too, Gladio. How long did it take you to come up with that beautiful speech?”

A sheepish grin spreads across his face, diverting the trails of tears ignis can now plainly see
creeping down his cheeks. “Couple hours, I dunno. Shut up, I was nervous, ok?”

Ignis’s expression softens. “Scared I would change my mind?” When Gladio nods, Ignis leans
towards him, until their noses are nearly touching. “I was afraid you would change your mind too.
I’m glad you didn’t.”
“Not as glad as I am.”

They gaze into each others’ eyes, both luminous with tears both shed and unshed, both wearing matching smiles. They’re so close that their breaths mingle, teasing and tickling each other.

After a few moments Gladio breaks the comfortable silence.

“Hey Iggy?”

“Yes?”

“Is it okay if I kiss you now?”

“Please,” Ignis breathes.

It’s nothing like Ignis imagined—not that he’d ever truly imagined that anyone would want to kiss him. It will take some time to get used to the idea that not only does somebody, anybody, actually wants him, but that Gladio, handsome, brilliant, charismatic Gladio wants him. Gladio, who could have his pick of the most eligible singles in the city.

The kiss is wet and tastes of salt from their mingled tears, and Gladio’s lips are surprisingly soft against his, as if he’s holding himself back, as if Ignis might shatter beneath the slightest pressure. Clumsy and awkward with inexperience, Ignis leans forward, pressing his lips more firmly against Gladio’s. There’s a soft grunt of surprise and Gladio nuzzles eagerly against Ignis’s mouth.

They kneel there together for several minutes, trading chaste closed-mouth kisses, until the ache of the linoleum under their knees and the tempting aroma of their waiting breakfast finally forces them to their feet again. Gladio is there with a steady presence for Ignis, who’s breathless and dizzy.

They only let go of each other’s hands when it’s time to eat, and even then, they sit side by side at the counter, Gladio’s right hand still clinging to Ignis’s left, each man preferring to make do eating one-handed rather than release the hold they’d both waited so long to secure.
Hi again!

I cannot thank you all enough for sticking with this story. You're amazing and I love and appreciate you.

Apologies for the late update. Between Gladnis Week and Episode Ignis it's been difficult to write, but I'm sure you've all been as swept up in the mayhem as I have been, so hopefully you didn't really mind not getting an update last week. There's been so much amazing Gladnis and Ignis content in the fandom. I'm still way behind with reading everything.

Updates should be back to weekly from here on out, now that the dust has settled from the DLC and from our ship week.

Also fair warning, this is a bit of a setup chapter but I hope there are some good things for you to latch onto. <33

It’s as if a veil has been lifted from over his eyes and now Gladio can see Ignis with startling clarity, both the Advisor’s effortless personal beauty and the ugliness that seems to haunt him.

Gladio’s heart swells (as do other parts of his anatomy) when he catches a glimpse of Ignis at work. Everything about the man, his boyfriend he has to remind himself constantly, is perfection. He loves the way Ignis adjusts his glasses with the tip of a finger, so efficient and precise, the minimum of effort expended. His heart skips a beat at the way Ignis unconsciously cocks a hip when he’s standing, as if his body doesn’t know how to be anything but beautiful. Whether Ignis is cleaning up after Noctis, taking notes during Council meetings, or simply standing there, Ignis is the epitome of elegance and poise.

In contrast, his heart constricts and threatens to break when he notices the way some of their coworkers treat Ignis, especially in the wake of Flavinius and Percy’s expulsion from the Council. The King had made every effort to shelter Ignis from the rigors of the gossip mill, but apparently anyone walking past the holding cells beneath the Citadel can hear the two ousted aristocrats cursing Ignis’s name. Anyone passing by will also see matching bandages across both of their noses, identical breaks that coincide rather neatly with the scrapes across Clarus Amicitia’s knuckles. Sometimes, Gladio knows, a Shield must be used as a battering ram when it would be unseemly for a King to sully his hands.

Gladio notices the stray elbows and shoulders that seem drawn to Ignis like magnets, forcing the slim man towards the nearest hard surface. He notices the change in tone when certain members of staff address Ignis, the way their lips curl and eyes narrow as if they’re seeing something offensive. He notices the way Ignis shakes their ill-treatment off, the mask of cool composure that slides across his features. He’s at once proud of Ignis’s resilience, and furious that there’s still a need for it.
He notices as well, though, the tentative smiles, the soft touches of sympathetic hands on Ignis’s shoulders. In particular members of the Kingsglaive are treating Ignis with a sense of camaraderie now. It’s as if, despite his exotic accent, they hadn’t realized before that like many of their own members, Ignis isn’t native to Insomnia, and has been subjected to the same hardships born of prejudice that they have.

Gladio suspects, hopes, and prays, that the tide is turning for Ignis at last. If it’s not, he vows to stand firmly at his side to weather the storm with him. Amicitias are known to break noses to defend the honor of those they care about, after all. It’s only a matter of time before the general populace clues in to the fact that Ignis has more than one champion within that great House.

It’s only been a few days since their mutual declarations of love, anointed with tears and ketchup hearts. Only a few days, but they’ve been the happiest that Gladio can recall. The simple knowledge that Ignis is out there somewhere, the guardian of the missing piece of his heart, is a comfort that Gladio hadn’t even realized that his life has lacked.

Gladio sits in an ornate armchair that he hopes is sturdier than its spindly antique legs would indicate. He waits, not very patiently, for Ignis to join him. It’s the day of the winter solstice, the last half-day of work before the gears of the Citadel grind to a halt for nearly three days. In a few hours most of the staff will be dismissed to spend precious time with their families, including Gladio’s father. Regis has always been very particular in that regard, since Gladio’s mother passed. He’s as determined that the Amicitia siblings spend the holiday with their father as he is that Noctis be afforded the same luxury.

Ignis has managed to secure the pair of them the last audience of the day with the King, hence Gladio sits in the prissy armchair, in the small waiting area outside of Regis’s private study.

When Ignis arrives precisely five minutes early, Gladio’s heart does that happy floaty thing that it likes to do when he sees his new love. He lifts a hand in silent greeting. He can feel Ignis’s nervous energy from across the room, and flashes what he hopes is a comforting smile. Weakly Ignis returns the gesture as he takes the vacant seat beside Gladio, a small bundle of papers resting on his lap.

Instinctively Gladio stretches his long leg to the side, casually hooking his ankle around Ignis’s, a gentle reminder that he’s not alone in this.

“Thank you,” Ignis murmurs, eyes like a spring morning flicking from the place where their feet are tangled together, to the report balanced on his lap. The report is the one that Gladio helped compile over the past few days, filled with paystubs and photocopies of pertinent sections of Lucian tax codes and civil service compensation agreements.

“I got you, Iggy.” Gladio smiles at him.

Right on time, the ornate double doors to Regis’s office are thrown wide, and the almost bored voice of the King’s secretary drones: “Audience for Ignis Scientia and Gladiolus Amicitia.”

As one they rise, and Gladio watches with amusement as Ignis uses his free hand to smooth imaginary wrinkles out of his slacks and pick at non-existent bits of lint on his waistcoat.

They enter Regis’s private office, and at a gesture from the King his secretary excuses herself, quieting closing the doors in her wake.

In unison both young men bow deeply, hands clenched reverently over the heart.
“Be at ease,” Regis gently releases them from their obeisance.

“Thank you, Majesty,” they both chorus, unrehearsed, but raised in the same maelstrom of etiquette and protocol. They then turn to Clarus Amicitia who, as ever, shadows his liege. Ignis dips a shallow, respectful bow, while Gladio merely nods to his father.

“Lord Amicitia.”

“Hi Dad.”

Regis settles himself behind a desk that dominates the room. Like almost everything in the Citadel it’s panelled in black marble with fine silver veins curling through it. It’s so massive that it’s a wonder how it even fit through the office doors. Legend says that the desk was placed here first and the walls of the King’s study were erected around it some thousand years ago.

Most of the room’s décor is ostentatious, and in keeping with the glossy black and white theme of the Citadel. Regis has, however, managed to infuse the space with a little bit of himself, mostly by way of the collection of framed photographs vying for space on crowded tables and shelves.

“Have a seat.” The King gestures politely to the chairs set at an angle to the enormous desk, upholstered in glossy black velvet.

Murmuring thanks, they both fold into the indicated chairs. Gladio aches to reach across the inches separating them and take Ignis’s hand, or to wind their ankles together again. He knows that the other man is nervous and his own need to offer comfort is nearly overwhelming.

Regis smiles kindly at the pair of them. “Dare I hope you boys are here on a mission of mercy, to spare two tired old men from doing any more work on a festival day?”

Gladio chuckles. Ignis chokes and immediately looks guilt-stricken.

“I, er well, apologies, Majesty. Of course, if you’d prefer this can always be deferred--”

Regis holds up a hand and is immediately rewarded with silence.

“Forgive me, Ignis, I forgot whom I was dealing with. I was only teasing. I’m happy to see either of you for any reason. Now, what is this all about?” Regis smiles kindly, and Gladio at least is sensible to the fondness in his eyes, even if Ignis remains too flustered to notice.

Ignis exhales a slow breath, something that Gladio has come to recognize as his way of scooping up the broken pieces of his composure.

“I wish to lodge a formal complaint in respect to my compensation.” A rush of embarrassed colour suffuses his cheeks when Clarus and Regis both lift their brows, clearly surprised. “I have already filed and lost an appeal through the administrative branch, and per protocol, this is the next step, and though I will apologize for the selfishness that leads me to this, I find myself compelled to encroach upon your most valuable time.”

Regis clears his throat before speaking. “No need to apologize, Ignis. Even a King finds himself tangled up in red tape at times. It’s the world we live in. And if as you say you’ve already brought your concerns to the admin office and remain unsatisfied then yes, I can review your petition.” He nods to the report clutched on Ignis’s lap. “Is that for me?”

“Yes, Majesty.” Ignis bows his head and meekly holds out the report. Clarus, respectfully, withdraws a few steps, lest he accidentally read something not intended for his eyes.
While Regis begins reading over the materials Ignis has provided, Gladio finds his gaze wandering the room. It seems impolite to stare at Regis while he reads, so instead he takes a few minutes to peruse the photographs clustered together on every spare surface.

There are countless pictures of Noctis through the years, from the days when he resembled a black and white beach ball, right up to the start of high school where Noctis proudly models his new school uniform. There’s no particular rhyme or reason that Gladio can discern for their placement. Pictures of a cooing baby sit alongside a sullen adolescent Noctis. Silly, somewhat blurry candid shots probably taken by Regis himself share space with fussy posed shots orchestrated by the royal photographer.

The pictures aren’t only of Noctis, though. His own face peeks out at him from a few frames. Every so often Gladio’s gaze will also alight upon a fringe of sandy hair and big green eyes behind thick-framed glasses. A little piece of Gladio’s heart melts away with every glimpse of a tiny Iggy.

Many of the pictures of Ignis are him with the Prince, which is natural, as he was Noctis’s shadow growing up. There’s an especially cute one of the two of them sitting on a couch, Noctis in a black romper, and Iggy, no more than eight years old, wearing short pants and suspenders and a fucking adorable bow tie of all things. Both boys are leaning into each other, eyes closed, mouths open, fast asleep, with a long-forgotten book open on Ignis’s lap. He must have been reading to the young Prince when they fell asleep together. There’s something brotherly and pure about the way they’re leaning into each other for comfort.

Another photo steals Gladio’s attention and heart. It’s a rare photo of Ignis alone, grinning up at the camera. There’s a big gap in his smile and the tiny Ignis in the frame is gleefully holding up a bloody tooth. The shot is slightly out of focus, and it occurs to Gladio then why his gaze is so drawn to it—other than the fact that it’s an adorable picture. It’s the kind of picture a parent takes. In the excitement of the moment there wasn’t time to wipe the blood off of the tooth or get the lighting and focus just right. There was a precious moment where a child lost perhaps their first tooth that begged to be captured, and it looks like Regis had obliged.

There are others as well, of course. A teenaged Ignis shyly holding a university diploma, a preteen Ignis biting his lip in concentration as he stares at something baking in an oven. Small Ignis and a smaller Noctis walking hand-in-hand in the Palace garden. Little moments in the man’s life that had stirred something fond and affectionate in the King.

If it were possible, Gladio respects and admires his King more than ever because looking around this room now it’s plain that he really does care about Ignis. He cared enough when Ignis was small to capture these precious moments, and he cares enough today to give those photographs places of honor in his private space.

Gladio shifts his gaze back towards the King, whose brows furrow tighter and tighter the more he reads. At his side, Ignis looks pale, nervousness having leached the color from his cheeks. He wishes he could shake the other man by the shoulder, point out the pictures of Ignis through the years interspersed with those of the Prince, and yell about how obvious it is that Regis loves him, yell about how the anger glinting in the King’s eyes isn’t directed at Ignis for ‘wasting his time’ as Ignis probably imagines.

Fortunately, Gladio’s self-control isn’t tested for long. Regis doesn’t need to read much beyond the first few pages. Sighing, the King closes the cover on the report and looks away. He scrubs a hand tiredly over his face and seems to gather himself, composing himself, before shifting to regard Ignis and Gladio. Behind him Clarus stiffens, naturally displeased by anything that seems to make his friend and liege so plainly unhappy.
When Regis speaks there’s an almost eerie tranquility to his voice, and Gladio just knows that if that calm façade slips that an unholy fury will come raining down on them all.

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Ignis.” Regis takes a breath and lets it out slowly, just the way Ignis does when under pressure. “First, let me assure you that this will be taken care of immediately. There won’t be any deductions from your future pay, other than mandatory taxes.”

Ignis opens his mouth as if to protest, then clearly seems to think better of interrupting the King of all people.

Regis waves a dismissive hand. “I don’t care if a few of these might be justifiable. I know you do more for my son than your job description requires—yes I know about the cooking and cleaning, everyone does—if you’re doing four different jobs on one salary, then I think we can overlook a free car and the occasional snack from the kitchens, hmm?”

Color rushes back into Ignis’s cheeks, going from paper white to tomato red within seconds. He opens and closes his mouth a few more times, stuttering out something that is probably agreement or thanks, but comes out as a jittery whimper.

“Furthermore,” Regis continues, heedless of the man who is about to die of gratitude before him, “You’ll be reimbursed for the previous deductions.” A drawer is pulled open, and after a few seconds of fumbling about, Regis pulls out a calculator. “You moved out shortly after turning sixteen, correct?”

“Y-yes Majesty,” Ignis squeaks.

“Hmm.” Regis taps a few buttons, muttering to himself all the while. “Alright so we owe you… ahh let’s just round that up to an even fifty, that’s better. Now let’s double that for the hardship this no doubt caused you.” He presses a button embedded in the side of his desk and an intercom crackles to life.

“Your Majesty?” The secretary asks, her voice fuzzy through the speaker.

“Have a cheque for 100,000 gil prepared for Ignis, please. Thank you.”

“Right away.”

Gladio clenches his jaw so hard to avoid gaping at the King that he thinks he might have cracked a molar. A hundred thousand gil is a ridiculous amount of money. Ignis is worth every penny in Gladio’s opinion, but it’s still incredible to see how readily the King turns a small fortune over to Ignis.

Ignis clears his throat a few times before he manages in a soft voice, “Thank you, your Majesty. I’ll strive to be worthy of your generosity.”

Regis shakes his head gently. “I’m simply doing what is right.” He sighs and there’s that flicker of raw anger in his eyes again. “I’ll also have to look into how this managed to get past my chief of staff and the appeals board.”

Ignis bows his head in acknowledgment. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

“Thank you, Ignis, for continuing to be so good to my son n spite of everything that you’ve been going through.”

Ignis gasps, a short, shocked indrawing of breath. Gladio winces, but quickly schools his features.
If Regis or Clarus notice their odd reactions they have the grace to not comment on it. *If only they knew what exactly everything entails,* Gladio muses wryly.

“It’s my honor to serve, Majesty.” Gladio has to admire Ignis’s ability to wrangle his composure. It’s a damn art form.

Regis chuckles softly, his eyes softening as he regards the Chamberlain-to-be, the cold fury melting away when confronted with the warmth and purity of Ignis’s devotion. “You truly are something, my boy. Is there anything else I can help you with? Either of you?” The King inclines his head in Gladio’s direction.

Ignis’s fingers twitch and Gladio longs to reach over and grasp his hand. The pair share a quick look, peridot locking onto topaz, each searching for a hint of hesitation, both seeking to confirm a conversation they’d had the night before. Small smiles, soft and secretive, alight upon both of their faces. No second thoughts, no sudden reservation. They both want the same thing.

“Actually, there is,” Gladio speaks up finally. “If you have a few more minutes, Majesty, Father.” Gladio nods to each. Clarus’s brows immediately shoot towards his receding hairline. Like Gladio up until this point, Clarus is more accustomed to being a silent observer, an imposing presence at the side of someone important to him. Their second order of business concerns him as well, however.

Regis nods, and Clarus takes a few steps forward until he’s hovering close enough for his robes to occasionally brush the King’s shoulder.

He’d been up half of the night rehearsing this in his head. A pretty speech about how much he respects his family’s traditions, how sacred his duty is to him, how no man nor Astral can keep him from protecting the prince. Flowery words that he hoped would seduce his father and the King into giving Ignis and himself their blessing.

As his gaze lands fondly upon the picture of a gap-toothed little Ignis all of his carefully prepared speeches go flying out the window.

Their world is so full of protocol and etiquette, of fancy speeches laced with hollow platitudes. Ugly thoughts often disguised with elegant prose. A miasma of insincerity permeates the Lucian court, masking the often selfish and sinister truth.

His love for Ignis, though, is pure, a beacon in the darkness that he doesn’t want to taint with scripted words. Instead he speaks from the heart, as a son to his father, and as a suitor to his love’s father figure. If Regis truly feels for Ignis the way that Gladio believes he does, he can’t imagine Regis wanting the Advisor to be with anyone who can’t speak plainly and proudly of their feelings.

Clearing his throat, he addresses both men and does nothing to hide the vulnerability in his expression, because he is vulnerable. If they deny his request something will shatter in him beyond repair, he just knows it.

“Ignis and I would like to date each other, but we both agree that we can only do so with your permission.” Gladio bows his head respectfully, holding the humble posture for a few heartbeats before looking back up to meet the gaze of his King and his Shield.

The two older men shift their gazes toward each other, their expressions both silently asking *Did you know about this?* They both shake their head. The pair seem to carry on a silent conversation, full of subtle hand waving and head cocking. Eventually Clarus shrugs and flashes a half-smile, and the pair of them turn to face the two younger men, both of whom have gone deathly pale,
hands clutching their respective armrests.

“Well boys, first allow me to commend you for not indulging in the time-honored tradition around here of sneaking around.” Regis quirks a funny half-smile himself. “I can assure you, most of your colleagues are not nearly as subtle nor clever as they imagine.”

“Iggy deserves better than that,” Gladio blurts out. Immediately his cheeks burn with shame at having interrupted his King, but he can’t find it in himself to regret his outburst, because it’s true. Ignis deserves better than to be someone’s secret boyfriend, to be relegated to stolen moments in dark corners of the Citadel, as if Gladio’s ashamed of him. He knows that Ignis is too professional to abide making a public spectacle, but he at least wants to be able to say with pride if asked about his love life “Yes, I’m dating the gorgeous and brilliant Ignis Scientia. Yes, I am very lucky, thank you.”

“I agree,” Regis replies mildly. “You both do. You also, I believe, deserve better than to have me question your dedication to your respective duties. I will simply remind you both that should your performance ever be found lacking for any reason, you will not be given a free pass simply because I am rather fond of you both.”

Both young men nod their understanding.

“Provided your relationship does not somehow interfere with your duties, then I can have no objection.” Regis smiles, hazel eyes twinkling kindly. “I have no wish to be a tyrant who dictates to his people whom they can and cannot be with. Particularly people such as yourselves. It would be a cruel way to repay your service.”

Ignis bows his head modestly. “Thank you, Majesty.”

Clarus nods his agreement but fixes Gladio with a stern glare that he is all too familiar with. “A word of caution, Gladiolus.” Oh shit, the full name. “Your first duty will always be to the Prince. You may someday have to choose between saving Noctis’s life, or saving Ignis’s. Have you considered this? It is a very real possibility when you’re involved with someone so close to your charge.”

Gladio swallows hard. He has. He’s thought about this very concept since the day he first came to understand his duty. Of course, growing up it wasn’t always Ignis he had nightmares about being killed or wounded in front of him while he shielded his Prince. It was his parents, then his sister, and various friends over the years. The knowledge has always been there, though, settled like an iceberg in the pit of his stomach. And his reaction to it now is the same as it ever has been.

“There is no choice to be made, Sir. I protect His Highness.”

Clarus nods solemnly. “Right you are.”

“Do I have your permission as well then, Sir?”

Clarus flicks his steely gaze from one to the other. Ignis visibly shrinks down into his chair, curling defensively into himself. Gladio hates to imagine the self-deprecating internal monologue the other man is doubtlessly subjecting himself to. He makes a mental note to lavish him with praise later on—provided that he’s not about to be expressly forbidden from seeing him outside of work, of course.

“If he’s willing to put up with you, I have no objections.”

Gladio is too relieved to be offended by the jab. He smiles with a flash of white teeth and dimples.
“Thank you. This is the greatest festival gift I’ve ever been given.”

“Thank you so much,” Ignis breathes, eyes wide with wonderment, as if he’d really thought Regis or Clarus would have shut them down. “Your Majesty, I swear that my commitment to His Highness will not waver. And Lord Amicitia, thank you for giving me this chance. I’m sensible that I hardly deserve someone of Gladio’s quality. I shall endeavour to be worthy.”

Gladio winces at the self-deprecation lurking beneath Ignis’s words. He is definitely going to have to shower the guy with compliments whenever possible. He’ll make a nuisance of himself if he has to.

“Relax, Ignis.” Clarus offers a rare smile, soft and gentle, a look usually reserved for Iris. “Just be kind to each other, and remember your duty. I can’t ask for more.”

“Well said.” Regis smiles and with a soft creak he pushes his chair back and rises. “Now, if neither of you have any additional petitions?” They both shake their head. “Then I say we uncork a bottle of the Altissian white Cor gifted me this morning and toast the happy couple.”

It’s not easy, but after a glass of wine they both feel relaxed and happy. Today went better than either of them dared to hope. Ignis’s salary has been resolved, with a massive bonus on top of it, and the King and Clarus both heartily approve of their relationship.

They really are the last appointment of the day on the King’s calendar, and are easily persuaded to linger, to relax with more wine while Regis and Clarus take turns good-naturedly grilling them for details of their relationship. They almost seem disappointed to discover that it’s only been a few days, so no, there really are no embarrassing or scandalous stories to tell yet.

“Actually, we were planning our first proper date for today, provided that we secured your permission,” Ignis explains, the apples of his cheeks rosy from the wine. “Just a brief get-together to exchange festival gifts, before Gladio goes home for the holiday.”

A giddy thrill races down Gladio’s spine at the reminder. Ignis has asked him to meet him in the music room at three. Now that the anxiety of the audience is behind him, he can eagerly look forward to this and hopefully many other dates. Ignis’s festival gift is currently tucked away in his office and he cannot wait to see his boyfriend’s reaction to it.

Clarus nods, smiling. “I see. And do you have any particular plans for the holiday?”

Ignis lifts his shoulders in an elegant shrug. “Not really. I’ll stop in to see my uncle when he comes home from his conference in Accordo.”

Clarus hums thoughtfully. “Well, if Gladio doesn’t object, you’re welcome to join us. We always have quite a crowd.”

Gladio brightens and he swears his heart completely stops beating for at least five seconds before it jumpstarts again with excitement. “Yeah that’d be great!” When Ignis just frowns a bit, looking concerned, he quickly adds, “You won’t be any trouble, honest. Dad’s right, the house is gonna be full of people anyway. But if you don’t want to it’s okay too. I know you usually keep stuff low-key.”

Ignis fiddles with his glasses, elegant fingers blocking Gladio’s view of his eyes. The breath that Ignis exhales is shaky and it takes him a few moments to compose himself. He eventually folds his hands neatly in his lap and smiles shyly.

“Thank you. That would be lovely.”
Gladio tamps down on the urge to fist pump the air in celebration. *Heck yes.* Ignis is officially his boyfriend, they have a date-like thing planned in an hour, and he gets to take Iggy home for the holiday. He’s already plotting all of the ways that he can subtly spoil and pamper the guy while he has a chance.

This is going to be the greatest Longest Night Festival of his entire damn life.

**Chapter End Notes**

I'll be back next week for a very romantic and festive installment. Gladnis deserves the happiest holiday.
Gladio and Ignis prepare to celebrate their first Longest Night Festival together.

Hi!

I hope everyone reading this has a wonderful holiday season, whatever that means for you and yours. Even if it's nothing more than having a not bad Monday. <33

As promised, Iggy and Gladio christen their new officially boyfriends status by celebrating the winter solstice together, first with a private date, and then later some good ol' family fun with the Amicitia clan.

The chapter started to get really long, so I decided to split it into two. <33

As ever, thank you so SO much for reading this. I can't begin to explain how happy it makes me that anyone else actually enjoys this.

It’s only a little past three in the afternoon but already the sky is a dull shade of silver, the sun obscured by a blanket of low-hanging clouds heavy with the promise of snow for Festival day. Inside the music room the large arched windows have their shutters thrown wide to welcome in the light that pools atop the marble tiles in a trio of spotlights.

Ignis paces, the heels of his dress shoes clicking like a metronome, steady, even and rhythmic, a façade of outward calm that belies his jangling nerves. Gladio will be here any moment, and suddenly he worries that his Festival gift will be woefully inadequate.

What was I even thinking? He laments bitterly. This needs to be as special as Gladio is. His gift isn’t anything to write home about, at least not in his own estimation. It is, however, the very essence of who he is, and he’s determined to be nothing less than his real self with his new boyfriend. As painful as it is to consider, if he’s truly not good enough for a man of Gladio’s class and caliber, then so be it. He won’t try to be someone or something that he isn’t in order to keep him like some kind of trophy.

He lets the word roll around in his brain. Boyfriend. Gladio is his boyfriend. He mouths the words to himself, savouring the way it feels, the way the corners of his mouth stretch and curve helplessly into the ghost of a smile.

He takes one last look over everything that he’s setup. The blanket is spread over the hard tiles, soft emerald green wool that could almost pass for grass. He’d had no idea when he began knitting it so many months ago that it would be used for an indoor picnic, or that it would be Gladio’s festival gift. In the middle of the expanse of lush green are several platters of finger foods,
traditional Festival fare. He’s spent the last few days preparing dumplings, savory stuffed buns, rice balls, candied fruit, and an assortment of sweet and spicy dipping sauces. A thermos stands ready with a rich broth, and a bottle of sparkling cider is chilling in a bucket of ice with two goblets. He’s also brought his festival lamp from home, a simple oil lamp that spreads warm golden light into the room’s shadowy corners.

A soft knocking breaks Ignis from his reverie, the unmistakable sound of knuckles on wood. He moves to open the door, pulling it inward to reveal Gladio’s smiling face, all white teeth and dimples. Ignis feels a fraction of his tension melting away at the sight of him.

“Hello.” He’s impressed by how relaxed he sounds despite the coil of anxiety wound about his chest. “Happy Festival Night.” He manages a small smile.

“Hey there, gorgeous.” Ignis isn’t fooling anyone. Gladio’s eyes tighten at the corners when he takes a good look at Ignis, reading his anxiety as if it’s written across his forehead. A large palm cups his cheek, Gladio’s thumb gently stroking the angles of his cheekbones, down to the curve of his jaw. There’s a chill still clinging to Gladio’s hand from having recently been outside, but Ignis doesn’t care, tilting his head eagerly into the touch.

Shyly Ignis brings his hand up to cover Gladio’s as well as he can, his long, elegant fingers stroking the cold back of Gladio’s hand.

“Oh dear. I should have gotten you a pair of mittens for your festival gift. Have you no sense of self preservation?”

“Isn’t freezing a way of preserving something?” Ignis laughs despite himself and just as easily as that, his tension melts away.

The Advisor steps back, gesturing politely for Gladio to come into the music room. The Shield steps inside, moving to set a box containing Ignis’s festival gift on one of the desks clustered in a corner of the room, where students occasionally study musical theory. His thin jacket is shrugged off and draped across the back of a chair. He then turns, warm amber gaze sweeping the room, landing on Ignis’s preparations.

“Is that for me?” There’s a light, almost giddy note in his voice when he asks, as if the simple offering is more than he ever hoped for, as if he can’t believe that Ignis set all of this up for him. Heat instantly scales the heights of Ignis’s cheeks and he shyly adjusts his glasses.

“Yes. I hope it’s alright?”

Lips press to his temple by way of a response, and strong arms wrap possessively around him, cradling him against the solid mass of Gladio’s chest. He’s simply held there for a long moment, so tightly that it’s a tad difficult to breathe, but Ignis isn’t one to complain. He gratefully soaks up Gladio’s warmth and affection like a greedy little sponge.

Finally, Gladio buries his face in Ignis’s tawny fringe and murmurs, “It’s perfect. I can’t believe you did all of this for me.”

There’s a tremulous note to Gladio’s voice that catches Ignis off-guard. Frowning, he tips his head back to look up at his boyfriend’s face, and watches as the taller man blinks furiously against a sheen of moisture.

“Gladio?” This time it’s Ignis’s turn to reach out, tentative fingers caressing a sculpted jaw, scraping over the fine bristles of the beard Gladio seems to be growing in. It feels strange, being
“Sorry.” The taller man tips his head down, pressing a kiss into Ignis’s palm. “It’s just… people
don’t do this kinda stuff for me. Nice. Thoughtful. Stuff that takes time and effort.” He smiles
sheepishly. “I usually get gift cards. And booze that I don’t actually get a chance to drink.”

“Well you deserve it. And more. I wish I could have done more.” Ignis sighs and guides Gladio
with a gentle touch to the blanket, and the Shield plucks up his gift for Ignis on the way.

Gladio steps out of his boots and shoots Ignis a warning look that all but promises a gruesome and
bloody end if he doesn’t take off his shoes before stepping on the blanket. A rush of pride swells in
Ignis’s chest as he watches Gladio sit down so carefully, hands fondly patting the soft green wool,
appreciating the texture of the moss stitch. He has the most adorably awestruck look on his face, as
if a simple handknit blanket can somehow compare to the fine down comforters or intricate quilts
he’s probably accustomed to.

“This is knit, not crocheted, right?” Gladio peeks up at him as Ignis steps out of his dress shoes and
settles himself on a corner of the blanket.

“You have been paying attention,” Ignis praises.

A slow smile creeps across Gladio’s face and he rubs the back of his head shyly, so that some of
the longer bits stick up at funny angles. “Yeah. And not just to how cute you are.”

Ignis chuckles, ducking his head, poorly masking a flash of pleasure.

“Seriously, though,” Gladio continues, “This must have taken you forever to make. Thank you.
And you made us a feast.” He shakes his head slowly, amber eyes warm and appreciative with their
regard. “I seriously don’t deserve you, but thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. And it’s hardly a feast, I don’t want to spoil your appetite for your family dinner
tonight.”

“Our appetites,” Gladio corrects with a grin. “Dad invited you too.”

Ignis winces, trying to ignore the sudden sensation of a kaleidoscope of butterflies taking flight in
his belly. “I’m aware,” he murmurs weakly. “I’ve been trying not to worry about what an ass I’m
going to make of myself.”

A warm hand pats his knee reassuringly. “Hey. Quit worrying. My Dad likes you. Thinks you’re a
good influence and everything.” Gladio smiles kindly. “But if you’re really that uncomfortable you
don’t have to. No one will be upset.”

Ignis smiles weakly. “Thank you. But no, it’s fine. Just promise to kick me under the table if I start
talking nonsense?”

Gladio chuckles. “Deal.”

Gladio gives Ignis’s knee a gentle squeeze “D’you wanna open your present before we eat?”

Ignis can’t contain the grin that creeps across his features. “Please.”

Gladio carefully places what looks like a festive garment box in Ignis’s lap, the kind many stores
give their patrons around the holidays to make gift wrapping easier. It’s navy blue and covered in
glittering snowflakes, pretty enough on its own that Gladio only needed to tape it shut, no
additional wrapping required. Ignis smiles fondly as he traces a sparkling snowflake, amused at the way some of the glitter clings to his skin.

He always appreciates gifts, warmed and heartened that someone thought of him, regardless of the quality of the gift itself. Like Gladio he tends to amass quite a few bottles of alcohol over the holidays, despite not quite being legal drinking age. It’s easy for people to forget that he’s not eighteen yet, and easier still to overlook his lack of a social life. Fortunately he can cook with most forms of alcohol so the gifts are seldom wasted.

Gladio watches him carefully, and Ignis finds himself utterly charmed by the way the man worries at his bottom lip, biting it so hard that Ignis expects to see blood.

“I’m sure that whatever it is, I’ll love it.”

“I hope so,” Gladio murmurs in something barely above a whisper.

Clever fingers lift the tape, Ignis doing his best to avoid peeling away any of the pattern on the box. He’d like to keep the box as a memento. When he’s ready Gladio leans forward, watching eagerly as Ignis lifts the lid.

Ignis carefully pushes tissue paper out of the way and smiles delightfully at his gift, which is a tastefully framed watercolor painting, Gladio’s signature tucked into the bottom corner.

“Oh Gladio, it’s beautiful,” he breathes. Reverent fingertips hover a hair’s breadth above the glass, not wanting to smudge it, but aching to trace the lovely brush strokes. He can hear Gladio exhaling a relieved sigh, but he currently has eyes only for his gift.

He drinks in the image, a sky swirling with misty gray clouds overtop a background of gently rolling hills lush with greenery, with a river curling like a ribbon between two hills, leading to a town or village. It’s quaint, rustic even, with hard packed dirt edged with cobblestones around a few prominent buildings.

Ignis squints, pushing his glasses firmly up his nose as if that will somehow further enhance his vision. While the buildings themselves aren’t quite the right shape or size, and the placement of some of the trees seems off, there’s no mistaking that the overall structure of the scene is correct. The buildings are the correct style for the region, the market stalls are to the east as they should be, there are a few modest homes that double as businesses to the west like he remembers, and to the north is the unmistakable form of a one-room rural schoolhouse. There’s even a tire swing behind it, the same one Ignis once told a story about getting himself stuck in when he tried to curl up and read in it with too many blankets.

“Wait, is this what I think it is?” Ignis tears his gaze away from the painting, looking over at Gladio again. “This is my village, isn’t it?”

Gladio nods and looks down, intently studying the hands he’s clasping and unclasping in his lap, clearly anxious again, despite the fact that Ignis clearly loves his gift. “I mean, I did my best, y’know? Based on the stories you told me. I hope I remembered ‘em right.” He fidgets and it’s so uncharacteristic of Gladio to look so unsure of himself that Ignis aches to just bundle the big sweet man up and hug him until he stops worrying. “I looked some stuff up at the library, too. Pictures of the ulwaat region just to get an idea of the landscape and architecture style. I couldn’t find anything specific to your home, though, so obviously I didn’t get everything right.”

“You did brilliantly,” Ignis reassures him. When Gladio keeps shyly staring at his lap, ignis sighs. “Gladio. Look at me?” When he sees the flash of amber behind long lashes Ignis smiles. Really
smiles. Not his fake, carefully constructed smile. The real one, that makes his eyes squinty and face scrunchy and shows too much teeth to be considered dignified. “I really love it. I’m so touched that just from a few of my childhood remembrances and some general research into the area, you could reproduce it as well as you have. This is by far the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever given me.”

Gladio finally smiles too, eyes luminous with happiness to see Ignis so thoroughly enjoying his gift.

“Aww I’m glad you like it. I was worried I’d get it so wrong it’d defeat the whole purpose.”

Ignis lets his gaze drift down, lingering on the schoolhouse which looks quite a bit like the home he remembers. Most schoolhouses in the region were constructed in the same fashion, so Gladio had good references to work off of.

“No, it’s perfect. Thank you,” he whispers.

Suddenly the image blurs and he blinks hard, feeling the wetness pooling uncomfortably against his glasses. This painting depicts his roots, his heritage. It’s the catalyst for some people’s irrational dislike of him. It’s why his nannies made him wash his hands until they were rubbed raw, why he was told that he’s unworthy and somehow less than everyone else around him. Yet it’s what Gladio has chosen to celebrate, chosen to commit however many hours of research and craftsmanship to.

“Gladio?” He hates the waver in his voice, he really does, but he has to ask, his pride be damned. “Most people despise the fact that I’m from this.” He gestures vaguely at the painting in his lap. “But you don’t. Why?”

He doesn’t look up, he can’t look up right now, but he can hear the telltale shuffling as Gladio shifts closer to him, he can feel the warmth radiating off of the larger man. “Other than the fact that I was raised not to give a shit about where someone’s from?”

Ignis chuckles, a dark, morose sound, but otherwise doesn’t have it in him to answer. Gladio doesn’t seem to mind, he merely slides an arm around Ignis’s slim shoulders, squeezing reassuringly.

“I love the fact that you come from somewhere like this.” Gladio taps the edge of the frame with his free hand. “Somewhere where life sounds simpler but harder than it is here, where people don’t have much but share what they can with their neighbor so everyone can get by, where people appreciate simple pleasures like tire swings and eating berries off the vine.”

Ignis leans into Gladio’s side, letting the other’s deep baritone rumble soothingly over him.

“You’re the person that you are because you came from this. You’re generous and selfless to a fault, you’re hard-working and honest, and so humble and modest despite the fact that you’re always the smartest person in the room. I dunno what kind of person you’d be if you’d been born into some snooty upper-class family in the city, y’know?”

Ignis chuckles, imagining himself fat, lazy and spoiled.

“Seriously, though.” Gladio nuzzles his hair. “I don’t care about where you’re from or what your class is. If I ever meet your parents I’ll happily kiss their feet and thank them for raising such a fine son.”

Ignis wipes his eyes and chuckles yet again, imagining the absolute mortification his parents would
feel if anyone—a Lordling like Gladio no less—did that.

“You’re absolutely ridiculous.” Ignis peers up at Gladio, offering a fond smile. “And I wouldn’t have you any other way. Thank you, Gladio. Thank you so much.”

Gladio presses smiling lips to his forehead in a gentle kiss. “Shucks.”

Ignis carefully straightens from where he’d allowed himself to slump into Gladio’s side. He dabs at his damp cheeks and smartly tugs on his vest to straighten it. When he’s sufficiently collected himself, he very gently sets the painting aside.

“Well, now that I’ve made a proper ass of myself, shall we tuck in?” He gestures at the assortment of food. When Gladio’s stomach makes an answering grumble, they both laugh and start grabbing dishes.

Gladio pours them glasses of cider while Ignis busies himself with the dumplings, which are the only items he’s brought that should be eaten hot. He adds a few dumplings to a pair of bowls, and then pours steaming broth from the thermos over them. Before long they’re happily eating and drinking together and the room is pleasantly quiet, the silence broken only by the occasional moans of satisfaction from Gladio when he tries something new.

It doesn’t take too long, though, before they succumb to temptation. They’re young and in love, the lighting is low, the blanket is soft and the food is light and aromatic. Emotions are running high for both of them in the wake of such kind and thoughtful gifts

Ignis holds a slice of candied pear out for Gladio to try, gasping when his fingertips are brushed by soft lips and a warm tongue for his trouble. When Gladio dips a rice ball in tangy sauce and holds it up for Ignis, the Advisor pays him back in kind, coyly nipping at a callused fingertip as he accepts the morsel.

Gladio’s words from earlier drift through Ignis’s mind. Simple pleasures indeed. He revels in the sensation of Gladio’s tongue flicking against his fingertips, the not unpleasant sting of teeth nipping playfully at his fingers. Just having this moment that they’ve stolen away form the hustle and bustle of the wider world, where they can be quiet, comfortable and well-fed, it’s one of the happiest moments of Ignis’s life.

Ignis has most of his index finger in Gladio’s mouth while the Shield slowly sucks on it, warm tongue swirling teasingly around the digit. The sugar crystals that Gladio was licking from his skin are long gone, but the other seems to be in no hurry to break the contact. Their eyes meet, coy emeralds peeking up through long lashes, bold amber staring back at him with raw, openwant written in their depths. It’s enough to steal every ounce of breath from Ignis’s lungs.

Wordlessly they both carefully set the now mostly empty dishes aside, clearing room on the soft knit blanket. Gladio’s arms slide around Ignis’s back as he’s gently pulled down to the floor on his side, facing Gladio. Ever the protector, Gladio carefully cradles Ignis in the crook of his arm on the way down. Ignis clings to Gladio’s waist as they settle, legs happily tangled together as they clutch each other with eager hands.

As one they bring their mouths together, chastely at first. Ignis can taste the sweetness of the fruit and the spiciness of the dipping sauce on Gladio’s lips, and the acidity of the cider on his tongue. It’s a heavenly bouquet. He knows that he should close his eyes, it’s what people do in movies after all, but he can’t bring himself to. He watches through the veil of his lashes as Gladio’s features grow softer with bliss with each kiss.
Gladio drags his knuckles over Ignis’s sides as they trade kisses, the sensation wrenching a soft moan from Ignis, who’s too enamored by the taste and feel of Gladio to feel embarrassed. Gladio growls his approval against Ignis’s mouth and does it again and again, hands skimming across his ribs and down over the curve of his hip. He plays Ignis like a fiddle, coaxing soft moans and gasps from the normally demure young man.

His kisses turn messy, his aim faltering as his lips glide over the corner of Gladio’s mouth and the curve of his jaw. Gladio doesn’t seem to mind, instead moaning in turn and tilting his head back, baring the thick column of his neck Ignis to lavish attention on. And he does, with breathless kisses and the playful swirl of his tongue, tasting the salty tang that is uniquely Gladio.

Ignis can feel Gladio’s appreciation in every touch, in the way his hands slide from Ignis’s hips to his ass, kneading and squeezing the Advisor through his slacks. He can also feel his arousal, half-hard and pressing against Ignis’s thigh.

“Fuck,” Gladio groans as Ignis mouths sweetly at the sensitive skin just above his clavicle.

“Not tonight,” Ignis teases, earning a breathless laugh and a swat on the ass for his cheekiness.

“Can we cuddle for a bit, though?” Gladio peppers kisses across Ignis’s cheeks.

“Please,” Ignis croons his assent.

With a fluid motion Gladio pulls Ignis flush to his chest and rolls over, dragging Ignis up on top of him. Ignis murmurs happily and settles into the welcoming contours of Gladio’s toned body, his head pillowed atop a broad shoulder.

Despite the large hands trailing lovingly up and down his back, though, something feels wrong. Ignis feels vulnerable and exposed draped across Gladio like this. The feeling makes him somehow anxious. He whines, teeth digging little dents into his bottom lip.

After another moment he releases his own lip with a little pop and lifts his head, peeking up at Gladio a bit shyly.

“Gladio?”

Smoldering amber lock with gentle peridot and the way that Gladio looks at him—like he’s something positively wonderful—almost steals the words from his lips.

“Hmm?” Gladio rumbles with an inquiring lilt.

His voice is small, tentative and unsure when he asks. “Can we trade places?”

Gladio quirks a rugged brow. “You wanna be under me?”

Ignis nods his head minutely, gaze cast to the side, afraid of the rejection or judgment he might see in his boyfriend’s face. He knows it’s a strange thing to ask, and he’s not even entirely sure why he’s asking in the first place. Anyone should be glad to snuggle into Gladio’s chest like this, he’s so broad and warm, and he’s strong enough that Ignis doesn’t have to feel guilty about hurting him. He just knows that it’s what he wants, he wants to be surrounded and protected and for once he’s feeling selfish enough to ask for it.

Gladio’s answer comes in the form of arms tightening around him, securing Ignis is place as they roll over again, until Ignis’s back nestles into the blanket and the sight of Gladio looming above him fills his field of vision.
“Tell me if I hurt you, please?” Golden eyes tight with concern, full bottom lip protruding in a worried pout, Gladio looks absolutely terrified of squishing him. Ignis spares a thought for how much effort Gladio must exert on a near constant basis to avoid breaking the things and the people around him with his size and strength. He would like it, more than almost anything, if Gladio could just be at ease with him, to not have to try so hard.

“You won’t,” Ignis reassures him. When Gladio just frowns doubtfully he smiles and adds, “but yes, I’ll let you know.”

Relief suffuses Gladio’s features, some of his apprehension melting away. The Shield presses a tender kiss to Ignis’s brow before he shifts down, until his bulk is cradled atop Ignis’s chest and legs, his head nestled into the crook of a narrow shoulder.

“You ok?” Gladio whispers, his fingers gently stroking up and down Ignis’s sides.

It’s admittedly difficult to breathe with Gladio’s bulk compressing his chest but he manages a soft “Yes, I’m fine.” Because he is. More than fine. The new position has chased away his chills and vanquished his anxiety. There’s something about feeling Gladio’s weight bearing down on him, covering him, that makes Ignis feel incredibly safe and protected. He feels precious.

They lie together for some time, hands that were once frantically clutching each other in the throes of teenaged passion now content to gently stroke, conveying more care and affection than words ever could. Ignis is content to snuggle beneath Gladio, savouring the way the other man’s body swells with each breath, and the endless warmth radiating off of him. Gladio too seems to settle, relaxing his weight against Ignis once he’s sure that he’s not going to break Ignis, his breath feathering soft and even against Ignis’s neck.

“Feels good,” Gladio mumbles sleepily, face pressed to the crook of Ignis’s neck.

Smiling, Ignis walks his fingers across Gladio’s back, acquainting himself with the ridges and valleys of his impressive musculature. “It does,” he agrees.

The sky outside darkens as the minutes tick by, until the festival lamp is their only source of light. Neither man wants to move. Ignis has never felt so safe and content, so protected against the darkness of the world. And he suspects that Gladio is so accustomed to cushioning others that he’s probably enjoying the chance to snuggle down into someone else for a change. They do, unfortunately, have a family gathering to attend, and Ignis isn’t planning on upsetting his new boyfriend’s father by making them late to dinner.

“As much as I could lie here forever,” Ignis murmurs. “We should probably go soon.”

Gladio groans and for a few moments he clings stubbornly to Ignis’s sides and wriggles himself against the Advisor’s lean frame, soaking up the last few moments of contact before they’ll have to behave themselves in front of Gladio’s family. He does peel himself off of Ignis eventually, though, and offers the younger a hand up.

They help each other straighten their clothes, affectionate hands sliding over wrinkled fabric and combing through mussed hair, each doing their best to make the other presentable. If their hands linger a little too long, well, neither of them will complain.

“You okay?” Gladio turns a pensive look Ignis’s way, a gentle hand coming up to caress Ignis’s kiss-swollen lips, lingering at the sharp point of his cupid’s bow. “Was that too much?”

Ignis smiles beneath rough fingertips. The amount of care and concern that Gladio shows him
never ceases to amaze and humble him. He doubts that any mere mortal could ever be truly worthy
of the boundless love and compassion that Gladio is somehow capable of, but Ignis vows to
himself to do his best to be worthy, and to reflect every ounce of happiness right back at him.

Bereft of Gladio’s heat after so long nestled against him, Ignis shivers despite the cloying warmth
of the room. “It was perfect.”

They gather their things, Ignis taking special care with the painting Gladio made for him, and
Gladio handling his blanket like it was woven from pure mythril. The dishes they are polite enough
to set on a table for the custodial staff to easily take care of when they make their sweep tonight.

The last thing that Ignis does, once they’ve donned their coats and shoes, is pick up a violin case
with his free hand.

“One more gift for you,” he says with a smile, nodding towards the door. “If you’ll be so kind, my
hands are rather full.”

Despite being burdened by their gifts, they’d agreed earlier that they would walk to Gladio’s home
from the Citadel. With so many people visiting the Amicitia mansion parking would be a precious
commodity, and Ignis didn’t want to be more of an inconvenience than he was already convinced
he was being. It’s not far, just north of the Citadel.

There’s a park on the way that they cut through. It’s beautiful now, with holiday lights twinkling
amid the bare trees and a fine dusting of snow that’s only just started to fall. The landscape looks
pure and untouched by others, theirs are the only footprints that mar the carpet of white, and those
will soon be filled in again.

It’s more perfect than Ignis could have hoped.

He leads Gladio to a secluded nook, hidden behind a veil of shrubbery aglow with more twinkling
lights. There’s a gazebo, with strands of garland and more lights scaling its supports. Around it lies
an untouched field of diamond-bright snow, and beneath its roof is shelter from the gently falling
flakes.

As they approach he can hear Gladio’s breath hitching, see the way his eyes flicker hopefully at
the instrument case in Ignis’s hand. It’s endearing, the enthusiasm that lights up Gladio’s features
despite the slight chill in the air.

“Sit,” Ignis coaxes him gently, nodding to the wooden bench tucked securely beneath the gazebo’s
roof. Obediently the larger man sits, the blanket Ignis knit him still snuggled protectively in his
arms.

Ignis sets the box with his painting aside and lays down the violin case, working the snaps open
and freeing the beloved instrument. He’ll have to thank his Majesty again for allowing him to
borrow it.

“I know you’ve heard me play before,” he says softly as he paces the gazebo, finding a place
where the instrument will be protected from the elements. He directs a smile to Gladio who’s
leaning forward eagerly. “But I wanted to play for you again. You only ever heard me play when I
was feeling down.” He makes a face, grimacing apologetically. “I want you to hear how I feel now,
though. How I feel with you.”

Gladio presses a hand to his mouth, wide-eyed with wonderment as Ignis lifts the violin, cradling it
as a lover would into the crook of his neck. He lifts the bow with a dainty flourish and sets it to the
Like before he doesn’t follow any particular known tune. Instead he pours all of the love and admiration that he feels for Gladio into the notes. He draws from the well of happiness and contentment that Gladio has fostered in him, and he lets that joy ring out into the still winter’s night.

The tune starts slow, as he’s wont to do. He coaxes the bow slowly across the strings, but as he dwells on his love he can feel an excitement, a giddy anticipation swelling within him. It doesn’t take long for both the pitch and tempo to pick up, and the melody that he wrings from his instrument can only be called a celebration. A celebration of acceptance, of finding one’s place, and of the love that makes it possible. A celebration of the joy they’ve shared and the joys that are surely to come.

As he plays, his gaze drifts to the sky, as it usually does. Snowflakes continue to float to the ground around them like so much confetti, as if the Six themselves are rejoicing in this moment as well.

He shifts his gaze back to Gladio from time to time, and his heart soars along with the melody when he sees how enraptured he is. His hand is still pressed to his mouth but he can see Gladio’s massive grin peeking out around the edges.

Ignis plays, he plays his heart out, until his fingers are too numb with the cold to continue. He ends with a flourish and then bows modestly. When he straightens he smiles shyly at Gladio, who to his surprise has fat tears rolling down his cheeks despite his broad grin.

“Gladio?” he whispers uncertainly, carefully setting the violin and bow in the case and closing it before rushing to his boyfriend’s side.

“That,” Gladio croaks thickly, “was the most beautiful fucking thing.”

Ignis leans in, pressing his lips to a tear trail that’s already threatening to freeze against Gladio’s cheek.

“It’s because you make me feel beautiful,” he explains simply.

Gladio takes Ignis’s cold hands in his and brings them to his lips, blowing hotly against the chilled skin before pressing a series of reverent kisses to each of Ignis’s fingers, one by one, unhurried, as if there’s nothing in this life he wants to do more than worship Ignis’s hands with his lips.

“I can’t tell you how good it makes me feel, hearing you say that, and hearing you play something so happy.” Gladio sighs softly and gives Ignis’s hands a gentle squeeze. “When I first heard you playing, I didn’t know it was you of course, but Six it went right to my heart, y’know? And I wanted nothing more than to make you happy, give you a better song to play.”

Ignis smiles tenderly, his own eyes bright with the threat of elated tears. “You did.”
Thank you so much for coming back to this crazy dumpster fire of a story! <3

Couple of super quickie things!

Gladio describes how his family celebrates Longest Night in Chapter 9. I didn't think it would take me this long to circle back to it, so I thought a friendly reminder might not go amiss?

When I first envisioned Ignis playing something happy for Gladio, I pictured him playing a violin version of Simple and Clean. Now I think it's just the episode Ignis main theme. Ha. It's so good. Thank you Squeenix for blessing the world with that OST.

Lastly - and feel free to skip this last note if you don't want any chapter spoilers? I'm sorry this chapter took so long. It went through a bit of a metamorphosis. I realized somewhere in the midst of it that I really wanted to do a better job fleshing out Gladio's character. I think that it's fairly evident why Ignis is the way that he is (both his good and bad traits) what with his dramatic backstory. But Gladio is another matter. I really wanted to give a glimpse into how Gladio was molded into such a fine man, someone who treats everyone as his equal and genuinely cares about them while some other nobles obviously ... don't.

I hope you enjoy! <3

Pleasant violin music continues to echo in Gladio’s ears as he and Ignis resume their walk towards the Amicitia mansion. So many times, especially over these past few days, he’s been convinced that he couldn’t possibly be any happier and his heart couldn’t possibly feel any fuller. And time and again Ignis manages to find some secret, unclaimed corner of his heart and his presence makes itself at home. Somehow, inexplicably, Ignis always manages to make Gladio love him more.

Gladio’s pretty damn sure that this time he’s really done it, though. He feels as if his heart is about to burst out of his chest at any moment to land flopping and bleeding at Ignis’s feet.

He’s heard Ignis playing the violin before, of course. Beautiful and sad, a solitary figure against a moonlit sky, pouring his misery out into the strings, unaware of Gladio’s secret admiration and grief for a man he didn’t even know. Tonight, though—sweet Astrals—it had been a revelation. The tune had been sweet and uplifting, singing to Gladio’s ears a melody wrought of hope and happiness. And the best part, the coup de grace that nearly brings the large man to his knees is knowing that Ignis played for him, standing close enough to touch, solid and real, no longer an ethereal figure haunting his daydreams, and most importantly no longer sad.

Gladio shifts his gaze to his side, where Ignis is keeping pace with him, his dress shoes cutting crisp, elegant footprints into the snow alongside the clunky impressions his own boots create. The Advisor is smiling, cheeks rosy and glistening with the kiss of melting snowflakes. He looks happy, and Gladio swears to himself to keep him that way, always, but especially tonight.
“I’m really excited to have you over for festival,” Gladio enthuses. “Sorry that Dad kinda sprung this on you last minute, though.” He grimaces, cheeks heating with self-conscious colour. “I think Dad’s excited that I finally have someone to bring home.”

Ignis jostles his shoulders in the best approximation of a shrug that he can manage, burdened as he is by his messenger bag, violin case, and the boxed-up painting Gladio gifted him. “It’s fine. I didn’t have any particular plans, since my uncle is out of town until the day after tomorrow. I was just going to use the days off to catch up on some work. I’ve been a touch lax this week.”

Gladio chews the inside of his cheek pensively. He’s not exactly surprised by this, but it still chafes to think about someone as kind and thoughtful as Ignis spending the holiday alone. Longest Night is traditionally a festival that revolves around family, which is why His Majesty goes to such lengths to ensure that even someone as vital to him as Clarus Amicitia is able to spend this time at home. Regis is by this point holed up in the Citadel with Noctis, protected primarily by members of the Kingsglaive who don’t have family in the city and therefore volunteered for duty.

“Rule number one of an Amicitia family holiday.” Gladio grins. “No work.”

Ignis huffs a soft laugh that turns into a little cloud of mist in the cold air. “Very well, I’ll leave the reports until next week. Happy?”

Gladio feels a flare of smugness when he thinks to add, “Not quite. That also means no trying to help out around the house. No cooking or cleaning, no fetching and carrying.”

When Ignis merely snorts contemptuously with a look that plainly says You cannot be serious, Gladio scowls because he damn well is serious.

“I mean it. You got a dirty plate to clear away? You give it to me. You want a drink? Let someone else get it for you. And, shit—” he glares at everything that Ignis is currently carrying, as if the items have just offended him and every single one of his ancestors. “Give me some of that.”

Without waiting for permission, he pulls the boxed painting from the crook of Ignis’s left arm, and then slides the strap of the messenger bag down the same arm, so that Ignis is only left carrying his violin case—which Gladio suspects the man won’t relinquish unless Bahamut himself swoops down and demands it from him.

It’s endearing, really, the way Ignis sputters indignantly, eyes rolling, feet stomping out each step as they make their way along the last few blocks to his home. Ignis can pout all he likes but Gladio is far too excited to have an actual boyfriend to pass up an opportunity to spoil said boyfriend silly.

“Gladio,” Ignis begins, and there’s a note of desperation to his tone, “I already feel as if I’m intruding, the least that I can do is tidy up after myself. What is your father going to think of me?”

Gladio huffs impatiently. Typical fucking Ignis. “My Dad already thinks you’re perfect.” Gladio pauses, a mischievous light sparkling in his eyes. “In fact, if you could be slightly less perfect than normal? Maybe get your elbow stuck in the gravy boat or burp in the middle of the blessing? That would be great, would make me look like less of an oaf in comparison.”

“Oh stop it,” Ignis sniffs delicately, but can’t quite swallow back a little snicker.

“Okay, okay.” Gladio heaves what he hopes sounds like a put-upon sigh. “You can keep your lovely manners. But only if you promise not to work.”

“Fine,” Ignis shakes his head, chuckling to himself as they approach the walkway up to the house.
Both men are as good as their word. Gladio practically trips over himself all night as he strives to ensure that Ignis need only lift a finger to eat and drink, and Ignis resists the urge to check his phone or help Jared with dinner preparations. Gladio sees the way his boyfriend’s fingers twitch from time to time with a barely suppressed impulse to get up and be useful.

Dinner is a boisterous affair. With so many members of the Guard and Glaive without families of their own, Clarus opens his home year after year to any who care to join the Amicitias for their holiday feast. His table and his wine cellar both have a high reputation, and it’s no surprise that the dining room is overflowing by the time they all sit down to eat. For Gladio this is just how the holidays are and have always been, but he sees the look of wide-eyed wonder on Ignis’s face and he can’t help but grin. He’s always proud to be an Amicitia, but on nights like this the feeling intensifies tenfold.

As gruff and intimidating as his father is, he has a heart made of candyfloss and it’s always fun to see how easily Clarus can disarm people when he has a mind to. It’s also fun to watch him scare the (sometimes literal) piss out of people when he has a mind to. Now, in the midst of the holiday season, his Lordship, Shield of the King, patriarch of the second greatest house in Lucis, is happily playing the gracious host, greeting his guests with one-armed hugs and back slaps, pressing glasses of wine and plates of hors d'oeuvres into empty hands.

A great effort is made to ensure that everyone, be they family, friend, or barely-acquainted colleagues feels welcome and included. There is no formal seating plan for dinner, and no place of particular honor. Clarus sits somewhere near the middle of the table rather than at the head. That seat this year is claimed by little Talcott, who needs a booster seat to be able to reach his place setting. Cor Leonis sits at the end of the table at Talcott’s left, cheerfully helping the precocious four-year-old mash up his vegetables. With a gentle hand at the small of his back, Gladio guides Ignis in their direction, since Ignis knows Cor will and Gladio thinks he’ll get along well with the Hesters who have come to spend the holiday with Jared.

He politely pulls out a chair for Ignis near the end of the table, next to Jared’s son and daughter-in-law, who are watching the Marshal and Talcott with the fondest expressions. Iris ends up settling herself near the opposite end of the table where she appears to be holding court with a collection of Kingsglaive members, regaling them with the trials and tribulations of being a ten-year-old. It’s cute, the way these battle-hardened soldiers hang onto her every word, nodding sympathetically and laughing where appropriate.

As he thought, Ignis and the Hesters take to each other like fish to water, and when they find out that he’s Gladio’s boyfriend their faces light up and the pair of them can hardly get a bite of food in as they regale Ignis with an endless stream of embarrassing anecdotes about Gladio’s childhood.

“Aww come on,” Gladio groans when Mrs. Hester launches into a story about the time Gladio thought the bathroom was haunted because the old pipes made creepy rattling noises when the hot water came on, and he thought he was so clever for running his bare ass outdoors with a bar of soap to ‘shower’ on a rainy day instead. “If you keep telling embarrassing stories, Iggy is gonna have second thoughts about this.”

Everyone laughs at this, including the usually stoic Cor who makes an uncomfortable wheezing sound that might be laughter. The Marshal sets down his glass of wine and with a flat delivery that a pancake would envy, intones “I just assumed you’re either bribing or blackmailing Scientia. I’m still trying to sort out which.” He shrugs and takes a drink of his wine, his mirth only betrayed by the twinkle in pale blue eyes.
“Hey!” Gladio glares at them all and sullenly hides behind his own wine glass, which contains sparkling cider.

“Ignis, if you’re here under duress just give the signal and I’ll get you out of here.”

Ignis nearly chokes on a mouthful of cauliflower puree.

After dinner, Gladio and Iris clear the table, setting everything into several tubs of steaming, soapy water to soak. Later Clarus will take care of the scrubbing and then Gladio will put the clean dishes away in the morning. All of the cleanup is, technically, Jared’s job, but Clarus always insists that Jared does enough on days like this by cooking for everyone, and that he should be free to spend the evening relaxing and visiting with his family instead of being elbow-deep in dirty dishes. Gladio agrees wholeheartedly.

By the time that he and Iris have finished setting the dishes to soak and packing the few leftovers away in the fridge, most of the visiting Guard and Glaives have said their goodbyes. This is the part of the Longest Night festival that is typically reserved for immediate family and the closest of friends, when people will gather around their festival lights to while away the long hours until dawn.

Gladio flicks off the lights in the kitchen and in the hallway as he leads Iris into the sitting room. A fire crackles merrily at one end of the room, and at the other a majestic holiday tree stands, its boughs glittering with prismatic lights and sparkling baubles. A modest collection of gifts are strewn beneath the branches to be opened in the morning, just a few things for each of them. Gladio has seen the towering piles of gifts when he’s been forced to attend holiday gatherings at the homes of some of his father’s peers and he quite prefers the few thoughtfully-chosen gifts he receives to a heap of gifts that only proves that his family has money.

Iris makes a beeline for the hearth rug, where Talcott is sprawled out with a collection of colouring books and markers. Gladio, like a moth to a flame, is drawn to Ignis, who looks particularly beautiful in this moment, with the twinkling holiday lights suffusing his fair complexion with a rainbow’s worth of colour.

“Hey,” Gladio breathes as he lowers himself to the couch beside his boyfriend. “Missed you.”

Ignis hums agreeably and shifts from where he’d been leaning against the armrest of the couch, instead settling himself firmly against Gladio’s side. The Shield welcomes the comforting weight, stretching a sculpted arm around Ignis’s narrow shoulders to draw him in even closer.

They relax like this for a pleasant stretch of time, at that magical stage of a holiday where everyone is full and sleepy after a good meal, content to bask in the warmth of friends and family. Not much is said. Occasionally Iris, who is taking her role as one of the bigger kids very seriously, will ask Talcott about his colouring, sweetly pretending to be impressed and amazed by his haphazard efforts at staying within the lines. Otherwise the calm is only broken by the crackling of the fire or the occasional clink of a glass.

Even though he can feel his father’s eyes practically burning a hole through him, Gladio turns towards Ignis, burying his face in the other man’s hair, nuzzling and pressing soft kisses to his temple, whispering against the perfect shell of his ear how loved he is and how happy he is to spend the holiday with Ignis.

To Gladio’s endless joy and relief, Ignis seems content to pillow his head against Gladio’s shoulder and simply relax, basking in the warmth of the moment. Someone turns the radio on, and they
simply cuddle for a time, letting the familiar holiday music sweep them away into the private world of their own remembrances.

Cor is the last of the guests who are not spending the night to make his farewells. He and Clarus share a rare hug. Talcott insists upon shaking his hand and does so with a surprising amount of gravity for a preschooler. A finger is wagged at Gladio and Ignis with a firm reminder to behave, and set a good example for the children.

The front door has hardly closed behind the Marshal’s boots, when Clarus turns to Gladio, and with a jerk of his chin and an imperious hand gesture, beckons him down the hall towards his study.

Gladio swears to the Six, if he’s actually about to get another rendition of The Talk, he’ll never speak to his father again. He and Ignis have been an item for all of three days, and they’re going to be sleeping on the living room floor with the rest of the family for pity’s sake. Even if Gladio had a mind to do something ungentlemanly, he’s not about to do it with his baby sister in a sleeping bag beside him.

Clarus leads him into the study and after flicking on a light, shuts the door behind them, sealing away the quiet merriment of the rest of the house. Gladio watches as his father pulls a snifter and a bottle from the ornate cabinet in the corner, pouring himself a drink. That, Gladio reasons, does not bode well.

Rather than address his son, Clarus flicks his wrist, sending the brandy swirling and sloshing within the snifter. He inhales, seeming to savor the heady aroma before indulging in a long, slow drink.

And then another.

And then another.

Gladio can feel sweat beading around his temples and at the nape of his neck more and more the longer his father drags whatever the hells this is out. His jaw clenches and unclenches as he swallows back a demand to know what the man wants already.

At length Clarus sighs and sets the nearly empty snifter aside and fixes Gladio with his full attention. His gaze is guarded and stern, the way it always is when he addresses Gladio not as his father, but as the patriarch of House Amicitia, or the King’s Shield—anything but the loving, doting father he is when duty doesn’t demand otherwise.

“So. It’s been quite a week for Scientia, hmm?”

Gladio has to swallow hard against the desire to respond with so what? He simply nods and continues to wait, trusting his father to get to the point—eventually.

“That dreadful business with Percy and Flavinius, the snafu with his salary, and now he has a new romantic relationship.”

Gladio nods again, and again suppresses the urge to demand that his father get to the damn point while Gladio’s still young.

“Imagine my surprise when I find that you, my only son and heir, are right smack in the middle of everything.”

Again Gladio nods, and as he does he can feel sweat beginning to slide uncomfortably down his
back. His father is talking to him the way he’d address a prisoner of war or a suspected traitor to the
Crown, as if Gladio has committed some heinous crime and he’s being given a chance to confess
and retain a few shreds of his honor before Clarus condemns him.

“I go through Scientia’s statement regarding Flavinius and his aide, and there you are coming to
his rescue this summer. I take a look at his petition regarding his salary and lo and behold, he has a
copy of your pay slip for comparison. And now here he is in making himself at home in my sitting
room, sipping my eggnog while my son and heir dotes on him.”

Gladio doesn’t even bother nodding anymore, and it takes an inner strength that even Titan himself
would be proud of to refrain from pointing out to his father that he was the one who invited Ignis
for Festival night to begin with.

“Oh stop looking like you’re sucking on a rotten egg, Gladiolus.” Clarus rolls his eyes at his son,
who is evidently not as adept at masking his irritation as he’d thought. “Yes I have a point here.”

Well then get to it, for the love of Shiva’s perky nipples.

“Yes Sir?” Gladio asks, his tone carefully measured.

Clarus heaves a soft sigh, casting a mournful glance at his empty snifter, plainly debating the
merits of pouring himself a second.

“I know that I’ve spoken to you before about being wary of people who are only interested in you
for your family name and status, and I’ve cautioned you against indulging in meaningless trysts.”
Clarus raises a placating hand, silencing the indignant tirade that Gladio wants to unleash upon him
on Ignis’s behalf. “And I know that Ignis of all people isn’t like that, so stop looking at me like
you want to serve my head to that boy on a silver platter. He grew up with the Prince clinging to
his coattails. Sometimes literally. I know that he’s unfazed by wealth and titles.” Clarus’s
expression softens marginally.

“But?” Gladio prompts, because he can see a massive but coming, and that’s aside form the fact
that he still thinks that his father is about to be an ass despite his reassurances.

Another sigh, and this time the mournful gaze settles on Gladio and not the empty snifter. “But that
doesn’t change the fact that Ignis has gained much from his acquaintance with you. And as fond as
I am of him, and as proud as I am of you for stepping in to help him, as your father, and the head of
this House, I have a responsibility to ensure that you also get something out of a relationship. That
it’s not just you giving and Ignis taking. You have your mother’s generous spirit, I just want to
ensure it’s not getting you in trouble.”

Gladio arches his brows to the point where he swears he can feel them recede past his hairline. He
wants to dig his fingertip into his ear to clean some of the wax out because he must have misheard
his father. Surely he’s not accusing the most selfless and generous fucking person in the world of
taking advantage of him? Of not giving at least as much as he gets? Because Gladio’s pretty damn
sure that the story of Ignis’s whole life is one instance after another of Ignis selflessly giving of
himself and expecting and often receiving nothing in return.

Large hands curl into fists at Gladio’s sides, clenched so tightly that his knuckles turn white. He
focuses on that, on the tightness as his skin stretches taut with tension, and on the sting as his nails
embed themselves in his palms. These little flares of discomfort are something that he can focus on
instead of the rage simmering in his gut, and it grounds him enough that he thinks he just might be
able to respond to his father without shouting for all the world to hear.
“It’s not like that,” Gladio grinds out through clenched teeth. He stops, takes a long breath through his nose, expelling it through his mouth along with a portion of his anger.

“Enlighten me then,” Clarus encourages, moving to lean against the side of his desk.

Gladio takes another deep breath and closes his eyes briefly, remembering all at once all of the wonderful things that Ignis has done, and all of the beautiful things he’s made Gladio feel. He opens his eyes after a few long seconds and proceeds to enlighten his father.

As he speaks Gladio is transformed. The tension melts from his broad shoulders, amber eyes brighten with a reflection of his happiness. He tells his father about exchanging books with Ignis and the thoughtful discourse they shared. He recounts cooking lessons and homemade ramen. He even talks about painting, and how Ignis gently encouraged him to paint for the refugee aid centre. Blushing, gaze cast to the side, he admits that Ignis is the first person in a long time to really get to know him, the real him, beneath the big sword and muscles, apart from the fancy title.

“Iggy makes me feel like a damned person and not just a name,” he finishes, ears burning with embarrassment at speaking so candidly to his father about his damn feelings. “And yeah, I’ve used my privilege to help him. Just like you’ve always taught me to do.”

When he musters up the courage to meet his father’s eyes again, Clarus is smiling, his expression gone soft with pride and relief.

“Forgive me, Gladiolus. I had a duty to check. You still have my blessing. Ignis is a fine boy and it seems you’re good for each other.”

Secure in his father’s renewed blessing, Gladio passes the remainder of the festival night happily, and if he becomes a bit clingy with Ignis no one mentions it.

As per tradition everyone changes into pyjamas. Ignis didn’t have time to pack a change of clothes, but Gladio lets him borrow a pair of flannel sleep pants that he seldom wears because they’re so warm, and a well-worn t-shirt. As mouth-wateringly delicious as Ignis looks in his perfectly tailored suits, he looks even better swimming in Gladio’s oversized clothing. The way the fabric drapes and billows around him only serves to highlight how sleek and lean the lines of the frame beneath must be.

Someday Gladio will explore and worship that body with hands and lips and tongue. It’s his festival resolution.

Sleeping bags and bedrolls are spread across the living room floor. Gladio lays out the blanket that Ignis knit for him. Feeling its cozy warmth around him is as good as getting a cuddle from Ignis himself, and he happily snuggles into it.

He’s made sure that Ignis gets the spot closest to the fireplace, where its gentle orange glow can ward off his fear of the dark. A spark of understanding and appreciation kindles in those piercing green eyes as Ignis settles into his appointed place.

As the elders, Clarus and Jared are afforded the two couches to sleep on, while the rest of them make comfortable nests of blankets and pillows on the rug. The children fall asleep quickly, their exhaustion after a busy day winning out over their excitement for the morning, when they will be allowed to open their presents. The rest of them occupy themselves with quiet card games or reading by the light of the fire or the holiday tree’s glow until one by one they too succumb to the tempting allure of slumber.
In the background the radio sings them all to sleep, and sometime through the night Ignis’ fingers become tangled with Gladio’s beneath the blankets.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Gladio and Ignis have been a Gladnis for 50 days. How ever will they celebrate this milestone, coupled with Iggy's birthday?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Being in love suits Ignis, it suits him very well. The threads of the mutual love and respect that he and Gladio have for each other are woven into armor that he can wear when he faces the wider world. It makes him feel protected. It makes him feel like he is something valuable. It’s the encouragement he needs to take better care of himself and not allow others to dictate his worth.

Sure, having a 6’6” wall of pure muscle at your side helps. Gladio’s presence serves as a silent yet powerful warning to anyone who might still harbor ideas about Ignis needing to be reminded of his social status and position.

Ignis is certain that his relationship with Gladio chafes at the delicate sensibilities of some of the more traditionally-minded denizens of the Citadel. If they thought that Ignis was rising above his place in the natural order of things by being Noctis’s advisor, he’s definitely overreaching by dating an Amicitia. Even Ignis himself wonders if he’s aiming too high, reaching for a star that his mortal fingers are never meant to touch. A simple deviation of fate could have easily seen Ignis in service to Gladio, bowed beneath him rather than at his side as an equal.

However, no one dares give voice to their disapproval, and any gossip surrounding their relationship is kept behind the most tightly closed doors, if it exists at all. To question their relationship would be to call into question the judgment of Clarus Amicitia and that simply is not done. If the King’s Shield and head of the Council declares the grass to be purple and sugar to be bitter, then so it must be. And if he says that he believes that Ignis makes a fine partner for his son and heir, then so he must be. Only the King would dare defy him, and on this particular matter they are in accord.

Besides, the pleasure of tormenting the Prince’s advisor is but a fleeting joy. A broken nose takes much longer to heal, as they all know very well by now.

Dating Gladio has done far more for Ignis’s well-being than merely discouraging others from mistreating him, though. In an effort to provide Gladio with the attention and support that his boyfriend deserves, Ignis has carefully sculpted his schedule into something far more manageable, far more humane. He is no longer pursuing a formal university curriculum, satisfied with his existing handful of degrees. With the new year he has given up his seat on several committees, citing his need to focus on his Crownsguard training, training that he no longer feels compelled to pursue in the dead of night to avoid drawing unwanted attention from the other recruits. These newfound free hours in his day are devoted in part to his own welfare—ensuring that he gets sufficient food and rest—and to spending time with Gladio.

In only a few shorts months together, Ignis has already carved a niche for himself in the Amicitia household. There is a place on one of the couches that is ‘Ignis’s spot’ and Iris thinks nothing of
strong-arming him into it whenever he visits so that he can help her with some homework assignment or other. Jared has managed to wheedle Ignis’s favourite foods out of him and uses that knowledge to tempt him to stay over for dinner far more often than Ignis thinks is polite—he has half a mind to contribute to the family’s grocery bill.

It takes some convincing, but Ignis also helps Gladio forge a bond with his uncle, Alsius. The elder Scientia had been thrilled when he returned home from his conference at the end of the holidays to find that his nephew had knitted him a lovely scarf and hat set as a festival gift, and oh by the way is also dating the most eligible bachelor in the Citadel, if you don’t count the Prince (who is like as not destined for an arranged marriage so is he truly even eligible?).

A storm cloud seems to pass over Gladio’s features when Ignis passes along his uncle’s invitation for them both to join him for a Sunday brunch. It takes several days for Ignis to chip away at Gladio’s sullen exterior, past the hardened gaze, the clenched fists and monosyllabic responses to get to the heart of his boyfriend’s malcontent.

“He’s your flesh and blood and he let all of that shit happen to you!” he finally shouts as the dam burst on his self-control. He slams his fist onto Ignis’s kitchen counter with such force that it’s a wonder the surface doesn’t crack.

Ignis struggles to explain that his upbringing was not his uncle’s fault, that he was no more responsible for what happened than Regis or Cor or any of the other kind adults they grew up with. Ignis tactfully leaves Clarus’s name out of the discussion, but the unspoken reminder still hangs heavy in the air.

Eventually the pair find their way onto Ignis’s couch, Gladio apologizing for his temper and foul mood by kissing along Ignis’s neck until he’s left breathless and gasping. Gladio agrees to brunch with Alsius in exchange for more kisses.

Brunch with Alsius turns out to be a rousing success and Ignis is thrilled beyond man’s ability to translate emotions into words at how well they get along. Alsius is notoriously quiet and reserved, but Gladio has quite a bit of experience at getting members of the Scientia clan to open up to him and they become fast friends.

Now they have been a couple for nearly two months. Fifty days, to be precise. Fifty glorious days that feel like sunshine, a fresh cup of coffee, and a handknit sweater. Warm, comfortable, and Ignis’s absolute favourite.

These fifty days consist of sappy text messages sent to simply say good morning or good night along with a reminder of how much the recipient is loved. There are lunch breaks spent squished into the same side of a diner booth over steaming bowls of soup, evenings out at the theatre where they’re both more interested in admiring the other’s profile than the show, and late nights spent tangled together on Ignis’s couch, hands dipping beneath waistbands, shyly and awkwardly exploring new territory.

Most of the 100,000 gil that the King had given him as compensation for his salary issues has been donated to Lady Terra’s Children’s Home and the Refugee Aid Centre. Ignis did, selfishly he thinks, indulge in one purchase for himself, and now his favourite way to spend an evening is with Gladio by his side painting away while he plays his new violin. He tries not to think about how many meals for hungry mouths could have been paid for using the gil he’d spent on it.

Fifty days spent sharing literature, art and music, fifty days of allowing himself to be a little bit spoiled and a little bit selfish. Fifty days that bring him now to his eighteenth birthday and to the
first time he’s been beyond the walls of Insomnia since his arrival as a small child.

At Gladio’s insistence, their bags are in the trunk, the radio is blasting a jazzy tune interspersed with bursts of static, and they’re driving south through the sparse beauty of the Leidan countryside.

“You’re owed an epic birthday, Iggy!” Gladio had insisted when Ignis had initially balked at the idea of taking off for an entire weekend. Taking a few days off of work to relax in his apartment and enjoy the sights and sounds of Insomnia is one thing. Taking two of Noctis’s retainers a full day’s drive away from him is something else entirely.

“Owed? By whom?” He’d quirked a meticulously groomed brow.


Eventually Gladio had worn him down. The bastard had gotten Noctis in on the action, somehow. Bribery and blackmail and other treasonous methods, most likely.

“I can stay at the Citadel for the weekend. Dad will love it, and it can help make up for all the times I forgot your birthday.” Noct had pouted and looked at Ignis with eyes that were impossibly large, shining with sincerity. Ignis had been forced to agree to being swept off for a weekend of “relaxation and being spoiled rotten” according to Gladio.

And so here he is, gloved fingers tapping the steering wheel in time to the beat, Gladio at his side, humming along off-key. They’ve been on the road since daybreak and according to Ignis’s calculations, two maps, and his phone’s GPS, they should be just about at the halfway mark of the trip. A rest area should be nearby, where they can break for lunch, stretch their legs, and switch drivers.

Gravel crunches beneath tires as Ignis pulls over to the side of the road, a few feet from the weather-beaten sign that signals this as a rest stop. To their right a wide swathe of lush green grass extends towards the distant cliffs. There’s not much here, just an old picnic table with so many layers of peeling paint it’s hard to tell what colour it’s supposed to be, and a large garbage can.

They don’t need much now, though. Just a safe place to pull over without blocking the meager flow of traffic.

Within minutes Gladio has everything set up. He has a blanket spread over the grass (not the one Ignis made him for Festival, it’s far too precious to touch the dirty ground), and a small cooler is unpacked. Although they are only a four-hour drive from Insomnia at this point, the February air is already significantly warmer than at home. Both men shrug out of their light jackets and Ignis takes the time and care to neatly fold them and set them to one side. He even, then, rolls up the sleeves of his ‘casual’ light blue button-up.

“Peanut butter sandwiches and fruit punch?” Ignis asks, brow quirking as he examines the lunch Gladio hands him.

Gladio’s eyes tighten at the corners, amber gaze slanting to the side in a gesture that Ignis has come to refer to as Gladio’s pouty eyes. “What? Is something wrong?”

Ignis shakes his head in a gesture of gentle reassurance. There’s nothing inherently wrong with peanut butter sandwiches per se. It’s more the fact that Ignis would have been happy to pack them a much more balanced and hearty meal. He’s been making boxed lunches for Noctis for years and can whip up something elegant and nutritious in his sleep—something worthy of Gladiolus Amicitia.
“Nothing is wrong.” Ignis feels his lips curving naturally into a smile as he gazes at Gladio’s face, his features contorted with tender concern. “It’s just, you know you had only to ask and I would have been happy to prepare something, right?”

There’s a soft click of plastic as Gladio breaks the seal on a bottle of juice, loosening the cap before setting it within Ignis’s field of reach. It’s a sweet gesture, to loosen the cap for him, all the more touching because Ignis knows the other man probably did it without even thinking about it; he’s naturally chivalrous like that.

“I know that,” Gladio murmurs as he unwraps a sandwich for himself. “And I know you wouldn’t think it was some great bother, because that’s just how you are. But it’s your birthday weekend, Iggy. The whole point of this trip is for me to spoil you, not the other way around. It’s bad enough that I let you split the driving with me.”

Ignis huffs and hastily averts his gaze, choosing to stare off towards the glare of the midday sun rather than directly at Gladio, because somehow it hurts less to stare into that cosmic inferno than to look at Gladio and be confronted by that overwhelming kindness that sometimes has Ignis feeling so bloody unworthy.

“I hardly deserve your kindness, Gladio. But I do thank you for it,” Ignis says, giving voice to his thoughts. “And I will admit, it is nice to have someone else take care of the little details for once.”

They eat and drink in companionable silence for a time, both content to soak up the other’s company as well as the warmth of the sun. Ignis can’t help noting that he and Gladio seem to have developed a thing for sharing picnics. He hopes that never changes. Food tastes better when it’s seasoned by fresh air, and is somehow more enjoyable when eaten on a blanket with your best friend.

And try as he might to dissuade Gladio from spoiling him absolutely rotten, somehow their lunch break ends with Ignis reclining on the blanket, his head pillowed atop his folded jacket, socked feet in Gladio’s lap, receiving a massage that Gladio insists he’s owed for having spent the morning driving.

Ignis very much doubts that Gladio will let him return the favour after Gladio drives for the final four hours, which will bring them down to Galdin Quay. Guilt coils in the pit of his stomach but between the warmth of the sun, the gentle breeze wafting down form the cliffs, and Gladio’s tender ministrations to his feet and calves, Ignis soon finds himself sinking too deeply into a haze of relaxation to care.

They make it to Galdin Quay in good time. The last vestiges of daylight’s kiss are just painting the world in soft shades of lavender and rose when they pull into a shaded parking spot. In the distance the lamps of the resort and the Mother of Pearl restaurant glow invitingly.

Gladio will tolerate no argument from Ignis as he hefts his duffel bag over his shoulder and reaches for the handle of Ignis’s roller bag. Ignis feels like a bit of a prat as he strolls along at Gladio’s side, wholly unburdened, as if the Prince’s Shield is his own personal valet.

“I hope you appreciate my humouring you,” Ignis smirks, casting his boyfriend a fond look out of the corner of his eye. “And do recall that your birthday is in less than two months. I fully intend to repay every favour.”

Gladio responds by flexing the muscles that the black tank top he’s wearing does precious little to cover and declaring “Hey these ain’t just for show. May as well use ‘em.”
Ignis tuts and gently knocks Gladio with an elbow. “There is far more to you than your physique, impressive as it may be, and you know it. You’re not a pack mule and you needn’t show off.”

Gladio huffs a soft laugh, and there’s a lightness and a brightness in his voice that makes Ignis’s very soul sing in a joyful reflection. “Sorry, all I heard was that my boyfriend thinks I’m impressive.” He then proceeds to quite literally skip ahead of Ignis, who can only shake his head and run after him, grumbling about what an absolute idiot his boyfriend is.

They bicker good-naturedly all the way to the check-in desk, where a helpful porter takes their bags from Gladio and leads them to their room.

Ignis feels all of the breath leave him at once. The room is simply stunning. It’s light and airy as one might expect from a seaside resort, a triumph of clean lines and crisp white linen. A large picture window and sliding glass doors dominate the far wall, with an unbroken view of the ocean just beyond their own private deck. The en suite boasts a massive jacuzzi tub that can easily accommodate both of them. Everything is the epitome of understated luxury.

Ignis tries very hard not to succumb to the tidal wave of emotion crashing over him, he really does. He steps out of his dress shoes out of habit and drifts towards the picture window, staring out over the ocean under the pretense of admiring the view while really he’s just trying to tamp down on an overwhelming feeling of I don’t belong and I don’t deserve all of this. This room, this resort, and this entire trip are as far removed from the wild hills of northern Tenebrae as can be. This is a level of luxury and comfort that as a child he didn’t even know existed, and even when he found himself surrounded by it in the Lucian court he always felt himself to be more of a tool or a fixture of that luxury rather than someone who is permitted to partake of it.

He has come a long way towards accepting his place in the world, but evidently not far enough to be unmoved by this level of opulence, tasteful and subdued as it may be.

He doesn’t know if it’s his posture that betrays him or an irregularity in his breathing, but somehow Gladio just knows. Gentle lips are pressed to his temple and a strong arm curls around his thin shoulders in a gesture of comfort that Ignis gratefully surrenders to, his lean frame curling into Gladio, accepting the offered comfort.

“What’s going on in there?” Gladio asks, nuzzling against his temple.

Ignis draws in a deep breath and then slowly lets it out, body deflating and sagging against his boyfriend’s reassuring bulk. “Would you believe me if I said nothing?” Ignis asks hopefully.

“Nope.” Another kiss to his temple, another chip against his defenses. Kiss by affectionate kiss, Gladio wears down his defenses and insecurities until they crumble like a sand castle beneath the tide.

“I just-“ Ignis begins, and he can feel the tips of his ears burning. “This is all so beautiful and extravagant and it’s hard to believe that it’s for me.”

Gladio doesn’t say anything. He simply holds Ignis tightly to his side, kissing his hair. After a few minutes Ignis tilts his head back in wordless invitation. Eagerly Gladio accepts, pressing his lips to Ignis’s in a sweetly melting embrace. His arms wind their way around Gladio’s waist and he clings to the larger man like he’s an anchor.

They stand there, bathed in the rose gold haze of sunset, kissing and holding each other until there’s no room left between them for doubts and insecurities.
It takes them longer than it should to unpack their small bags. Gladio keeps stopping what he’s doing to pull Ignis into another hug. Ignis keeps casting his boyfriend longing looks from across the room, which Gladio always promptly responds to with fresh kisses.

When they have finally unpacked and have settled, they head to the Mother of Pearl for a quiet dinner. Ignis briefly considers suggesting that he cook them something himself—there’s a produce vendor in a little shack down at the end of the pier that looks very promising—but he knows that Gladio would never allow that tonight, not on Ignis’s birthday. And he can admit it, he’s tired. It’s shocking how exhausting it is to simply sit in a car all day. Having someone else cook for him will be a blessed relief tonight. Even if the prices are outlandish and he mourns for Gladio’s bank account.

As they walk through the restaurant, carefully weaving their way past occupied tables, Ignis cannot help but admire the exceptional man at his side. Gladio has such an easygoing air about him most of the time, so casual and carefree that it’s easy to forget that beneath the hoodies and fondness for Cup Noodles is a man born to great power and privilege. But his fine upbringing shines through in the way he moves so confidently through the luxurious setting, unfazed by the opulence, unintimidated by the maitre d’ in his fussy white tuxedo who shows them to a table for two. The very ground beneath his feet seems to bow before him in deference to him with each step.

Ignis fears he’ll never understand what he did to deserve this man, but he’s forever grateful to whichever of the Astrals decided to bless him.

As is his custom, Gladio pulls Ignis’s chair out for him, and then rather than taking the chair opposite of him, Gladio instead folds his large frame into the seat to Ignis’s right, a cheeky grin lighting up his features. Ignis rolls his eyes good-naturedly as Gladio carefully relocates the second place setting to his chosen seat.

They order a crisp white wine to toast Ignis’s eighteenth birthday. Their server checks their identification and offers a beaming smile to Ignis, along with a quiet “Happy Birthday, Sir.” Ignis appreciates the fact that the man has the tact to not shout it from the rafters and make a fuss.

Their glasses chime clear and sweet as they clink them together.

“Happy Birthday, Iggy.” Gladio smiles fondly, amber eyes twinkling as warmly as the candle on their table.

“Thank you.” Ignis sets his hand palm up atop the crisp white tablecloth, a shy offering that Gladio seems happy to accept.

They hold hands while they order, and even once their food arrives they both make do with one hand, their fingers stubbornly twined together, each refusing to relinquish the pleasure of the other’s touch.

Much to their surprise, their server arrives shortly after their plates have been cleared and sets two elegant dishes before them. They are without a doubt the most exquisite desserts that Ignis has ever seen—or smelled. Pears, poached in champagne based on their fragrant aroma, with whipped cream and a ginger tuile.

“With the chef’s compliments and birthday wishes,” their waiter says with a warm smile.

They finish their desserts leisurely, taking the smallest bites imaginable to prolong the pleasure. Ignis makes sure that Gladio tips their server handsomely.
By this time the sun has settled beneath the horizon and moonlight scintillates atop the waves like a sea of diamonds. On an ordinary evening, Ignis would still have several hours of work ahead of him before he could retire. This is not; however, an ordinary evening.

They make their way back to their hotel room. On the way, they pass the small seaside spa tucked into the far side of the resort. Ignis’s gaze lingers thoughtfully on the massage tables and the patient attendants waiting for clients.

Following his gaze, Gladio quirs a grin and leans in close, his breath fluttering hotly against Ignis’s ear. “I dunno if I can tolerate anyone else puttin’ their hands all over you.” Gladio slides an arm around Ignis’s back, a possessive hand curling around his hip. He gives Ignis’s curves a gentle squeeze. “But if you’re tense I can think of a few ways that I can help you out with that…”

Heat ripples up from somewhere in Ignis’s belly and he groans in the back of his throat. He presses his lips together in a stubborn line, desperately clinging to what remains of his dignity and propriety. He knows that Gladio can feel his quickened breaths and see the sultry dusting of colour across his cheeks because he just chuckles lowly and quickens his pace, leading him towards the privacy of their suite.

Gladio shuts and locks the door while Ignis turns on the lamps, a soft golden glow chasing away the silvery moonlight. Ignis then perches on the edge of the bed, bending down to untie his shoes. He can feel the intensity of Gladio’s stare and his fingers fumble at his laces, suddenly clumsy and unsure of himself.

He knows Gladio, knows him beyond the superficial layers that few bother to struggle past. He knows perfectly well that Gladio has not whisked him off for a romantic weekend away with the intention or expectation of bedding him. He knows that Gladio really does want Ignis to relax, enjoy himself, and for once be the person that the world caters to rather than the other way around. As usual Gladio expects nothing from Ignis but will gladly give him anything.

If this weekend amounts to nothing more than sunbathing and cuddling, he knows that is okay. But suddenly the bed he’s sitting on is conspicuous by its very presence, as is the bath built for two in the next room.

He’s thought about it, of course. All of the wonderful and terrible things he wants to do to Gladio’s beautiful body, and all of the exquisite things Gladio could do to him. That man is a living work of art and Ignis aches to appreciate it. He wants to enjoy every last inch of that body that could make a marble sculpture weep with envy, and he also longs to turn his own body over for use in the pursuit of the other man’s pleasure. But these have just been decadent fantasies while the bed beneath him feels ever so real.

He’s still struggling to untie his shoes when he feels the mattress dip beside him to accommodate Gladio’s weight, and the reassuring press of a hand against the small of his back, a heavy palm rubbing gentle rhythmic circles into the tense muscles there.

Ignis sighs, body going soft and pliant beneath that tender attention. He manages to untie his other shoe at last, and is grateful for Gladio’s lack of commentary on why it’s taking him so damn long to perform such a simple task.

“You know,” that deep bass rumble washes over him, penetrating the layers of worry clouding Ignis’s brain. “If you just want to take a long bath or get a back rub or something, I’m totally down for that. We can sit out on the deck and try to count the stars if you want. Whatever you want.”

Ignis hums softly in acknowledgement. He notices and appreciates the relative innocence of those
suggestions, the unspoken but still very much heard reminder that nothing sexual needs to happen, there’s no obligation to push their physical relationship further than it’s already gone. As well, Gladio’s whatever you want echoes in his head, permission to be selfish, to be demanding, to have more of Gladio than he’s had before.

Gladio’s hand slides up and down the expanse of Ignis’s back, the tension melting away with each pass, muscles growing warm and malleable. “Whatever you want. Be selfish for once.”

“But what do you want?” Ignis asks softly because at his core he doesn’t know how to be truly selfish and doesn’t know if he wants to learn. “I can’t be happy if you’re not.”

Gladio chuckles softly as his hand grows still, though still pressing against Ignis’s back. “I wonder how many couples have had this exact same conversation. Or if we’re the only idiots who worry so much about their partner.”

Ignis straightens his back, Gladio’s hand sliding easily to his waist with the movement, still stubbornly refusing to sever that contact. Shy emerald meets equally shy topaz and Ignis has to laugh as well. “Pity we were both raised to be considerate and gentlemanly. It does make it rather more difficult to utterly ravish someone.”

Thick, dark brows arch in surprise and then waggle suggestively. “You want to ravish me, do you? Or do you want to be ravished?” There’s a flash of white teeth as Gladio offers one of his trademark grins.

Ignis swats a massive bicep in a playful mockery of true anger. “Stop that. You know I can’t think straight when you’re cute like that.”

“Sorry,” Gladio shrugs helplessly, expression anything but apologetic. Smug would be the most appropriate term. He takes hold of the hand that just swatted him and brings it to his lips, bestowing a series of kisses along Ignis’s knuckles.

Ignis feels his coyness melt away with each touch of those plush lips, ripe for kissing. With an exaggerated groan he tugs their joined hands out of the way and leans forward, claiming Gladio’s mouth in a fierce kiss. He ignores the way his glasses tilt awkwardly, instead savouring the taste of Gladio, the clean, fresh sensation that is uniquely him, flavoured tonight by the lingering taste of a champagne-poached pear.

Strong hands snake around his hips, following a familiar path to tug Ignis into Gladio’s lap. This is as easy and comfortable as breathing by now, as if Gladio’s thighs were made to support Ignis’s weight and cradle his lean frame, as if the swell of Ignis’s ass had been sculpted specifically to fit Gladio’s hands.

They lose themselves for a time to the familiar pleasure of eager kisses and trembling bodies grinding together, awakening arousal and desire in each other. Until Ignis thinks that he might be able to shed his reservations, until he feels suffused with so much of Gladio’s love and trust that maybe, just maybe he can whisper the secret desire that’s been tickling the corners of his mind all day.

“Can we go to the bath?” He gasps against Gladio’s kiss-swollen lips.

“Gods yes,” Gladio sighs in response.

The world tilts and swirls around him as Ignis finds himself scooped up and cradled against Gladio’s chest, his long legs dangling to the side. He laughs, carefree and reckless for a change,
and allows Gladio to sweep him off towards the bathroom.

It’s sweet, honestly, the way Gladio sets Ignis down on the marble counter with such delicacy, as if he’s some priceless treasure that a stiff breeze could damage. It’s even sweeter when lips that are plump and red from kissing him press against his cheek, kissing him and murmuring, “let me take care of you.”

“Yes,” Ignis whispers back.

He watches from his lofty perch as Gladio adjusts the taps and starts filling the impressive tub and then begins shedding his clothing.

Considering Gladio’s usual predisposition for not wearing much of anything, it’s not as shocking as it could be to see the other man peeling off his tank top or shimmying out of his jeans. Ignis even manages to watch him tug his boxers down and off with only a slight loss of composure. He’s seen all of these bits and pieces of Gladio before. But he’s never seen them all at once, never seen that heart-stoppingly beautiful body all at once, in all its glory until now.

Gladio has to catch Ignis with a hand splayed across his chest before the Advisor topples off of the counter, not realizing that he’d started leaning forward to better admire Gladio’s utter perfection.

“Woah. You okay, babe?” Gladio bites his lower lip, eyes swimming with concern.

Ignis nods, cheeks heating anew with a fresh blush. “Yes. I was just … caught up in the view.” That earns him a smile and a peck on the lips.

Gladio then helps him undress and he cannot help but feel the reverence in the other’s touch, every movement achingly slow and so gentle.

Inch by inch Gladio unwraps Ignis, peeling away the layers of his dress shirt and slacks, even kneeling down to carefully pull his socks off. All the while maintaining a constant litany of praises, mostly wordless, appreciative sighs and moans, as if he is anything to compare to the Adonis in front of him. Occasionally he’ll lean in, whispering words like “lovely” and “beautiful” against pale skin, and Ignis will squirm, flattered despite himself.

By the time they’re both naked, and Ignis’s glasses are set on the counter, the tub is almost full. Gladio turns the taps off and extends a chivalrous hand to Ignis, a subtle reminder that he is and always will be a perfect gentleman.

A shiver makes his fingers tremble despite the warm steam wafting from the tub, and it takes Ignis a moment to recognize that it’s Gladio whose hand is shaking with, what? Nerves? Excitement? Ignis squeezes his boyfriend’s hand and Gladio squeezes right back, his grip immediately growing steady. Nerves, then. Ignis smiles at that and feels a renewed swell of love for this wonderful man.

“I love you,” Ignis gently reminds Gladio

“I love you more,” Gladio insists as he helps Ignis step up and into the tub.

Ignis arches a fine brow. “I very much doubt that.”

The water is just the right temperature to be almost too hot, stinging until his body adjusts. It feels heavenly against his tense muscles.

Gladio eases into the tub beside him, close enough for their thighs to touch, a different kind of heat flaring between them.
“Let me prove it to you?” Gladio chews his lip, honeyed eyes peering over at him through ridiculously long lashes.

Ignis groans, his entire body arching with want, though he doesn’t yet know what it is he’s acquiescing to. It’s unfair, how tantalizing Gladio looks with his sun bronzed skin flushed and glistening, and that voice that can dip into octaves that shouldn’t even be possible. With monumental effort he reaches for the little shampoos and soaps the resort provided.

“After we wash,” Ignis insists, grinning at the indignant expression sweeping Gladio’s face.

Gladio huffs and plucks the necessities out of Ignis’s hands. The Advisor huffs but his annoyance is quickly subdued when Gladio rumbles. “Okay, but I get to wash you.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! *sheepish grin*

If anyone is uncomfortable with the direction this chapter is taking and you're just here for the fluffy part of the romance, you can safely skip the next chapter and just read the last one. I know smut isn't exactly everyone's thing. If it IS your thing, hey there, see you next time. If it's not that's okay and I respect that, which is why I'm trying to contain the worst (or best, hehe) of it to a single, easily-skippable chapter.

Love y'all bunches. <33
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

*Sneaks this chapter up here and flees, mumbling apologies about how long it's been since I wrote smut*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gladio remembers the time when Ignis shared with him that his favourite colour is white. Ignis had likened it to clean linens and fresh-fallen snow. Now, while the verdant shades in Ignis’s eyes have bolstered his fondness for green, he is beginning to understand what Ignis meant when he extolled the virtues of white. Because the expanse of milky white skin trembling beneath his own bronzed hands is the most enticing thing he has ever laid his eyes—or hands—on.

Up until this evening he’s only caught glimpses here and there of what Ignis hides beneath those impeccably tailored suits of his. He’s seen flashes of a flat stomach and angular hips when they’ve fooled around, and he’s seen him in a Crownguard tank, his bare arms and collar bones glistening with sweat after a good workout. He even got excited once when he saw Ignis’s bare feet because at the time it seemed like such a private and intimate part of his then-crush to see.

None of those past experiences, not even the times he’s had his eager hands down his love’s pants, have prepared him for how world-shatteringly beautiful Ignis looks fully nude, long-limbed and elegant, his fair skin smooth and unmarred save for a small collection of beauty marks, some of which are in the most delightful places.

Such as the one at the base of his spine that he’s been staring at, mesmerized, when he’s supposed to be helping Ignis wash his back.

When Ignis shifts, radiating self-conscious discomfort because he doesn’t know why Gladio’s suddenly stopped, he presses an apologetic kiss to the man’s shoulder and resumes his lathering.

Ignis sighs contentedly, the taut lines of his back visibly melting into relaxation as large hands work the soap into his skin as gently as possible.

“Fuck, you’re so smooth,” Gladio moans, rolling his palms over the curve of his shoulder blades and down his sides, finding another beauty mark just above his ribs that he carefully catalogues for future reference. “I’m half afraid that I’m gonna scratch you up with these coarse hands of mine.”

“Mmm,” Ignis hums contentedly, stretching like a satisfied cat beneath Gladio’s touch. “Worth it. This feels incredible.”

Gladio chuckles and continues with the half bath, half massage. He cups handfuls of water and gently pours them across Ignis’s back, over and over, rinsing away the soap. Glistening rivulets trail across smooth skin, following the curve of the man’s decadently arched spine.

When he’s done, he touches a hip below the water and gently encourages Ignis to sit up on the edge of the tub so that he can more easily wash his legs and feet for him.

Gladio is already squeaky clean, having been unable to resist Ignis’s pleas to be allowed to help
wash him first. He’s pretty sure that he’s absolutely ruined for having anyone else, including himself, wash his hair, because the things Ignis did to his scalp with those fingers of his should be illegal, or at least come with a warning label. His toes curl with pleasure just thinking about it.

“Gladio?” Ignis murmurs, peering down at him shyly from where he’s perched on the wide edge of the tub. Gladio realizes that he’s spaced out, distracted by how fucking gorgeous Ignis is. *Again.*

“Sorry, sorry!” He kisses Ignis’s knee to atone. Ignis hisses softly, leg twitching. Ticklish? Gladio grins and files that little tidbit away.

It takes awhile, because dammit Ignis’s legs are a work of art and it takes time to properly appreciate good art, but he does eventually get him nice and clean, lathered, scrubbed and rinsed with his own hands. Gladio soon finds himself curled within the warm, soapy water, leaning against one of Ignis’s long legs, gazing up at him, not even bothering to hide the sappy, lovesick look on his face.

Those magic fingers work their way into Gladio’s damp hair, sweetly smoothing the dark locks back from his brow, combing from his hairline to the base of his neck. He sighs, relishing the way his entire body tingles at the touch, and lets his cheek rest against a sleek, well-muscled thigh, admiring the view from this angle.

“You’re so beautiful,” he praises Ignis, who in turn looks away, smiling shyly.

For probably the thousandth time that day he’s awestruck by how much Ignis has changed since his last birthday—or how much his perception of him has changed at any rate. It’s difficult to reconcile the image of the beautiful creature lounging above him, appearing perfectly content and at ease, with the cold, distant young man who had a stick jammed so far up his ass he could have spit splinters at people.

Gladio understands now, the myriad defenses that Ignis had to adopt over the years in order to survive with his sanity intact. Ignis had been like a little hedgehog, with his outer layer of prickles and hard spikes, meant to protect the vulnerable person inside. Seeing him now so unguarded and relaxed, accepting Gladio’s affection and care like he *deserves* it is something he wouldn’t have thought possible a year ago, or even six months ago.

They relax for a time, letting the fragrant steam of the bath soothe their minds in much the same way that the hot water soothes tired muscles. Ignis’s fingers continue their tender ministrations along Gladio’s scalp before wandering over the impressive swell of his shoulders and biceps.

“So,” Ignis begins, clearing his throat nervously. “Now that we’re clean, how did you intend to prove it?”

Gladio blinks dumbly a few times. Between the heat in the bath and the lovely man next to him, his brain has turned into happy mush, a state not helped by the redirection of bloodflow to certain choice parts of his anatomy.

“You were going to prove that you love me more? Or do you forfeit?” Full lips quirk into a heartbreakingly gorgeous smile.

Gladio grins with a deliberate flash of teeth. He’s definitely not forfeiting or giving up this fight. He’ll die upon this fucking hill If he has to, in the most epic battle of ‘I love you more’ that the world has ever seen. Pressing a kiss to the outside of Ignis’s thigh, he growls. “Not forfeiting.”

“What do you plan to do, then?” Ignis murmurs lowly. Gladio’s spine tingles. He doesn’t know if
Ignis is doing this on purpose or not but every word drips from that man’s lips like molten honey and by the Gods it’s doing things to him.

“I got some ideas,” Gladio rumbles, and gives Ignis’s thigh a light nip. A sharp inhalation and the clenching of the flat stomach in front of him are both reward and encouragement.

Actually, he has one idea, one very specific idea that has haunted his fantasies for weeks now. And it’s not like he arranged this weekend for this express purpose or anything, he really didn’t. He’s had plenty of opportunities to live this fantasy and there will be many more opportunities to in the future, he’s in no rush. But this moment is just so perfect. Ignis is relaxed, naked and content above him, already in the perfect position…

Gladio forces himself to look up, knowing that a blush is blooming brightly in his cheeks, hoping that Ignis will blame it on the steam. “Can I suck you off?”

A high-pitched whine issues from the back of Ignis’s throat. Elegant fingers clench reflexively, tightening to a fist in Gladio’s hair. His scalp burns in a way that is surprisingly pleasant, a little bit thrilling, even.

Gladio knows that this is a bit of a long-shot with Ignis. Ignis is by nature and conditioning a giver. The idea of Gladio lowering himself before him and performing an act so filthy and so one-sided in its pleasure goes against everything that Ignis has been for most of his life. And it’s also what the man whole-fucking-heartedly deserves, in Gladio’s opinion.

He’s so distracted by the stinging in his scalp and the doubts spinning their way through his brain that he almost misses the breathy “Would you?” that Ignis gasps out.

Gladio props his chin up on Ignis’s knee and peeks up at him, trying to contain the hope flaring in his chest. “If you’d like that, yeah. I’d love to.”

He watches the tip of Ignis’s tongue as it flits out to trace his lips. Seafoam eyes grow unfocused as Ignis’s gaze turns inward. Gladio doesn’t know if he’s trying to talk himself into accepting Gladio’s offer or out of it. The larger man surreptitiously crosses his fingers beneath the water’s surface and waits. After a long moment Ignis’s grip in his hair loosens and the man gently soothes the sore spot with his fingertips. The Advisor takes a deep breath and nods. “Please. Yes, please.”

Gladio shifts himself until he’s curled up in the bath in front of Ignis. Callused hands settle lightly atop Ignis’s knees but he makes no move to part the slender thighs in front of him. Instead he lets his hands rest there, a reassuring weight and a gentle invitation. He waits with endless patience for Ignis to willingly part his knees for him.

When Ignis does, Gladio eases into place and it’s as natural as breathing. He could happily spend the rest of his days in the sanctuary he finds between Ignis’s legs. He slides an arm around Ignis’s waist to help prop him up if he needs it, while his other hand is occupied rubbing soothing circles into Ignis’s thigh.

He’s inexperienced at this, having neither given nor received this particular act, and he’s horribly afraid that this will be awful and embarrassing, that he won’t even be able to get Ignis hard, much less get him to climax. And if by some miracle he gets him to release he has no idea what to do at that point. All he knows is that he desperately wants Ignis to be selfish, and to feel as much pleasure as possible. He knows what he has fantasized about doing to him with his mouth and tongue, and he knows what he thinks would feel good on his own aching erection.

He begins gently, carefully, his lips pressing a trail of reverent kisses along the softness of Ignis’s
inner thigh. His skin is like satin stretched taut over steel. Ignis has been training hard with the Crownsguard and it shows. Gladio is impressed. Ignis is thin but he’s toned, sleek and compact where Gladio is bulky.

“Is this okay?” Ignis whispers into the steamy air as his fingers tangle into Gladio’s hair again in a touch as light as a butterfly’s wing.

Gladio hums appreciatively. “More than okay.”

He lets his lips follow a path of worship up the inside of one smooth thigh and then down the other, leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake. Above him Ignis gasps and his grip in Gladio’s hair tightens with each kiss.

Gladio sighs contentedly, watching as Ignis’s thighs tremble beneath the warmth of his breath. Emboldened by how beautifully responsive Ignis is being, Gladio flicks his tongue out, painting a wet stripe up to junction where Ignis’s thigh meets his hip. He presses a gentle kiss to the skin there before finally turning his attention to Ignis’s cock, which is already flushed and hard with want.

“You’re so beautiful. The most beautiful,” he praises Ignis in a low murmur.

Before Ignis can say anything in response to the praise Gladio is lavishing him with, the Shield presses the flat of his tongue to Ignis’s balls and whatever the Advisor was going to say falls apart, dissolving into a choked moan.

His own dick gives an interested little twitch at that sound and eager for more, Gladio drags the flat of his tongue over Ignis’s balls a few more times before experimenting with delicate little flicks of his tongue, gauging his love’s reactions to learn what he likes.

When he takes one of Ignis’s balls into his eager mouth and sucks on it Ignis cries out, water splashing as his legs twitch and tremble uncontrollably. Gladio pulls back with a satisfied grin, giving Ignis a moment to catch his breath. He makes certain that his arm is braced snugly against Ignis’s back before leaning in for more.

He works Ignis over the way that he imagines he would want to be worked over, with long, languid swipes of his tongue along the underside of Ignis’s cock, with his lips and tongue curling around the tip, nuzzling at the pearls of precome that weep from the slit. He wrenches more cries from Ignis’s beautiful lips when he traces the slit firmly with the tip of his tongue.

Gladio’s confidence grows with every soft sigh and ragged breath he draws from Ignis. Every moan and cry are a benediction and an encouragement.

At some point Ignis grows quiet, though his legs still shiver and twitch to either side of Gladio’s knelt frame. Glancing up he sees Ignis with a hand clamped firmly over his mouth, smothering the evidence of his lust behind his palm.

“Don’t do that,” Gladio entreats, looking up at Ignis from between his knees. “Let me hear you.”

Colour floods Ignis cheeks, tinting the ivory skin a deep rose. He nods and carefully lowers his hand, tangling his fingers into the longer bits of Gladio’s hair.

“Good,” Gladio rumbles happily and with both of Ignis’s hands on his head, lets himself be nudged back towards Ignis’s arousal.

He takes Ignis’s length into his mouth, until he feels his gag reflex threatening to get the best of
him. He takes the hand that’s not currently braced against Ignis’s back and wraps his fingers around the base of his love’s cock, as if to mark the limits of his own abilities.

Despite his inexperience, Ignis comes apart quickly beneath his artless touches. Gladio is only just beginning to fall into a rhythm when Ignis is suddenly pushing his head away with rough hands, forcing him back. An apology is just on the cusp of forming on his lips, because of course he assumes he’s hurt Ignis somehow, maybe sucking too roughly, or not shielding his teeth properly.

And then Ignis is spending himself into the bath water, milky ribbons that are soon lost amid soap suds and steam. Gladio watches, mesmerized, as Ignis’s delicate features contort with pleasure, open-mouthed and gasping, before going soft and lax. Gladio gives his cock a few firm pumps, wanting to wring every ounce of pleasure out of the night for Ignis.

“I-I’m sorry!” Ignis gasps. “I couldn’t hold on.” There’s a waver in Ignis’s voice, a vulnerability or uncertainty that makes the protective Shield in him roar.

Gladio is glad he wrapped an arm around Ignis because the man is slumping bonelessly, leaning heavily against him.

“Shh, no gorgeous, you did great.” Gladio soothes him softly. It was quick but he knows he couldn’t have fared any better if their positions had been reversed and he’d had Ignis’s hot little mouth on his own cock for the first time.

It takes a few moments for Ignis to come back to himself, all the while Gladio kneels patiently in front of him, tracing idle patterns into the skin of Ignis’s legs and sides. His own cock throbs with a need that he has no intention of fulfilling tonight, because tonight has to be all about Ignis. It’s not that Gladio is some ridiculously selfless creature—that’s Ignis’s turf and he won’t encroach—but he knows that he’ll regret it later if he gives in to his own carnal desires. At least for tonight he wants Ignis to be entirely selfish.

Besides, there’s always tomorrow.

Ignis’s fingers finally untangle from Gladio’s hair, and his scalp tingles at the sudden absence of tension. Quick as a wink, Gladio catches Ignis’s long, dainty hands in one of his own and tenderly brings them to his lips, painting his knuckles with kisses. Peridot meets topaz as they lock gazes and smile at each other.

“Shall I?” Ignis nods meaningfully at Gladio’s erection breaching the surface of the water, and there’s a roughness to his voice that Gladio wishes he could bottle for later, save it for another night when he’s not afraid of taking advantage of Ignis’s subservient nature.

Gladio just shakes his head. “No.” Ignis’s features immediately fall, and Gladio hastens to amend. “Not tonight. I just want tonight to be about you.”

Ignis laughs, shaking his head so that his damp bangs slink across his eyes. Gladio reaches up to smooth the other man’s hair back for him, marvelling at how easily mistaken for pure silk the tawny locks are.

“You’re too much,” Ignis says. “And you’re far too good to me.”

Gladio studies Ignis’s features, taking in the amusement sparkling in his eyes, the way the corners of his lips quirk into a subtle smile. There’s nothing self-deprecating about his demeanor, so he lets the comment slide. “I am pretty great,” he says, to which Ignis just laughs.

They help each other out of the bath and wrap each other in fluffy white towels. They forgot to
bring any of their clothing into the bathroom so they head back into the bedroom to change. Gladio
tries to pretend that his dick isn’t tenting his towel.

Once they’re relatively dry and changed into light sleep pants, they make their way to the bed. The
sheets are soft, with an obscenely high thread count. Watching Ignis stretch out atop this nest of
luxury is more than enough satisfaction for Gladio.

There are times, like right this moment, when Ignis’s past crashes into him with all of the subtlety
of a rampaging behemoth. He tries and fails to reconcile the stunning vision before him of Ignis,
content and relaxed, melting into the comfort of a plush bed, with the mental image his mind’s eye
conjures of a younger Ignis, shivering on a bed that’s been stripped of blankets, or worse yet,
wedged into the corner of his closet like a pair of old boots.

Gladio’s arm feels heavy as lead as he draws the duvet up to cover Ignis. His mind is miles and
years away, back in the Insomnia of his childhood. He doesn’t really even notice that he’s begun
rhythmically dragging his hands along the covers, smoothing them over the lines of Ignis’s body,
trying to pour a lifetime’s worth of comfort and affection into the touch. Not until Ignis lets out a
breathy little sigh and murmurs. “That feels wonderful, thank you.”

“My pleasure,” Gladio murmurs as his hands slowly grow still. He pats Ignis’s shoulder and slides
himself beneath the covers to join his boyfriend.

He’s surprised when Ignis stretches an arm out to turn off his bedside lamp, and even more
surprised when he whispers. “You can turn your lamp off, if you like.”

His breath hitches, uncertainty temporarily paralyzing him. He’s pretty sure that his heart will
shatter into pieces, and those pieces will break down into dust if Ignis ends up waking up
frightened in the dark. “Are you sure?” He bites his bottom lip hard enough to leave dents.

Ignis sighs, rolling over in the large bed until his head rests against Gladio’s pillow. Gladio
willingly surrenders this territory, and a heavy arm winds around Ignis’s waist to hold him there.
“You’re here. I’ll be fine.”

Obligingly, he reaches behind him, fumbling until he finds the switch for his lamp. With a soft
click the room is bathed in distant moonlight.

Gladio wakes the next morning to buttery sunlight flooding the suite. He blinks a few times as his
eyes focus and his gaze finally settles on Ignis, whose sharp gaze is fixed on him, a fond smile
teasing his lips.

“Morning, sleepyhead,” Ignis murmurs.

“Hey there,” Gladio rumbles. At some point through the night he’d let go of Ignis. He quickly
remedies this, draping his arm possessively around the small man. “You been awake long?”

Ignis hums, wriggling closer, erasing the scant millimeters that had formed between them while
they slept. “I don’t know. I’ve been too busy admiring my handsome boyfriend to keep track of the
time.” He grins, playful and carefree, and Ignis looks his actual age for once. “Did you know that
your skin glows in the sunlight? Like you’ve been cast in bronze. It’s stunning.”

Gladio can feel the warmth collecting in his cheeks. Not knowing what to say to such ardent
sweetness, he tips his head down, capturing Ignis’s lips in an unhurried kiss, lazy and languid.

They’re both tempted to stay exactly where they are all day, bare chests pressing together,
showering each other with wordless affection from loving hands and hungry lips. But they are only human, and it only takes a few minutes before Gladio’s stomach rumbles and they break apart, laughing.

“Sorry,” Gladio grins sheepishly.

“It’s fine. I’ve needed to use the privy for awhile now.”

Gladio steals one last kiss before shooing Ignis off to the bathroom while he orders them in room service for breakfast.

They make themselves ready for the day. They both don their Crownguard-issue swimming trunks. They’re dark gray, falling nearly to their knees, and are respectable-looking enough that even prim and proper Ignis doesn’t mind walking around the resort in them. At Ignis’s insistence they both wear shirts, with Gladio shrugging into a comfortable black tank top, while Ignis favours a more modest wine-red t-shirt that compliments the gray trunks nicely.

They eat breakfast on their private deck, serenaded by the roar of the ocean and the cries of seagulls. It’s nice, a little slice of peace and quiet that they’ve managed to carve out of their otherwise hectic lives.

“You know,” Ignis says as he helps himself to a muffin that’s positively bursting with seasonal berries. “I think that you’ll need to tell me if you’re ever unhappy, or ever need something more from me.”

Gladio sets down the mug of tea he’d been about to take a drink from, choosing instead to focus all of his attention on Ignis. “What do you mean?” He tries to keep his features from tilting into a frown, but he knows that he fails.

Elegant fingers begin to tear the muffin into little chunks. “I worry that I won’t be able to tell what you need, because you’re always so busy giving and trying to make me happy. But you deserve to be happy, too.”

“Iggy, I’ve never been happier in my entire life. Trust me.”

Ignis smiles weakly, nodding. “Alright. Thank you.”

Gladio stretches his leg out, nudging Ignis’s leg with a sandaled foot. “Stop torturing that poor muffin.”

Ignis huffs but complies, popping pieces of muffin into his mouth.

They spend a leisurely morning walking the beach, enjoying the scenery and each other’s company in equal measure. They talk about everything and nothing of importance—books they’ve read recently, a theater production Ignis wants to see, an amusing anecdote from one of Gladio’s recent training exercises with some of the more colourful members of the Kingsglaive.

By midday the sun is almost uncomfortably warm against their skin and they succumb to the tempting siren’s song of the ocean. They step out of their sandals and strip off their shirts (Gladio eagerly, Ignis reluctantly) and go for a swim. When they’ve finished they emerge from the waves, dripping and laughing, content to spend the remainder of the afternoon lounging on a vacant blanket.

They cap the day off with another sumptuous dinner at the Mother of Pearl, in which Ignis jots
down pages and pages of notes in his little recipe notebook. Gladio watches him at it with fond eyes.

That night they’re lounging in their room, a contented tangle of bare arms and legs, having lost their shirts and swimming trunks somewhere between the door to their suite and the bed. Gladio finds himself sprawled atop Ignis’s more compact frame, a position he has grown happily accustomed to, now that he knows that he’s not in any danger of crushing his surprisingly sturdy boyfriend.

Ignis’s lips are doing exquisite things to Gladio’s neck, things that are likely going to leave difficult to explain marks. Gladio doesn’t mind, he’ll wear Ignis’s bruises like they’re badges of honor.

“What do you want, gorgeous?” Gladio manages to groan out.

“Hmm?” Ignis hums enquiringly into the sensitive skin at the crook of his neck.

“We did what I wanted last night. What do you want?”

Gladio props himself up on his elbows, hovering above Ignis so he can read the myriad secrets that his eyes sometimes betray.

Ignis is quiet for a long moment, though his gaze is steady and thoughtful, clearly giving Gladio’s question serious consideration. Gladio is pleased. He half expected Ignis to dodge the question, or reflect it right back at Gladio. When he finally answers there’s an excitement flickering in his eyes like a pair of stars transported from the heavens. “I want you in me.”

All of the breath leaves Gladio in a great rush. This is both the fulfillment of every fantasy that hides in the deepest recesses of his mind, but also the realization of one of his greatest fears. He’s certain that this will feel absolutely incredible—for him. For Ignis this is going to hurt. Gladio knows that no matter how careful he is, no matter how gentle he is, Ignis is going to hurt.

He looks into the seafoam depths of those hauntingly beautiful eyes and sees nothing but an endless well of love and trust and Gladio’s reservations crumble away like a sandcastle before the mighty tide. How can he possibly deny Ignis this? How can he deny Ignis anything he asks for?

“All right,” he whispers, in a voice that sounds like it’s made of gravel and grit. “Okay, babe. But tell me if anything’s bad and we stop. Please.”

Ignis nods. “Of course.”

Gladio drags his tongue over his lips, suddenly so dry. He clears his throat and rumbles. “Umm, do we have… you know? Supplies?” He smiles sheepishly.

Gentle laughter falls from Ignis’s lips. “Side pouch of my bag. I picked some up. Just in case.” The blush that dusts Ignis’s cheeks goes all the way up to his ears.

“That’s my Iggy, always ten steps ahead of everyone.”

Gladio rolls off of Ignis’s supine form with a bit of reluctance, he’s so soft and warm to lie upon. He finds the innocuous little bottle exactly where Ignis said that it would be, and he arches a brow.

“Ulwaat berry flavoured, eh?”

Ignis turns his head away shyly, mumbling something about being in a bit of a hurry when he
bought the stuff.

Gladio just grins wolfishly as he climbs back up onto the bed. He encourages Ignis to settle himself back against the pillows. Gladio both needs and wants to see his boyfriend’s face when they do this.

He takes a moment to simply admire Ignis, sprawled before him, porcelain skin bare and pliant beneath the soft golden lamplight, an offering that Gladio willingly accepts, even if he feels wholly unworthy of the gift that Ignis is bestowing on him.

“You’re so gorgeous. Six, I don’t deserve you, Iggy, but thank you.”

“Mmm that matter is very much up for debate, but thank you for the sentiment.” Ignis’s lips twitch with the ghost of a shy smile. “Now will you kindly get on with it before we both lose our nerve?”

Gladio grins and makes a soft tutting sound, even as he obediently uncaps the lube and squirts a generous amount onto his fingers—at least he thinks it’s generous, he’s never done this before.

“You’re pretty bossy. I like it,” he ends on a soft growl that makes Ignis visibly shiver.

He slips into place between Ignis’s willingly parted thighs, just as he did last night, only this time he has far more to worry about than what to do when Ignis comes.

He gently brushes the unlubricated fingers of his left hand over Ignis’s thigh, skating along the taut lines of lean muscles up to the jut of his hip, rubbing soothing circles into the skin there, each caress a silent, wordless promise that he’ll be careful, that he’ll look after Ignis the best that he can.

He starts by brushing the tip of his finger against Ignis’s entrance, feeling the ring of muscle clenched tightly in opposition to him. Gentle soothing sounds spill unbidden from his own lips as if that will somehow help.

He continues grazing Ignis’s puckered hole with the pad of his finger, tracing endless circles around the warm, tight flesh. He knows that he needs to actually put his finger inside of Ignis, but sweet Six, it doesn’t seem like he can, not with these thick fingers of his. So he continues to trace an endless teasing loop.

Gladio’s lost track of how long he’s been kneeling there, teasing Ignis’s velvet hole. He knows that he needs to actually insert his finger, he understands the basic framework of what he needs to do here. But Ignis is just so damned tight that he can’t seem to get started, not without hurting him, and he’s determined not to make Ignis suffer more than necessary.

“Is something wrong?” Ignis’s melodious accent caresses Gladio’s ear. The Shield shifts his gaze from Ignis’s lovely—but stubborn—ass, taking in the worry lines creasing his fair brow, the contrition swimming in his verdant gaze. When their eyes meet, Ignis swiftly lowers his and murmurs, “Have I been too selfish, is this too much? I’m sorry, love.”

He coughs, clearing his throat around the boulder that seems to be lodged there, quickly shaking his head. “No, no beautiful,” he hastens to reassure Ignis. “It’s just… you’re so tight, I don’t know if I can fit.”

“But with that attitude you won’t.”

Gladio can’t help it, he laughs. “Well okay then, Mr. Advisor. Advise me. How do I get these fat fingers into your tiny self without ruining you?” He tries to keep his tone light and playful but he’s certain that a note of worry betrays him.
Ignis softens, every last inch of him, from his eyes to his toes. “You sweet man,” he murmurs. With an almost painfully tender smile, Ignis takes Gladio’s left hand in his right, their fingers lacing together automatically. Ignis squeezes their joined hands, his grip warm and sure, a grounding presence. “Just push it in. It will be alright; your finger isn’t as big as you think. Just do it and then give me a moment to acclimate myself.”

Even though it goes against everything he stands for and every protective instinct that has been honed in him, even though he’s convinced that his stupid finger is going to tear Ignis in half, he doesn’t know how to deny him, not when he asks so sweetly, splayed so vulnerably before him, making demands that are in the end so damn generous. He holds his own breath and does as he’s bidden, forcing the tip of his index finger into Ignis’s opening, past protesting muscles that are forced to stretch to accommodate him.

Ignis gasps, lithe frame shuddering. A thousand apologies are half-formed on his lips but before he can begin babbling in his contrition Ignis relaxes and gives his hand a reassuring squeeze. “There, you see?” His voice is thin with a hint of strain. “Just give me a moment to adjust and then I think you can begin moving it.”

Gladio’s heart feels much too large for his chest as it hammers away behind his ribs. He can see the place where his finger disappears into Ignis and it’s the most beautiful and filthy thing he’s ever seen. His cock throbs with lewd desire, craving that tight heat.

They manage to fall into a rhythm of sorts. Ignis keeps their fingers knit firmly together, squeezing tight when Gladio pushes more of himself in, and then gradually easing the pressure when the pain subsides, signalling for Gladio to open him further, to thrust his finger or add another.

With Ignis’s gentle guidance Gladio manages to work three fingers into him and he slowly, carefully pumps them in and out. Despite the fact that they’re barely moving, they’re glistening with sweat, and Ignis is panting, full lips decadently parted.

“You doin’ okay?” Gladio asks, bringing the back of Ignis’s hand up to his lips.

“Yes,” Ignis whispers. “I think I’m ready for you.”

Gladio nods and cautiously eases his fingers out of Ignis’s entrance, marvelling at how loose he is, half expecting his body to immediately wrench itself closed as soon as his intruding digits are clear.

He stretches to reach one of the pillows that Ignis’s isn’t lying against and tucks it up underneath his boyfriend’s hips. “Are you comfortable?”

Ignis nods reassuringly.

He palms a dollop of lubricant and works it into his own length, which has gone stiff and swollen with interest already. He gives himself a few perfunctory strokes before settling into position. He kisses the closest bit of Ignis that he can reach, which happens to be one of his crooked knees.

“I love you so much,” he says in a whisper, as if anything louder will shatter something sacred and fragile in the air around them tonight.

“I know, and I love you too.”

With his left hand he reclaims Ignis’s right, offering a reassuring squeeze. His right hand trails down, molding to Ignis’s hip. He can feel Ignis trembling against him, shivering with anticipation.
Gladio lines himself up with Ignis’s entrance and just like he did when it was just his fingers, he coaxes just the head of his cock inside. Immediately Ignis’s fingers clench around his hand, silently begging him to be still while he adjusts.

The waiting is torture, made bearable only because he loves Ignis more than he craves his own pleasure. The way that Ignis’s tight heat cinches around him is incredible beyond words, his body simultaneously trying to push the intrusive bulk out while also squeezing him tightly in place. He has to ignore the greedy voice in the back of his mind that urges him to thrust deeper into Ignis.

Only when Ignis’s grip on his hand goes lax does he dare move, and he keeps his gaze fixated on Ignis’s face the entire time, rather than savour the view of his cock being engulfed by Ignis’s lovely body.

Inch by inch he eases himself inside, with Ignis gently guiding him. He doesn’t know how long it takes to fully seat himself. Within each passing moment he finds a lifetime’s worth of joy.

Ignis’s voice finally cuts through the delirious haze he finds himself in, tremulous with affection. “I think you can move now,” he murmurs. “Slowly.”

He trembles with the effort it takes to not snap his hips and pound Ignis into the bed, because Six know that’s what his cock wants.

If he thought that the pressure and heat were wonderful when he was simply resting in Ignis while his love adjusts, the sensation as he pulls back is positively sublime. Ignis’s body clenches tight, a molten vice that can’t seem to decide if it wants to drag Gladio in deeper or push him back out. Tight walls hug and squeeze his already aching cock and he has no idea how much longer he’ll be able to manage.

“C-can you touch yourself?” He asks between panting breaths. Ignis shudders beneath him but nods, elegant fingers that had been twisting the sheets into swirls move to circle his own erection. His other hand, of course, remains in Gladio’s, the Shield stubbornly refusing to let go.

He rocks his hips cautiously into Ignis, languishing in that decadent heat and friction that makes his toes curl with pleasure he hadn’t known was possible. Below him Ignis pants, chest heaving with the effort of merely existing in the moment. He jerks his cock in time to Gladio’s thrusts, thumbing precome from his slit to coat his hardened shaft.

A lewd symphony fills the air, ragged breaths and moans mingling with the sound of skin slapping against skin. Gladio maintains just enough composure to whisper encouragements to Ignis, a litany of praises broken by the occasional sharp gasp whenever Ignis clenches around him just right. Gradually his shallow thrusts go deeper, harder, rocking the lean body beneath him.

At one point Ignis writhes and murmurs, "I can take more." To which Gladio huffs a laugh and has to tell him that he's already thrusting his full length into him. Ignis responds by curling one of those sinfully long legs of his until he can tap Gladio on the ass with the heel of his foot. "Faster then," he demands.

Gladio can feel his climax swirling inside of himself, a tight spring on the cusp of uncoiling. He holds himself back, somehow, too afraid that if he comes first that he won’t have the presence of mind to ensure that Ignis finishes, too. He tries to arch his hips at different angles, desperately chasing Ignis’s orgasm while running from his own, hoping to find that sweet spot in Ignis that will flood him with electrifying pleasure.

He doesn’t know if he ever finds that bundle of nerves somewhere inside Ignis that’s supposed to
make the other man see fireworks behind his eyes. Between the feeling of being so full, the frenzied movements of his hand on his cock, and the sight of Gladio sweaty and straining above him, Ignis comes suddenly and violently, spend coating the taut expanse of his abdomen. Gladio’s name is a prayer upon the other man’s lips as he climaxes.

Ignis moans through his release, and those crude sounds coming from such a polished tongue are Gladio’s undoing. His hips stutter as his entire body curls in on itself and over Ignis. The need that had been coiled low in his belly suddenly overwhelms him and he’s coming, hard, somewhere deep inside of Ignis.

When he’s spent he collapses atop Ignis, heedless of Ignis’s release sticky between their bellies or the way all of the breath is forced out of Ignis’s lungs from the impact. His cock is still sheathed in Ignis’s body, and their hands are still joined, fingers stubbornly laced together atop the rumpled sheets. It’s difficult to tell where his body ends and Ignis’s begins, and Gladio rather likes it that way. Their hearts have been one for so long that it’s only right that their bodies should be as well.

There’s a reasonable voice in the back of his mind, one that sounds suspiciously like Ignis, that tells him that at some point he’s going to have to get up, fetch a washcloth to clean them up, probably get Ignis some painkillers, and maybe massage his lower back. But his body feels like lead and Ignis is so warm beneath him, and so safe under the shelter of Gladio’s body that he doesn’t think he’ll be moving for awhile.

Chapter End Notes

Just one more chapter after this one, oh my gosh. I can’t thank everyone enough for reading this, really and truly. We’re so spoiled for amazing fan content in this fandom that I’m half convinced y’all just don’t know where to find the good stuff so you’re stuck with me. <33
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

So here we are, the last chapter of the self-indulgent feels train that I started over seven months ago.

Words can never express how grateful I am to every single person who read this, who left a kudos or a comment, who shared their own creativity with me, and who reached out to a shy smol tonberry and became awesome fandom friends. <3

There are a million more little things I want to include in this story. My head and my heart are so full of Gladnis. I am 100% open to any questions anyone has about the story, about any events that took place before, during, or after. It's all in my head and I'm happy to flail.

And again, thank you so much if you're reading this. You're amazing.

Quick note in case it's hard to keep track. The boys are 22 and 21 here, so a bit shy of a year before the game starts.

Three Years Later

Voice raw from both sleep and lust, Gladio cries out, fists crushing Ignis’s patchwork quilt in a white-knuckled grip. Beneath the poor abused bedding Ignis hums appreciatively around Gladio’s cock, swallowing down the evidence of his lover’s pleasure.

“Fuck, Iggy,” Gladio groans in satisfaction.

A smile as wicked and sharp as the daggers he favours tugs on Ignis’s lips as he pokes his head out from beneath the covers, admiring the fruits of his early morning labours. Gladio’s cheeks are flush with vivid colour even in the weak light of dawn that usually strips the colour from the world. His expression is soft with the bliss of an unexpected but certainly welcome climax.

Gladio releases the quilt, leaving it crumpled in the wake of his monstrous grip. He holds one intricately tattooed arm up in a silent invitation, one that Ignis readily accepts, crawling over the familiar sculpture of his lover’s body, draping himself atop the larger man’s chest. A heavy arm falls with surprising gentleness across Ignis’s back, snuggling him into place.

“Dunno what I did to deserve that wake-up call, but thanks.” Gladio rumbles and Ignis swears that he can feel the vibrations all the way to his toes.

Gentle laughter spills from Ignis’s lips. He nuzzles a prominent collarbone before murmuring, “You’ve just been your usual lovely self.” He knows that he’s being overly saccharine, but somehow he knows that Gladio won’t mind. The Astrals know, honey flows from the other’s lips often enough when he speaks to Ignis.

As expected, the Shield puffs his chest up and purrs, “I am pretty fabulous, huh?”

Ignis rolls his eyes, clever fingers skating over the familiar ridges and valleys of Gladio’s
impressive musculature. It only takes a moment to find what he’s looking for, a patch of sensitive skin, violently purple and dimpled where Ignis’s teeth sank into yielding flesh the night before. He stabs at the tender spot with a fingertip, applying pressure until Gladio hisses angrily.

“Arrogance doesn’t become you, Gladiolus.” Ignis chides, though the warmth suffusing his verdant gaze tells a different story.

“Ow! Shit, I’m sorry.” Gladio squirms enticingly beneath him.

Ignis chuckles lowly, wriggling his way down Gladio’s chest until he can kiss the little sore spot, one of many scattered across Gladio’s chest and thighs, painting a crude picture of their recent activities.

“It’s alright.” Ignis flashes a soft grin as he snuggles back down again, his head now pillowed atop the familiar planes of hard-earned abdominals. “This time.”

Gladio laughs, carefree and fully at ease. “I love you. I also kind of hate you. But mostly I love you.”

“Right back at you,” Ignis murmurs, letting his fingers trail down Gladio’s sides, absently caressing the soft skin, tracing the lines of the recently finished tattoo.

They languish in bed for several blissful minutes, content to linger in the little utopia they’ve managed to create for themselves, trading lazy touches laced with the deepest affection. Soon enough they will need to face the day, don the mantle of their respective duties and devote themselves to something greater than themselves. These lazy mornings are a rare treat.

“Hey Gladio?” Ignis’s lilting accents cuts through the sleepy quiet of the morning.

“Yeah, gorgeous?”

“I’m going to do it today.”

Suddenly wakefulness seems to crash into Gladio like a tidal wave, and he’s instantly alert, heaving himself up onto his elbows to better peer down at Ignis. Their gazes meet in a moment of quiet understanding.

“Fuck. Wow.” Gladio lets out a long breath. “You want me to be there with you? I can rearrange my day.”

Ignis shakes his head minutely. “No. That’s not necessary.” He presses a kiss to the closest bit of Gladio that he can reach, which happens to be a hipbone. “I… I’m not doing it in person. I’ve prepared a document…” he trails off feebly, feeling a rush of shame flooding his veins. “Cowardly of me, I know, but it’s all I can manage.” He sighs.

Gladio clicks his tongue, tutting at Ignis, wearing a stern expression far more at home on Ignis’s face than Gladio’s usually easygoing visage. “Hey, no. You’re not cowardly. Shit, you’re the bravest person I know.”

Ignis squirms, wondering if it would be childish of him to tug the quilt up over his head and hide, because by the Six, Gladio is looking at him like he’s something absolutely wondrous and it’s almost more goodness than Ignis thinks he can take just now.

“I’m serious though,” Gladio insists, a firm hand coming down to cup the back of Ignis’s head in a soothing gesture, killing any escape plans before they even have half a chance to flourish. “You do
this however is easiest for you and never mind anyone else. And for what it’s worth, honestly, I think this way will be better for them, too.”

“I hope so,” Ignis murmurs.

“I know so.”

Chuckling weakly, Ignis finally slides out of his cozy cocoon where he’d been snuggled between Gladio and the quilt. It’s time to start their day, and it promises to be quite a day indeed.

Ignis graciously allows Gladio first dibs on the bathroom. The boiler in his apartment is small, and hot water tends to not survive multiple showers in the morning. While Gladio is tending to his morning needs, Ignis busies himself about the apartment, getting a pot of coffee started, and retrieving one of the spare uniforms that Gladio keeps in the back of Ignis’s closet for mornings such as this when he spends the night.

Two identical packages are delivered to the desks of King Regis and his economic advisor, Alsius Scientia. Innocuously they sit in their respective in trays, plain manila envelopes, the secrets they contain gently bulging against the paper. The ink is slightly smudged where someone has stamped Confidential across the seal with an unsteady hand.

Each in their own time the busy men break the seal on their envelope, revealing a stack of neatly bound pages, colourful tabs marking off sections and appendices. It is tidy and clinical in its presentation, despite the deeply personal and sensitive subject matter. The author has gone to great pains to present his story with as much emotional distance as possible, detailing physical and psychological abuses without personal commentary. Every effort is made to spare the reader’s sensibilities while still informing them of beatings, nights locked in dark closets, degrading chores, unkind words, and a host of deprivations masquerading as exercises in humility.

The document itself is typed, but affixed to each is a handwritten note, the cursive wrought with familiar flourishes that render the signature superfluous.

Dear Sir,

Please permit me to apologize and beg your forgiveness. This is the epitome of selfishness in every way conceivable. All of my excuses are poor and I’ll not subject you to them.

I apologize most sincerely for the valuable time it will take for you to read this. I beg you, please, this matter is not urgent nor is it time-sensitive. Please read it at your leisure and convenience. This is but a feather when weighed against the demands of the Kingdom and Council.

I apologize for how much time I allowed to pass before admitting to the contents of the enclosed document. It was cowardly of me. I do not know what frightened me more: the disappointment and disgust you’re likely to feel towards me, or the pain that these revelations may cause you.

On that note, I apologize for any pain or distress that reading this may cause. Herein lies the true crux of my selfishness. I write this knowing that my words are likely to hurt, yet still I feel compelled to write them. These secrets have been as shackles unto me and I apologize for buying my freedom with your peace of mind.

Please, selfish creature that I continue to be, I would assuage my own guilt by lessening your burdens. So please, before you read this, know that you are blameless. All parties involved, myself
included, went to extraordinary measures to ensure that you would not know what was happening. You could not have known, you could not have been expected to intervene, and I beg you to not dwell on what might have been.

With all of my respect, and deepest apologies,

• Ignis Scientia

The furious staccato of dress shoes upon marble heralds Alsius’s arrival. Ignis glances up from where he sits behind a desk that threatens to bow beneath the weight of countless files and reference books.

Alsius looks as if he’s been running, his thinning hair is tousled and colour rides high in his pale cheeks. Hands on his slender thighs, the elder Scientia is bent double, visibly struggling to control his rapid breathing.

“Uncle?” Ignis asks, tone rife with concern. He has to tamp down on the guilt bubbling up within his chest, knowing that he is the cause of his uncle’s distress.

The elder straightens, a gloved hand lifting to adjust his askew spectacles. He regards his nephew for a long moment and Ignis stares back, quite at a loss.

Alsius laughs suddenly, the sound shaded with bitterness uncharacteristic of the normally placid advisor. “Foolish of me. I was so focused on simply getting to you that I didn’t spare a thought for what I was even going to say when I got up here. And now here I am standing rather uselessly at your threshold. It seems somehow fitting for such a useless uncle.”

Ignis’s features contort into a grimace. As unsurprising as it is, his uncle’s reaction still pains him to see. Self-loathing washes off of the older man in agonizing waves that batter Ignis’s spirit. Gray eyes that are normally calm as a winter lake are bright with anger, directed both inward and outward.

Alsius sinks into the padded visitor’s chair on the other side of Ignis’s desk. His breathing is still ragged and perspiration beads upon his brow. He likely ran all the way here from his own office on the other side of the Citadel. Ignis rises and fills a mug from the small water cooler in the corner of the office. He offers it wordlessly to his uncle before moving to lean against the edge of the desk.

“Are you alright?” Ignis asks gently. It’s a stupid question and he knows it. Of course his uncle isn’t alright, but in asking the question he means to convey that he cares about the man sitting before him. He suspects his uncle can use the reassurance just now.

Alsius drains the contents of the mug, and with no free space on the desk to set it, he places it in Ignis’s offered hand. He nods, clears his throat, and manages to murmur, “I’m fine, but that’s hardly the point. Are you? What do you need? What can I possibly do?” Ignis can’t quite repress his smile at that. It’s a quintessential Scientia response to a situation, to immediately try to come up with a plan, the most effective strategy to address a problem.

Ignis sets the used mug onto a nearby shelf. He sighs, casting a sad glance towards his uncle. “I’m really quite alright. It’s all in the past. Informing you and His Majesty was really the last thing I felt I needed to do in order to fully move on with my life.”

His uncle frowns. “Ignis, even your self-sufficiency has its limits. Some of the things that I read—
that happened to you—they’re not so easily brushed aside. I can’t even begin to imagine how all of this has affected you. Half-starved, sleeping in a closet, beaten and berated daily—” He cuts himself off with a choked sound, as if the horror of what he’s describing catches up to him all at once. Trembling hands curl into fists as the elder visibly struggles to tamp down his anger.

Ignis shrugs. “I’m well aware of the lasting effects. I’ve lived with them for most of my life,” he points out bluntly but fairly.

Alsius flinches as if struck and Ignis allows himself a moment to wallow in his own remorse at being so sharp with his uncle. He honestly hadn’t meant for his words to sting, he was simply stating a fact. In a gentler tone Ignis tries again. “What I mean is, I recognize the, shall we say, psychological scars they left. And I assure you, I really am coping just fine and have largely moved on. I’m okay,” he assures him.

“You shouldn’t have to cope,” Alsius’s tone grows hard, fiery anger cooling into steel. “You were brought here so that you could reach your full potential. You were supposed to be loved and nurtured so that you could flourish. Not cope with bloody abuse. I’ll never be able to make this right, I know that, but I can’t do absolutely nothing.”

“Uncle—”

“No, Ignis. No.” Alsius firmly but gently verbally barrels through Ignis. “I promised your parents that I would keep an eye on you. I knew what this city and its people can be like and I promised them and myself that I would protect you from that ugliness. I failed rather spectacularly, obviously. I refuse to fail you further.” Gray eyes flash angrily. “I hate the people who did all of those horrible things to you. And I hate myself more for letting it happen. My own nephew mistreated for years under my very nose. I’ll never be able to make up for this, never be able to face your parents in the Beyond, I know that, but by the Six, Ignis, I’m going to try.”

Ignis wants to argue. He wants to systematically list off all of the ways that the abuse affected him, and explain how he is overcoming those issues, such as his fear of the dark and his inability to relax for more than five minutes. He wants to highlight, as he did in the document, all of the ways that the abuse was deliberately hidden, the ways his impressionable mind was manipulated into acceptance until it had been going on for so long that it seemed pointless to say anything. He doesn’t do any of that, though. He knows that won’t actually make his uncle feel any better. Instead he sighs and stoops down, slim arms questing for a hug, giving his uncle something to do.

They embrace, a bit awkwardly as his uncle is still seated while Ignis stands. Close to his uncle’s ear, Ignis murmurs, “Okay. Whatever you think is best.”

It takes several minutes for Ignis to realize that his uncle’s trembling is no longer born of barely suppressed rage, but rather the elder is crying, dampening the shoulder of Ignis’s suit jacket.

In the end tentative plans are made for Ignis to meet with a psychiatrist to ensure that all of his needs are truly being met, and for uncle and nephew to meet for lunch every week to ensure the bonds of family remain strong between them, despite their busy schedules and demanding lives. While this is all mainly for Alsius’s benefit, Ignis cannot deny that it might be nice to have a bit more support, in addition to what he already receives from Gladio and his friends.

With obvious reluctance Alsius dries his eyes and parts company with his nephew in order to attend a budget meeting. Ignis is glad to see his uncle’s demeanor shifting to the quiet reserve that he’s accustomed to. Having a plan in place, having a series of next steps to follow makes the situation more palatable to both of them. It’s simply in their nature.
A wave of silence marks His Majesty’s approach. One by one the clerks and secretaries in the administrative wing stifle their conversations and withdraw nimble fingers from keyboards, each rising from their desk chairs to mark their liege’s passage with a respectful bow.

Chair legs scraping against glossy marble, Ignis intuitively rises, bending at the waist in a deep obeisance before His Majesty clears the threshold of his office.

With his gaze cast respectfully to the floor, Ignis doesn’t see Clarus Amicitia close the office door with a trembling hand, nor does he see the grief etched into every line of the King’s features. Instead he hears the slow, deliberate thuds of well-heeled boots approaching him. He dares not rise but instead he waits, slender frame a study in anxiety, tense to the point of shattering beneath the barest hint of pressure.

Cool fingers brush the top of Ignis’s bowed head, encouraging him to straighten, which he does reluctantly.

“How could I have been so blind?” The hazel eyes that regard him are clouded with a sorrow so heavy that it would send lesser men to their knees. Regis is no stranger to grief, and Ignis’s heart aches with the knowledge that he is now adding to His Majesty’s burdens.

“No, Your Majesty, you didn’t—”

It only takes a slight shake of the head for the King to command Ignis’s silence. He swallows his protests bitterly, the unsaid words burning like bile in his throat.

The King’s voice is soft when he speaks, each word weighed down by a sort of gravity only powerful men seem capable of. “You are kind for wanting to absolve me of guilt. Do you know, dear boy, that this would be so much easier if you were angry and bitter? If you shouted and cursed my name?” A rueful smile forms, adding new wrinkles to an already prematurely lined face. “No one deserves to endure what you did, but that it should happen to someone so good and so kind…” The King shakes his head with a sigh, unable to continue with that painful train of thought.

Ignis hangs his head, murmuring a soft “My apologies,” because he doesn’t know how else to respond.

“No, my apologies,” Regis corrects him gently.

Ignis shifts his weight uncomfortably. Everything about this screams to him of wrongness. Ignis was raised to believe that his King is but a half step removed from the Astrals. Infallible, divine, and above the need to apologize to an insignificant speck on this mortal coil like himself.

A gentle touch beneath his lowered chin coaxes Ignis to lift his head and meet his liege’s remorseful gaze. “Ignis, never before have I so desperately wanted to prostrate myself at another man’s feet and beg their forgiveness, my kingly pride be damned. And I would, if I didn’t know that would only make you feel worse.”

“It really would,” Ignis supplies feebly, painfully aware of how ripe with colour his cheeks are at the very suggestion.

“Then I won’t,” Regis regards him softly, expression kind. “But may I have this?” He spreads his arms hopefully. Ignis steps forward, the motion as natural as breathing. Obedience is easy before a kind and benevolent master.
Arms, thin and strong as steel cables, encircle him, drawing him firmly to the King’s chest. The cape of his royal mantle billows before settling neatly around the pair, like a barrier between them and the rest of the world. Ignis is briefly overwhelmed by a rush of sensation: the scent of expensive cologne, the pressure of a powerful grip, the subtle prickling of raw magic thrumming in the air.

Regis’s arms are the epitome of safety, his grip firm and unyielding, as if daring the ugliness of the world to invade, to dare touch Ignis again. It feels nice. Warm. Parental.

“You dear boy,” Regis murmurs the familiar endearment, one he’s often used for Ignis through the years. “I’ve always loved you like a son. Always. That the people I trusted to care for you in my stead could treat one of my boys so callously.” He sighs, breath ruffling Ignis’s hair. “I don’t know how to make this up to you, and I don’t know how I can ever thank you for your devotion to Noctis in spite of everything.”

“There’s no need, Sir,” Ignis murmurs against the King’s chest. “It’s always been an honour.”

Regis lets out a small choked sound and simply buries his face in Ignis’s hair, silently holding the young Chamberlain, his hands rubbing soothing circles into Ignis’s back, each touch an assurance that Ignis is loved and cared for by his liege when words have failed him, or his grief squashes his capacity for speech.

It is long minutes before Regis composes himself and for the second time that day Ignis spies tears in eyes he’s never expected to see wet and certainly not on his behalf.

“Sit, Ignis. We do need to talk.”

Regis folds himself into the visitor’s chair. Ignis retreats behind his desk, tugging his chair out and maneuvering it to settle nearer the King, sensing that placing distance between them will only cause Regis pain. From his place where he leans against the door, arms crossed, Clarus Amicitia nods his approval at the gesture.

“I do not need your permission, strictly speaking,” Regis says, his tone low and rough, thick with residual sorrow. “But I won’t proceed without it.”

Ignis cants his head to one side, curiosity piqued. “Yes, Majesty?”

The King rakes thin fingers through his prematurely graying hair. “Those people, no,” he corrects himself softly, “those animals who did these things. I would see them punished.”

Perfectly straight teeth sink into the yielding bed of his bottom lip, and he relishes the sting, the pain that grounds him and helps him to focus.

Reading the hesitancy in Ignis’s expression, Regis continues gently. “It can be handled quietly; the matter can be classified if you wish. Being King does come with certain privileges that I am not unwilling to abuse for your sake.”

Ignis releases his bottom lip and manages a small smile. “I no longer wish for this to be a secret, but I also don’t intend to shout about it from the rooftops.” He bows his head. “Discretion would be most appreciated. Particularly around His Highness’s ears.”

Regis nods in understanding. “Of course.”

“And,” Ignis cringes, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, “Sire, please. I don’t believe that everyone necessarily acted of their own volition. I would hate to see a good person ruined because they
didn’t know how to disobey an order or stand up to a superior.” His mind flickers to Marita and others, who were kind to him when they could be, who were as frightened as he was.

A reassuring hand settles atop Ignis’s knee. “Of course. Nothing will be done in haste. We will investigate quietly and carefully, and together we’ll decide how to proceed and against whom. With one exception.” The King holds up a long finger.

Ignis can feel his pulse quicken as he waits to hear what His Majesty wishes.

“I insist that Greta be brought in, if she’s even still alive. I’ve read enough and I trust your recollections enough to know that I do not want that vile woman wandering freely in my city. She doesn’t deserve to feel sunlight on her face or breathe free air.”

Ignis exhales a shuddering breath of nervous laughter. “That sounds very reasonable, Your Majesty. May I in turn beg a favour of yourself in this matter?”

“My boy, I would promise you the moon right now. Speak.”

Ignis clears his throat, seafoam gaze flicking briefly to where Clarus continues to guard the door, the weight of his back pressing it firmly shut against anyone who might think to intrude. “Gladiolus once expressed an interest in uh, being privy to Greta’s fate, if I ever did pursue the matter.”

Regis’s brows arch briefly, surprise tugging on his lined features before they relax into a quiet smile. “He knows about all of this?”

Again Ignis cannot help stealing glances at Clarus while he speaks. “Yes, Sire. He managed to find out about this on his own a few years ago. He’s aware of the gist of it, though not all of the minutiae. I swore him to secrecy, though.” Ignis is quick to add, suddenly fearful of bringing down unholy vengeance on his boyfriend’s head.

To his endless relief and gratitude, neither man seems upset. If anything, Clarus appears relieved. It only occurs to Ignis then that the King’s Shield had likely been dreading having to break this awful news to his son, fearful of the repercussions for their relationship—one he has always been staunchly supportive of.

“By ‘privy to Greta’s fate’ you mean he wants to punch her stupid ugly face, am I right?” Clarus growls, speaking up for the first time.

Regis and Ignis both laugh, though the sound is weak and flimsy, lacking the buoyancy of true merriment. “Something like that,” Ignis admits.

“Does anyone else know?” Regis asks then. Noctis’s name hangs unspoken but omnipresent between them.

“Just yourselves, Gladio, and my uncle. To the best of my knowledge.” He pauses. “I would prefer that as few people as possible know. As I said, I no longer care to keep secrets, but I would still prefer not to become a subject of gossip or an object of pity. I do understand that the coeurl is out of the bag now as they say and I understand that others will find out in due time. My uncle, for instance, wishes me to speak with a psychiatrist.”

Regis nods, regarding Ignis with eyes far too solemn and sad for one so kind. “Of course. We shall keep this as private as we may, among the family so to speak.” He smiles then. “You are family, you know.”
Ignis knows.

Late that evening, after seeing to Noctis’s supper and homework, Ignis finally slides the key into the lock of his apartment door. It’s been a long day. A remarkable day, certainly, but long. Between his uncle’s fury and the King’s sorrow, he feels the emotional toll the day has taken like a physical ache, like someone has been hammering on his ribcage all day.

When he enters his apartment, he realizes that he’s not alone, and a fond smile instantly overtakes his features, erasing the lines of fatigue that a uniquely stressful day have etched into his image.

Gladio has made use of the spare key Ignis had given him, and is currently reclining on Ignis’s couch, his feet propped up on an armrest, a thick book in his hands. He’s obviously been waiting for Ignis, and Ignis is grateful beyond words that he didn’t have to ask his lover to come to him, he already knew where he was needed.

Ignis steps quickly out of his dress shoes and pads into the living room. Gladio has already marked his place in his novel and set it on the side table, gaze like molten honey fixed on Ignis.

“Hey,” Gladio’s deep bass rumbles soothingly into the still night air.

“This is a pleasant surprise. Hello, love.”

Gladio grimaces as he shifts in place, sweeping his legs off of the couch to make room for Ignis to sit. Ignis frowns, keen seafoam gaze marking the tense lines of his boyfriend’s body, the careful way he holds himself. It takes a moment for the puzzle pieces to fall into place in Ignis’s weary mind.

“Training with the Marshal today?”

Gladio grunts. “Three hours of drills, an hour of sparring. Then another hour of drills because apparently Cor hates me and I didn’t spar well enough.”

Ignis winces sympathetically as he settles himself onto a couch cushion, long legs tucked up to one side. “That sounds particularly rough, I’m sorry.” Cor’s training sessions are a thing of legend and abject horror. Enduring five hours is impressive.

Gladio shrugs and then hisses softly, immediately regretting the gesture. “Eh, it’s fine. Probably nothing compared to your day, huh?” He flicks his gaze to Ignis, a sly half smile curving his full lips.

Ignis shrugs, managing to do so without hurting himself, since he wasn’t the Marshal’s punching bag all afternoon. “My day was fine. I didn’t really know what to expect but we all survived.”

Gladio nods, humming contemplatively. “Yeah. You wanna talk about it?”

A knowing smile blossoms across Ignis’s features, softening harsh lines. “I assume that’s why you’re here.”

The Shield makes a non-committal noise. “I ain’t gonna force you or anything if you don’t wanna talk about it. I can just keep you company.” He pauses, gaze averting. “Or if you want to be alone I can totally clear out.”
In a flash Ignis’s hand is splayed across Gladio’s chest, as if he could hold the other down were he truly determined to leave. “Don’t you dare,” Ignis grumbles, and then says more softly, “talking about it sounds nice.”

Gladio chuckles, the vibrations of which thrums pleasantly against Ignis’s palm. “I’m all yours, then.”

Ignis reaches to one side, seizing a throw pillow, tossing it lightly onto the floor at his feet. When Gladio quirks a curious brow he simply smirks and points to the pillow. “Come now, you know the routine by now. I’m quite capable of multi-tasking.”

Gladio huffs a soft laugh, leaning in to brush a kiss against Ignis’s cheek before obediently sliding off of the couch and moving to sit cross-legged on the cushion as bidden, facing away from Ignis. Gingerly, his muscles obviously stiff and sore in the wake of Cor’s not-so-tender ministrations Gladio peels off his t-shirt, baring the broad expanse of his back and the bird of prey tattoo.

They settle into the comforting familiarity of their routine, with Gladio sore after a particularly rigorous workout and Ignis eager to ease his hurts. Usually they watch television while Ignis does this, but tonight he’ll talk.

He starts gently, palms flush to aching skin, fingers splayed for maximum reach. He applies gentle, constant pressure, rubbing up and down the sculpted expanse of Gladio’s back, warming and loosening the muscles before really digging into the knots.

“It all went as well as I could have hoped. My uncle was furious—at them and at himself.” He sighs working hard to keep his hands steady as they travel in languid circles over sore muscles. “I hated seeing him so angry, especially at himself. He’s a good man, he doesn’t deserve anyone’s hate, least of all his own.”

Gladio hums in quiet agreement, the sound melting into a low moan of pleasure when Ignis’s palms knead a particularly tender spot behind his shoulder. “Yeah. He’s good people.”

Ignis explains the tentative plans he’s made with his uncle, and his fervent wish that having something to do, having a strategy with which to approach the situation, will help his uncle to cope. Will help both of them to cope.

“His Majesty was sad,” Ignis explains, once he’s through detailing his meeting with his uncle.

“Not angry? Ahh fuck yeah right there,” Gladio whines.

Obligingly, Ignis applies firm pressure with his thumbs to the knotted muscles beneath Gladio’s shoulder blades, relishing the little grunts of satisfaction the other makes.

“No, not angry. He was eerily calm, actually, but his eyes betrayed his sadness. I felt absolutely awful about it, honestly.”

Gladio hums thoughtfully. “S’not how Dad tells it. Ow!”

“Apologies,” Ignis murmurs, gently caressing the flesh he’d pressed too hard, startled into carelessness by Gladio’s words. “You surprised me there. What do you mean, that’s not how your father tells it?”

Gladio rolls his neck in a lazy circle, testing the looseness of his muscles in the wake of Ignis’s ministrations. The Chamberlain continues working his way farther down the Shield’s tortured back. “Dad says the King was so mad when he read your statement that he lost control of his magic
“Goodness,” Ignis breathes. “Well he’d certainly mastered his anger by the time he called on me.”

Gladio nods. “Yeah, that sounds about right. It’s probably not proper for him to go tearing through the Citadel setting things on fire when he gets pissed off, huh?”

Ignis laughs leaning forward so that he can press his palms into the stiffness and tension lurking in Gladio’s lower back. “Indeed. Not very regal, that. Oh that does remind me, though.”

“Hmmm?” Gladio asks wordlessly, beginning to fall under the spell of comfort and relaxation Ignis’s hands are weaving.

“His Majesty intends to, very quietly and carefully mind you, bring charges against certain people.” Gladio grunts something that sounds like ‘fucking right’ but It’s difficult to make him out to be sure. “I convinced him to let you get a lick in with Greta.”

“I fucking love you,” Gladio groans, either because he so relishes the idea of knocking out Greta’s teeth, or because Ignis is playing his sore back like a violin.

“Likewise.” Ignis chuckles, digging his thumbs into a stubborn spot of tension in Gladio’s back. “So, your father talked to you, did he?”

“Oh huh,” Gladio flexes, sleek muscles rippling like satin before Ignis’s appreciative gaze. “Cornered me as soon as he got home for dinner.”

Ignis hums thoughtfully. “Anything I need to know? Was everything okay?” He tries to ignore the ball of worry rolling around in his gut. Clarus had seemed accepting of Ignis earlier that day, but perhaps his outlook changed upon further reflection.

Gladio leans forward making it easier for Ignis to reach the knot of tension in his lumbar region. “Not really. He hugged the crap out of Iris. Then Talcott wandered in and Dad nearly squished the poor little bean, hugging him so hard. They don’t know why, Iris just figures he had a hard day. He gets kinda affectionate when bad shit happens, y’know? Like he’s just grateful we’re there.”

Ignis makes a soft sound of understanding.

“Anyway, he just hugged everyone a lot, then he pulled me into his study and told me the tale of ye olde great desk fire. Oh and he said he’s proud of me,” Gladio mumbles feebly as if embarrassed.

“As he should be,” Ignis says gently, loving hands finally growing still atop Gladio’s mercifully relaxed muscles. “You’re a truly wonderful person. I think the Six made you so damn large because they needed room to pack in so much goodness.”

The Shield laughs, shaking his head modestly. Gladio then reaches back to pat Ignis’s knee affectionately, wordless thanks for the massage. With a languid stretch and a satisfied sigh he rises and flops back onto the couch beside Ignis.

“Sounds like everything went about as well as you could’ve hoped.”

Ignis shifts, allowing himself to slump sideways, secure in the knowledge that Gladio’s strong arms will be there to catch and cradle him. They are and he does, tucking Ignis into his side, warm and solid, Ignis’s private pillar of strength.
“Indeed. I’m a lucky man. Truly. The amount of love and support I’ve been given from you and from them is staggering and humbling. Though I do regret hurting them. I know it’s not entirely my fault, but still, I feel bad.”

“Not your fault at all,” Gladio corrects gently.

Ignis waves his hand in a casually dismissive manner. “Regardless, I dislike seeing those I care about upset.”

“I know, babe.” Gladio tucks his chin down, pressing his cheek into the top of Ignis’s head, nuzzling into the silken softness of his hair. “Think I should give His Majesty and your uncle a few days to adjust before I ask them?”

“Hmm?” Ignis nests his head against Gladio’s shoulder, careful not to lean too heavily, fearful of aggravating his overworked muscles. “Before you ask him what?”

“Well,” Gladio begins, and there’s a tremulous note to his voice, a shyness there that he’s not accustomed to hearing. It sets his heart racing, though he doesn’t know why. “It’s tradition to ask the family’s blessing before proposing to someone, yeah?”

All of the air seems to vacate the room at once, leaving Ignis in a breathless void where his blood rushes like a torrent through his veins, heart hammering a frantic beat against his ribs. Time slows, this moment searing itself into every layer of his soul.

“Gladiolus Amicitia, are you asking me to marry you?”

“Well, technically I think I’m asking you if I can ask the King and your uncle for permission to ask you to marry me?” The hesitant way Gladio’s voice lilts upwards is the most endearing thing that Ignis can conjure up even with his vivid imagination.

With speed like lightning and the might of a thunderclap, Ignis throws his arms around Gladio, dragging his boyfriend, his goofy, romantic, tender-hearted, adorable, and utterly hopeless boyfriend, into a fierce hug.

Laughing, effervescent with more happiness than he thought a single heart could contain, he answers in the only way he possibly can. “Yes. Either way, yes.”

End Notes

Some truly beautiful people have created works for this fic. Please show them all of the love and appreciation that you have to spare!

jaciopara drew this adorable picture of the soft boys.

crimson nemesis drew this depiction of one of my favourite moments

mr.reblogbutton drew this cute as heck rendition of another precious moment.

Sanru wrote a side story to this fic and I love it.

bloody_empress24 drew this adorable picture of Ignis modelling Gladio's hoodie. *clutches
Benelline drew this sweet picture of the boys hobbying. <3

I'm finally using my dang tumblr. Come say hi!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!