The Basis of Reality
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Summary

Ignis wakes up after the Leviathan covenant to find himself in a hospital in a strange land. What's stranger, though, is that this place has a video game called *Final Fantasy XV*, following the adventures of Prince Noctis and his loyal retinue as they fight to regain Noctis's throne. Worse yet, the game spells out the details of Noctis's ultimate destiny - and it's not something Ignis can ever allow to happen.

Ignis needs to get back to his own reality, fast - but when the game starts to reflect his absence, he realizes there may be a chance to change destiny. After all, why fight the gods when you can fight the developers instead?

Notes

WARNING: CONTAINS SPOILERS FOR ALL FFXV CONTENT, UP TO AND INCLUDING EPISODE: ARDYN.

General disclaimers:
While the premise is complete crack, this is a serious fic.
IANA doctor, and this fic contains copious amounts of medical terminology abuse and (probably) incorrect medical practices.
This is NOT an RPF. All characters from "our" reality are fictional. No real-life Square Enix developers were harmed in the making of this fic.
Awakening

The first thing Ignis was aware of was the pain. It stabbed into his skull through his eyes, spread down his neck and shoulders and spine out to his fingertips. He thrashed and fought, struggling to claw away whatever was causing it. But something - someone - held him down; voices overhead said things like sir, please hold still and it's all right and just calm down. And whenever Ignis tried to open his eyes, tried to see where he was and what was happening, the pain shot through him like knives.

“Noct,” he gasped through the agony. “Where's Noct?”

No one answered. The voices still spoke above him, but now they talked about blood pressure, heart rate, bleeding; rapid-fire medical chatter that almost drowned out the sound of beeping monitors and hissing machines. The sounds of a hospital, except Altissia’s hospital had been evacuated yesterday, and Ignis had seen the building smashed by Leviathan's rage.

He wrenched an arm free and flailed until he found someone’s shirt, wrapped his fingers in the fabric and pulled them close. “Where is Noct?” he demanded. “Where am I?”

More hands caught his, pulled him away from whoever he’d grabbed. He tried again to open his eyes and see where he was, who held him, but he couldn't, something was covering his eyes and he couldn't see, and he fought again, but the hands were unyielding. A voice said, “You're in a hospital, sir, please, calm down. Just calm down, you're safe—”

He didn't care if he was safe. A memory flickered through his mind, Chancellor Izunia’s airship turning ponderously, deliberately, toward the altar. “Noct,” Ignis gasped again, and tried to sit up.

Someone said, exasperated, “Can we get that sedative already?” and Ignis's gut twisted, no, but hands still pinned him down and then a sharp small pain in the back of his hand, the rush of an IV, told him he'd lost. He tried one last time to get up, to escape the hands and the voices and the hospital, but the world tilted and spun sideways, and then faded away completely.

* * *

Ignis woke, gasping, from an impossibly vivid dream of blood and pain, stone crumbling around him while people - his friends - Noct - screamed and died. The abrupt transition from the too-bright colors and piercing sounds of the dream to the darkness and near-silence of reality left him disoriented. It took him longer than it should have to realize that the sluggishness of his thoughts wasn’t solely due to the shock of waking up. He’d been drugged, some kind of painkiller if the distant dull throbbing down the left side of his face was any indicator.

Hospital, he thought. Remembering, vaguely, someone telling him that. But that was impossible - Altissia’s hospital was so much rubble after Leviathan’s rampage. He tried to open his eyes to look around, but pain spiked through the drugs hard enough that he gasped. When it faded back to a faint throb, Ignis lifted a hand to his face.

Bandages covered both his eyes, the bridge of his nose, and his lower lip, and an oxygen tube ran below his nose. Even the light pressure of his fingertips on the left side of his face hurt, and he dropped his hand again without exploring further. He’d known he’d been injured, he just hadn’t realized how badly. But it was fine; he’d have the bandages off soon enough and then he could see again. In the meantime, his ears and hands would have to suffice.
Voices chattered softly somewhere to his left, too distant to make out the words. Closer, machines beeped and hummed. Ignis found an IV in the back of his left hand, and wires attached to his chest which stretched up and away to somewhere behind him. His clothes were gone, leaving him in nothing but a light hospital gown. He lay on a narrow bed with rails on either side, the upper half raised a little so he wasn’t completely horizontal. The rest of his body felt very far away; he didn’t think he’d been seriously injured anywhere else and the painkillers masked any minor bruises or hurts.

Footsteps to his left, a soft knocking. Someone standing at the door to his room, most likely. A woman’s voice called softly, “Hi there. Are you awake?”

“Yes,” Ignis said. His voice was hoarse, his throat drier than he’d thought, and the bandage on his lip slurred his words.

The woman’s shoes squeaked on the floor as she came closer. “I’ll get you some water,” she said. Her voice was deep, with the faintest hint of a Leide drawl. “I’m Janelle, by the way, and I’m the nurse on duty. What’s your name?”

“Ignis Scientia,” he told her.

“Great,” she said. “Is it okay if I call you Ignis?” He nodded, and she continued, “Here, I’ve got water. Don’t try to sit up any further, there’s a straw.”

Ignis let her help him drink, the water cool and soothing on his throat. When he’d finished, he said, “Where am I?”

“San Francisco General Hospital,” Nurse Janelle answered. “Someone found you in an alley and called 911. Do you remember what happened?”

Ignis frowned. He didn’t know that name, that place. Possibly it was one of the many small towns that dotted Accordo outside Altissia proper, though he couldn’t imagine how he’d ended up there. “No,” he admitted uneasily. “I was in Altissia helping with the evacuation.”

“Huh,” Janelle said. “I don’t know where that is, and there’s no place round here needs evacuating.” Her hands touched his jaw with professional care, tilting his head. “How’s your head feel, hon? Any pain?”

“Just under the bandages,” he said.

“All right,” she said, and let go; he heard the rustle of paper. “We didn’t find any ID on you, or a phone. Did you have a wallet, a driver’s license, something?”

“Not on me, no,” Ignis said. He’d left everything except his phone in the safe in their room at the Leville, just in case something went wrong during the evacuation and the Empire’s intrusion. And he was pretty sure he’d lost his phone sometime during the chaos, though when he tried to remember what had happened after leaving the hotel that morning, he came up with nothing but blurry, disjointed images and vague flashes of fear and pain.

“Is there someone I can call for you?” Janelle asked.

Noct, Ignis almost said, but caught himself. Even assuming Noct had survived his encounter with the Hydrean (he had to have survived), there was no way his phone would still work, not after being drenched with that much water. Better to call Gladio, who would have gotten to Noct or died trying. “Yes,” Ignis said aloud. “Gladiolus Amicitia.” He rattled off the number.
“Um,” Janelle said. “Can you say that again?”

He repeated the number, slower, giving her time to punch it in. But when he’d finished, she said, “It’s not going through.”

Panic sliced through Ignis’s gut. It could be nothing - Gladio’s phone could have been damaged as well - or it could mean something had happened to Gladio himself. Which would likely mean something had happened to Noct. “Could you try one more number?” Ignis asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

“Sure,” she said.

He gave her Prompto’s number this time. Waited, holding his breath, while she dialed. But a moment later she said, “That one’s not working either. What country are those numbers from? I don’t recognize the format.”

“Lucis,” Ignis said. It’s fine, he told himself firmly. They’re fine. They were fine when you last saw them, and they’re all quite capable of taking care of themselves. The Hydrean’s rampage had probably just knocked out the city’s communications infrastructure. It was a possibility they’d discussed last night while making plans. That’s all it was. Noct was fine, and so were Gladio and Prompto.

Janelle made a thoughtful noise, and he heard paper rustling again. “I’m going to ask you a few routine questions, okay?” she said. “Can you tell me what year it is?”

“M.E. seven fifty-six,” Ignis answered automatically, still distracted by worry.

A pause, broken by the scratching of pen on paper. “Okay,” Janelle said, and there was an odd tone to her voice. “Who’s the current president?”

That brought Ignis up short. “President?” he repeated. “Accordo doesn't have a president. It's governed by a ruling council headed by First Secretary Camelia Clastra.”

Another pause, longer this time, then more pen scratches. “Okay,” Janelle said, her voice carefully neutral. “You get some rest for now. I'll be back in a little while.”

“Wait,” Ignis said. He reached out, got lucky and caught her arm. “Has there been any word of the Prince? Or the Oracle?”

“Not that I know of,” Janelle said. “If I hear anything, I promise I'll let you know.” She gently detached his hand from her sleeve. “Just lie back and relax, okay?”

Ignis subsided reluctantly, worry churning in his gut as he listened to her shoes squeak away. She hadn’t liked his answers to those supposedly routine questions, and it had been clear she was only humoring him about Noct and Lunafreya. And she hadn’t been able to get through to either Gladio or Prompto, had said their numbers were invalid. What in Bahamut’s name is going on?

A hospital in a place he’d never heard of, a nurse wholly unconcerned about the Oracle's safety. Something was terribly wrong here, but Ignis couldn't figure out what. If he could just see, he could get up, walk around, ask questions until he got the answers he needed. But as it was, he was trapped in a hospital bed, his thoughts fuzzy and slow with painkillers, unable to make sure Noct was all right, unable to do anything except lie here and worry.

At least he didn’t have to wait long. Janelle’s squeaky shoes returned, accompanied by a second set of footsteps. Janelle said, “Ignis, the EP’s with another patient right now, but he wants you to have
a couple tests to make sure we didn’t miss anything. We’re going to take you down for a CT scan, and while we walk I’m going to ask you some more questions, okay?”

It wasn’t as though he had a choice. He answered her questions - headache? neck pain? difficulty concentrating? and a dozen more - as she and whoever was with her wheeled his bed along several hallways, up an elevator, and through doors before finally stopping. Ignis dozed through the scan itself, but on the trip back to his room a shock of pain through his left eye woke him. He gasped and tried to sit up; a hand on his shoulder pressed him back down before he tore the wires from his chest.

“Easy,” Janelle said. “What’s wrong?”

He couldn’t answer, just pressed a hand to his left eye through the bandages. The pain of the contact was nothing compared to the burning agony searing through his eye socket. Vaguely he heard Janelle saying something, felt a cool rush through the IV in the back of his hand, and finally, mercifully, the pain faded again. Ignis sagged back against the mattress, breathing hard.

“Apologies,” he managed.

“You don’t have to apologize to us, hon,” Janelle said gently. “You’re hurt. If the pain gets bad again, let me know and we can adjust the dose.”

“It’s fine,” Ignis said automatically. He didn’t want more painkillers, he wanted his injuries to hurry up and heal so he could take these damn bandages off and see again.

“All right,” Janelle agreed. The bed stopped moving; hands fiddled with his IV and the wires taped to his chest. “It’ll take a bit for the results of the scan to come back - they’ll probably go straight to the day shift doctor. She’ll take a look at them and then come talk to you. In the meantime, get some sleep.” A hand wrapped around his, steered it to a button on a cord wound around the bed rail. “If you need anything, push this, okay?”

Ignis nodded. Exhaustion and the fresh dose of painkillers were already pulling him under, and he didn’t hear Janelle’s squeaky shoes leave the room.
Thank you all for the kudos and the lovely comments! I honestly wasn't expecting anyone to like this nutty little story. Y'all are amazing!

Ignis woke up what must have been hours later to another searing wave of pain through his left eye. He rode it out, breathing in short, shallow bursts until it wasn't the only thing he could focus on. He briefly considered pressing the button, calling for Janelle and more painkillers, but he needed to get back on his feet, back to Altissia and his prince. He could tolerate the pain.

A knock, and a woman's voice said, “Hey there. If you’re hurting, you should tell the nurse so we can do something about it.” It wasn’t Janelle; this voice was lighter, with a clipped Insomnian accent.

“I’m fine,” Ignis said.

“I can see your vital signs,” the woman said dryly. “But it’s up to you.”

“Really, I’m quite all right,” Ignis said. He flashed his best court smile, though the effect was likely diminished by all the bandages. “Might I ask when I’ll be released?”

“Actually, I’m here to talk about that,” she said. “I’m Dr. Matthias; I took over for the night EP so you’ll be seeing me for the rest of the day.”

“Under other circumstances, I’d say it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Ignis said.

Dr. Matthias chuckled. “Likewise.” Paper rustled and shoes clicked softly on the floor as she came closer. “I have the results of your CT scan,” she continued. “No signs of a brain injury - not even a concussion, which is impressive, considering. But the night crew was still worried about your mental state, and I have to admit I agree with them.”

“And why is that?” Ignis asked.

“You claimed the year was ME seven fifty-six, and said there wasn’t a president, but a first secretary,” Dr. Matthias said. “And you mentioned being in Accordo.”

“And?” Ignis demanded, frustrated. “Those are all correct. Why is that concerning?”

She took a deep breath. Said, very gently, “Because Accordo isn’t a real place. Those ‘facts’ are all from a video game. As is the name Ignis Scientia.”

Ignis frowned. “I beg your pardon?”

“Ignis Scientia is a character in a video game,” Dr. Matthias repeated, still in that same gentle tone. “Accordo is one of the locations in the game. What I don’t understand is what you’re trying to do here. You’ve certainly got the voice down, but injuring yourself like this—”
“You think I did this on purpose?” Ignis demanded. “You think I’m pretending to be a—a video game character? Why in the world would I do that?”

“You tell me,” she said.

“I’m not pretending anything,” Ignis snapped. “I am Ignis Scientia, and until I woke up in this hospital I was in Altissia. And I would very much like to get back there as quickly as possible.”

“That’s going to be difficult,” Dr. Matthias said, “since it’s not real.”

“It is real!” Ignis said desperately. He pushed himself up onto his elbows, twisting to face her and remembering barely in time not to try to open his eyes. Nausea from the abrupt movement made his head spin, his stomach lurch, and he had to stop talking and just breathe until it passed. “Altissia is real,” he repeated, and heard the desperation in his own voice.

When Dr. Matthias spoke again, her voice was closer, as if she’d started to move to help him while he was ill. To his relief, she didn't try to touch him, and only asked, “Can you prove it?”

“How?” Ignis said. “How could I possibly prove an entire country exists?”

A long pause. Finally Dr. Matthias said, “Okay. Can you summon a weapon? From hammerspace?”

“You mean the royal arsenal?” he asked.

“Show me.”

Ignis stretched his hand out in front of him, reaching for the magic that bound him to Noctis. His dagger materialized in his hand, a familiar comforting weight, and he nearly gasped with relief. If he could summon his weapons, Noct was still alive.

Dr. Matthias, though, didn’t notice his reaction. “Holy shit,” she breathed. A rustle of movement, then a hand grabbed his wrist, holding it steady while she poked at the dagger with her other hand. “No way! That’s not - that’s not possible!”

“It’s the power of kings,” Ignis said. He dismissed the dagger, mostly just to see how she reacted, and was rewarded with a shocked gasp. He thought he felt a brush of air over his empty hand, possibly the doctor waving her hand through the space where the dagger had been. A moment later she patted his arm, then the blankets over his legs, but it wasn’t as though he could have hidden a dagger in his hospital gown.

“Bring it back,” she demanded.

She still held his wrist with one hand; he made sure her other hand was clear before summoning the dagger again. “Holy shit!” she said. She let go of him, and a moment later he heard the creak of a chair and the skitter of wheels as she sat down hard. “That's not possible,” she repeated in the tone of someone whose world had just been turned upside down.

Ignis could sympathize. “It's quite possible,” he said. “What do you mean, I’m a character from a video game?”

“Exactly that,” Dr. Matthias said, still sounding dazed. A pause; Ignis's imagination supplied an image of her waving her hands the way Prompto often did when he was at a loss for words. “You're… I mean…” Another pause, then frustration as she said again, “Exactly that — you're a
character from a game.”

“Can you prove that?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t have my console here, but we can do this.” He heard rustling as she moved, then, “What’s a conversation you’ve had - or I guess that Noctis has had - recently that no one else should know about? Something, uh—” She audibly veered away from whatever she’d been about to say. “Important. Significant to your journey since leaving Insomnia.”

Ignis considered. Noct’s discussion with First Secretary Clastra had technically been private, but also attended by a number of aides. Prior to that… “Just before we left Cape Caem,” Ignis said. There’d been a number of people there, too, but none of them would have breathed a word about what had been said. “We spoke to some old friends about what had happened and what was to come. Who were they and what did they tell us?”

“Here,” Dr. Matthias said. A soft melody began playing, flat and tinny as if through a phone's speakers. Then Iris’s voice: I guess it’s goodbye for now.

Ignis’s breath caught. Oblivious, Iris - the recording of Iris - continued, The Regalia’s already waiting below deck. Hopefully she’ll serve you as well across the ocean as she did here. Just don’t break her or Cid’ll have your head.

The music faded. Into the silence, Cor’s voice said: Something I gotta get off my chest.

Noct’s voice was next - a heavy sigh, then, What’s that? Then Cor again, and it had been days but Ignis still remembered the words: I’m sorry. Sorry I wasn’t there for your father. I swore an oath to protect the king, but I wasn’t strong enough to uphold it.

He listened, numbly, as the conversation continued. Cid’s gruff admonishment, followed by the music returning, a solemn backdrop to the words that even now made Ignis’s chest ache: Those ain’t your bodyguards, they’re your brothers. Trust in ’em. Always.

“How?” Ignis whispered.

“It’s a cutscene,” Dr. Matthias said, stopping the playback. “From the game. I can do more, if you want.”

He swallowed. Thought for a moment. Another conversation, one with someone who hadn't been at Cape Caem, just in case. “We traveled to Steyliff Grove recently with a guide. The guide mentioned some concerns about their employer.”

“Aranea?” Dr. Matthias said. “One sec.”

The audio clip this time was more obviously a game: ominous ambient music; Noct's, Prompto's, Aranea’s, and Ignis's own voice bantering back and forth; interspersed with periods of fast-paced battle music and weirdly stilted, repetitive combat sounds. The conversation with Aranea about her doubts regarding the Empire, their collective awe at Steyliff’s ceiling of water, even the bridge that had collapsed out from under them. It was beyond strange, and when Dr. Matthias finally stopped it, Ignis found he’d clenched his fists so hard in the blankets that his fingers had gone stiff.

“This doesn't make any sense,” he said.

“Tell me about it,” Dr. Matthias agreed dryly. “Video game characters aren’t supposed to spontaneously appear in the real world.”
Ignis didn't bother quibbling over her definition of *real world*. “More to the point,” he said instead, “how do I get back?”

“Good question,” Dr. Matthias said. She blew out a sigh, then the creak of a chair and a change in the height of her voice indicated she’d stood up. “Okay. For now, I think what I’m going to do is get you a session with an occupational therapist. I’m technically not supposed to, but if we go with you’re really Ignis Scientia from Insomnia, then you won't have insurance and aren't going to be able to do it later.”

“Insurance?” Ignis asked, baffled. “For emergency treatment?”

“Hah,” she said. “I guess Lucis would be enlightened enough to have universal health care, huh?”

“I wasn't aware there was another kind,” Ignis said.

“There is, but it's stupid,” she said. “What matters is that here in the ER, unless you can pay - either with insurance or out of pocket - all I can do is diagnose and treat the immediate issue until you’re stable. After that, we send you home.”

“Except apparently my home is in another… what, reality?” Ignis pointed out.

“Well, the EMTALA doesn't care if you have somewhere to go, unfortunately. Just that you're stable enough to go. Which you're going to be, soon. But I think I can swing an argument for a session with an OT, which should get you started with a cane and basic navigation, at least.”

Something in her phrasing nagged at Ignis. “You say that as though you don't expect me to be able to take these bandages off anytime soon,” he said.

A long pause, then a soft exhale, and the bottom dropped out of Ignis's world. No.

Dr. Matthias said, very gently, “Did the night EP talk to you about your injuries at all?”

He shook his head.

Her shoes clicked on the floor, then her hand touched his arm. He wrenched away, moving before even he realized, gasping out, “No. No, I can't— I can't be—”

“Your left eye,” Dr. Matthias said, her voice carefully clinical, “was so badly damaged it's a miracle they saved it at all. Your right eye wasn't much better, though it may eventually regain some light sensitivity.”

Ignis lashed out, trying to shove her and those horrible words away, but his hands caught nothing but empty air. “No!” he shouted. “Fix it, please, you have to fix it, I can't—” He swallowed the words, forced his hands down. Tried again, focusing on sounding calm so he didn't have to focus on the rest. “I'm of no use to Noct like this. Please, there has to be something.”

“I'm sorry,” Dr. Matthias said, hideously, terribly gentle. “Ignis, I’m so sorry, but there's nothing we can do.”

He wrapped his hands in the blankets to keep from lashing out again. His breath came sharp and ragged in his throat, and for a long time it was all he could do not to scream. Dr. Matthias rested a hand on his back and said nothing else.

Eventually a soft but insistent buzzing broke the silence. Dr. Matthias moved, sighed. “I'm being paged,” she said. “I have to go.” She squeezed his shoulder, still so, so gentle. “Just… hang in
there, okay? I'll be back later and we'll figure something out.”

Ignis didn't say anything. A soft exhale, not quite a sigh, then her hand dropped away. Her shoes clicked across the floor and off into the distance, leaving him alone in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think we have any idea what kind of system Lucis uses to provide health care, but given how the majority of the country's population is packed into Insomnia, it's probably something fairly straightforward and local.

Also, since we don't know the exact nature of the damage to Ignis's eyes, it's entirely possible that immediate access to modern medical care would have saved his sight. But for purposes of this story, whatever the damage was, it isn't fixable. (Poor Iggy...)
I said it before but I'll say it again: I'm a fanfic writer, not a doctor. Probably inaccurate medical practices and terminology, ahoy!

What do you guys think? Is this ridiculous little fic worth continuing? Or should I quit while I'm not too far behind?

Ever since he was a child, Ignis had been the one to help others. From the moment he was introduced to a small black-haired toddler; to when, as a teenager, he’d realized that though he only worked for Noctis, helping the Citadel's councilors was an excellent way to curry favor; to the last few months when he’d been acutely aware that he was often all that stood between his friends and utter ruin, he’d done his best to help others as much as he could and never request help himself.

Now, though… Now, even something as simple as using the bathroom was an exercise in frustration and humiliation, as he had to call a nurse for help. He couldn’t even get dressed yet - he was trapped in the flimsy hospital gown until they were ready to remove the wires and the IV, which the nurse warned him wouldn’t be until the doctor cleared it. Making matters worse, his eyes alternated between burning dully and spiking with moments of breathtaking pain, as if to remind him of what he’d lost. By the time the occupational therapist arrived, Ignis wanted nothing more than to stab something.

The therapist was a polite young man who weathered Ignis's anger with far more patience and kindness than Ignis deserved. He gave Ignis a long cane and a crash course in how to use it, and didn't comment on Ignis’s obvious hatred for both. Not even when, after stumbling one too many times, Ignis gave in to the helpless rage and flung the damn cane across the room, unable to stand his own fumbling about like—

Like the blind man he was, now.

Still, by the end of the session, Ignis could at least navigate his little hospital room without tripping over anything. He managed to thank the therapist as well, and almost sounded sincere.

After the therapist came a man who introduced himself as a financial counselor and said he wanted to talk about insurance and payment. Ignis mostly had no idea what that was about - what kind of heartless country required its citizens to pay for life-saving emergency treatment? But deflecting questions until the man got frustrated and left was pettily, spitefully, enough of an outlet for the anger that, by the time Dr. Matthias came back, Ignis thought he could hold a normal conversation.

“Hey,” she said. “Me again. You doing okay?”

“As well as can be expected, I suppose,” Ignis said. He was sitting up on the bed, and he heard the click of the doctor's shoes as she crossed the room and nudged the creaking wheeled stool out of the way.

She made a rueful little sound. “For what it's worth, the therapist said you're doing great.”
“He’s only being polite,” Ignis said. The cane leaned against the bed near his hand; he couldn't see it, but he could feel its presence like a toxin.

Dr. Matthias didn’t dignify that with a response. “I need to check your injuries, all right? Lie back and hold still. Let me know if anything hurts.”

He did as instructed, settling back against the raised end of the bed and managing not to flinch when her fingers touched his arm. “I didn’t mention them earlier,” she said, “but you’ve got some cracked ribs and extensive bruising as well.” Pushing the hospital gown out of the way, she felt along his ribs, pausing when pain hitched his breath. “That hurts?”

“Only mildly,” Ignis said.

A pause. “I can’t tell if you’re being sarcastic or not.”

“I wasn’t,” he said. “It’s not pleasant, but I can live with it.”

“Well, once the morphine wears off you can tell me again,” she said dryly, “but for now, just be careful. No sudden movements, no heavy lifting. Got it?”

“Understood.” Ignis wasn’t sure how well that would work out, given that as soon as he got back to Altissia and his friends they would need to resume their journey, but he could at least keep the doctor happy.

Dr. Matthias closed the front of his hospital gown, then reached up to touch his jaw. She started with the bandages on his lip and nose, peeling them back with calm brusqueness. “These are looking good so far. You’ll need to keep them clean, but I think you'll get away with minimal scarring.”

Ignis reached up to brush his fingers over the injuries. As best he could tell, they were both simple short-but-deep cuts, each with bits of butterfly tape holding them together. They stung a bit to the touch, but not enough to bother him. “The tape will come off on its own in a few days,” Dr. Matthias continued. “I'm not going to re-bandage them - just try not to get them wet until the tape comes off.”

She moved up to his right eye without waiting for a response. She was more careful here, but Ignis still couldn't help a hiss of pain as she peeled up the bandage. Dr. Matthias paused. “Sorry,” she said. “I know this isn't fun.”

“It's fine,” Ignis said. “I’m fine.”

She didn't answer, just finished removing the bandage. It wasn't until the fabric pulled away that Ignis realized he'd been holding his breath - had expected to see a change in the darkness behind his closed eyelid. But there was nothing. The darkness stayed, unyielding and impenetrable. He swallowed hard, and knotted his fingers in the blankets beneath him.

Dr. Matthias's breath brushed against his face as she leaned closer. Cool fingers probed gently along his eyebrow, down the outer edge of his eye socket. Ignis lifted his own hand, following her path, exploring the wound. His fingers found swollen, bruised skin all around his eye, as well as another, longer cut through his eyebrow, held together by stitches.

“Can you try to open this eye?” Dr. Matthias asked. “Just this one?”

He didn't want to. He desperately didn't want to, because as long as the bandages had covered his eyes, pinning them closed, he could tell himself that she was wrong. That when he did open his
eyes he’d be able to see again. Even the lack of change in the light when the bandages came off could be excused away: the lighting in the room was too dim, the doctor's body was casting a shadow. But the moment he opened his eye...

“Ignis,” Dr. Matthias said gently, and he realized he was breathing too fast, too harsh. She caught his hand in hers and squeezed. “I'm right here. You can do this.”

He gritted his teeth. Fought for control and found it. Made himself open his eye.

Darkness.

His next breath came out a sob. “Damn it,” he whispered. “Damn it, damn it, damn it—!”

His eye burned, then something hot and wet slid down his cheek to his jaw. Tears, and that was so horribly unfair, that he could still shed tears but not see, that for a few minutes he lost himself completely. He sobbed, only distantly aware that he still clung to Dr. Matthias's hand, that she was murmuring soft, soothing, meaningless words.

Eventually Ignis wrestled himself back under control. Made himself breathe slowly, evenly, and stop crushing the doctor’s hand. “My apologies,” he said, his voice hoarse and raw.

He heard Dr. Matthias move; a moment later she pressed some tissues into his hand. “Here,” she said. “And you have nothing to apologize for.”

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t… It’s unprofessional of me to…” He waved a hand vaguely at himself, the damp ugliness of his breakdown.

There was a pause that he felt was distinctly incredulous, then Dr. Matthias said, “You just suffered a traumatic, life-changing injury, Ignis. There’s nothing unprofessional about being upset or freaking out about that.”

“Nevertheless.” He used the tissues to wipe his face, mindful of his various injuries. When he felt like slightly less of an embarrassment, he said, “Did you need to continue your examination?”

“No,” Dr. Matthias answered. “I don’t want to take the bandage off your other eye yet - there was a lot more surface damage on the surrounding skin, and it needs time to heal. But I do need to put something back over that cut on your eyebrow.”

Ignis nodded and settled back against the bed, using the time while she rebandaged the cut to calm himself further. She didn’t cover the whole eye this time, just the cut itself, and Ignis wished he was cowardly enough to ask her to do so. With a bandage pinning his eyes shut, he could go back to telling himself he’d be able to see again.

When Dr. Matthias finished, she moved away and dropped onto the creaky stool. “There,” she said. “You’re all set.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, and fought the urge to prod at the new bandage, at the bruising around his eye.

“Have you given any thought to where you want to go?” Dr. Matthias asked, distracting him. “You’re more than stable enough now that I have to discharge you.”

“I’ve thought about it, but I’ve no answers,” he admitted. “Crossing realities, or whatever it was that happened here, is a conundrum I never thought to plan for.”
She snorted, and Ignis smiled faintly in return before sobering again. “Regardless, I need to figure out how to get back to Altissia as soon as possible,” he continued. “If Noct is injured—”

“Oh,” Dr. Matthias said. “Noct is fine.”

Ignis frowned at her. “How do you know?”

“It's in the game,” she said. “He sleeps for a few days straight after the Leviathan fight, because of how much power he burned, I guess, but he wakes up fine.”

It was good news, but Ignis wasn’t ready to feel relieved yet. Wouldn’t be until he saw Noctis for himself to confirm he was really all right. Even so, he felt the tight knot of worry in his chest ease.

“And the Lady Lunafreya?”

“She…” Dr. Matthias sighed. “She’s gone.”

He remembered that last flash of vision, Ardyn Izunia’s airship headed for the altar. Damn.

“Ardyn,” he said. Not a question.

“Yeah,” Dr. Matthias agreed quietly. “He stabs her in the stomach. She survives long enough to help Noctis beat Leviathan, but vanishes into the sea after.”

Ignis took a deep breath. The loss of the Oracle was a blow - not just to Noctis, who’d wanted nothing more than to save her from the Empire, but also to the continued stability of the world itself. Without the Oracle, humanity had lost its messenger to the gods, and its most potent source of protection from the mysterious illness known as the Starscourge.

“I need to get back,” he said again. Frustrated, thinking out loud. “But I’ve no idea how I came here in the first place.”

“You don't remember what happened?”


“Retrograde amnesia isn't unusual when dealing with traumatic injury,” Dr. Matthias pointed out. “You may start to remember again, given time to recover.”

“Or I may not,” Ignis said. It came out sharp, angry, his frustration dangerously close to boiling over. “And I’m certainly not going to get very far wounded in a strange city.” He scowled, then stopped, wincing, as the muscles around his eyes screamed protests.

There was a pause, then, “Well,” Dr. Matthias said hesitantly. “This might be more than a little weird, and of course you’re free to say no, but… if you want, you can stay at my place until we figure out how to get you home.”

Ignis considered for a moment. It actually wasn’t a bad idea. Whether he really was somehow a “character from a video game”, or she had simply somehow gotten perfect audio recordings of multiple private conversations, he was confident that he was at least nowhere near Altissia anymore. Nurse Janelle hadn’t been able to call Gladio or Prompto earlier, so he couldn’t expect any help from his friends until he managed to reestablish contact. And as he’d said, given his… injuries, he couldn’t very well go wandering off on his own.

“If it wouldn't be too much trouble,” he said, “I’d greatly appreciate that.”
“No trouble at all,” she said. “You're going to have a lot of discharge paperwork to fill out, and I should be done with my shift by then. I’ll come get you afterwards, okay?”

He nodded. The stool creaked as Dr. Matthias stood up, then she continued, “I have to get going. One of the nurses will be by to help you get checked out.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said automatically. Her shoes clicked against the tiles as she left.

Alone, Ignis gave in to the urge to curl in on himself, pressing a hand over his mouth. He realized he didn't know whether his eye was open or closed, had to make himself blink to be sure. The steady darkness burned, and before he quite realized it he was pushing on his eye with the heel of his hand, as if he’d been sun-blinded and could bring his sight back by rubbing hard enough.

It hurt, and he gasped with the pain as it spiked from his right eye through his skull to echo in his left. Still he pushed harder, grinding his hand into his eye, but the unrelenting darkness refused to budge. Finally, bitterly, he dropped his hand away, and the sudden easing of the pain made him gasp again.

Eventually a nurse came, as Dr. Matthias had promised, and helped him dress in his still-damp Crownsguard uniform which reeked of brine. One of his cufflinks was missing, but other than that, his fingers found no damage to the fabric. But then, the damage he’d suffered hadn't been to his body where the uniform could take it instead of his flesh.

At least he was out of that bloody hospital gown.

Once he was dressed, the nurse led Ignis out of the room and along several halls, noisier and much more crowded than they’d been last night. Despite the cane and the nurse’s hand on his elbow, Ignis kept bumping into things, though at least the people mostly got out of his way on their own. He still felt overly large, awkward, and clumsy, and it was a relief when the nurse steered him into a little private office.

The relief only lasted until he remembered that he couldn't read any of the discharge paperwork. As chamberlain to the Crown Prince of Lucis, Ignis’s signature carried a great deal of weight, and he’d known since childhood to never sign anything he hadn't thoroughly read and understood. Even if he was somewhere else now - somewhere the Kingdom of Lucis didn’t exist - he didn’t like the idea of signing his name to papers he couldn’t read. He finally settled for having the nurse read each document aloud, word for word, though he could tell it was as annoying to her as it was frustrating to him.

The papers mostly involved various legal disclaimers, the hospital protecting itself from possible lawsuits related to his treatment and discharge, as well as several lengthy documents informing him of his obligation to pay for services rendered. He gave in to the petty spite again, listing the Citadel as his home address. If this hospital in a place he’d never heard of managed to contact the Crown City and resurrect its fallen government long enough to wrangle payment, more power to them.

Dr. Matthias arrived as he was finishing the last set of documents. “Ready?” she asked when he set down the pen.

“As I can be,” Ignis answered. He stood, made his way carefully across the two steps to where she waited by the door. She told the nurse goodnight, then took Ignis by the arm and led him away.
Coping

Dr. Matthias had hired a car to take them to her home, explaining that while she normally took a train, she didn't want to subject Ignis to “the horror that is San Fran public transit”. Ignis appreciated the excuse, thin as it was; he was acutely aware that he was in no shape for a great deal of walking, especially among crowds.

As it was, even walking out of the hospital to the hired car turned out to be almost too much for him. The heavy-duty painkillers had worn off, and Ignis discovered a number of lesser aches and strains that had been lost beneath them. Moving hurt, and without the painkillers to numb them, his eyes hurt worse. And he was utterly exhausted, besides; other than the few hours of drugged unconsciousness in the hospital, he hadn’t slept since the night before the meeting with First Secretary Claustra. He spent most of the ride dozing despite himself, and barely managed to muster the energy to climb from the hired car and walk up the short path to the doctor’s home.

The set of tall narrow steps leading up to her front door turned out to be more difficult than Ignis had expected, and he was selfishly, pathetically grateful for Dr. Matthias’s patience as she helped him navigate up to a small porch. “The house is kind of old,” Dr. Matthias said as they entered through a creaking door, sounding apologetic. “My grandmother left it to me, which is the only reason I can afford to have a two-bedroom house all to myself in San Francisco. But it's comfortable.”

“I'm sure it's lovely,” Ignis said.

She chuckled and nudged his arm to steer him to one side. “Staircase is over here,” she said. “There's a shower upstairs, you can wash up while I get the guest bedroom ready.”

He needed her help again on the stairs, not only because of his eyes but because his abused body was near to collapse. The shower, at least, he managed on his own; it wasn't as though he had never washed in the dark before, and he could sit down in the bathtub. Then Dr. Matthias showed him to a room with a comfortable bed, and Ignis collapsed onto the pillows and fell asleep immediately.

His dreams were unremarkable nonsense: walking through the corridors of the Citadel arguing with his uncle about welfare checks for garulas and having choco-back swim races with Prompto through the canals of Altissia. Except that in his dreams, he could still see. The images were so vivid that when he woke, the loss of light and color was a hurt nearly on par with the physical pain that thudded behind his eyes. He lay there for a long time, unbandaged eye open and staring uselessly, willing himself not to break down again.

When he felt able, he climbed out of bed, groping around until he found the cane where he’d left it propped up on the bedside table. His eye burned, so he closed it again - it wasn’t as though keeping it open did any good. He made his way to the bathroom and fumbled his way through washing his face and brushing his teeth before realizing that shaving was going to be a problem. Perhaps not immediately - much to his teenage self’s dismay, he’d never been able to grow more than a pale, patchy fuzz - but even that would eventually grow in enough to look scruffy and unprofessional.

Ignis decided to put that thought off for another day, and firmly told himself that it was only because he shouldn’t try to shave until his lip had healed. Lying to himself really only worked when he wasn’t so painfully aware of the lie, but it was that or allow himself to shatter at the seams. So he finished washing and got dressed in a spare set of clothes he’d had in the armory. Thankful, for once, that he’d given in to Noct’s laziness and let him store most of their gear and luggage there after one too many last-minute camps. Thankful, too, that as long as he could still
access the armory, he had an assurance that Noctis was alive.

Then - very carefully, fumbling and tiptoeing in a way he was sure looked utterly absurd - he headed down the stairs. He didn’t hear Dr. Matthias anywhere; she’d told him last night that she had to be back at the hospital today, so that wasn’t a surprise. Ignis was a little surprised that he’d slept so long, but if he was honest with himself, he’d been badly wounded. His body needed time to rest and heal, much as he might wish otherwise. But he’d been so tired last night that he hadn’t thought ahead, hadn’t remembered to plan for such mundane things as getting food, given his condition. The doctor had mentioned that there was plenty of food in the kitchen, that he was welcome to any of it, but they had both forgotten that making meals relied on sight.

Which he didn’t have, would never have again, and Ignis's legs collapsed out from beneath him so suddenly that he bruised his knees crashing to the hard floor. No, he thought helplessly, furiously. Astrals, please, no, no no no…! But the gods weren’t listening. Hadn’t shown even the barest modicum of concern for the human casualties of this game they were playing, this prophecy they were driving to completion.

Alone in the house, Ignis gave in to the grief and the rage, throwing back his head and howling. He screamed until his throat was raw, until he ran out of breath, until the helpless anger faded and he sagged against the wall. Exhaustion dragged at him, and for a while he just sat there, legs drawn against his chest, face buried against his knees. Everything hurt: his eyes most of all, but his cracked ribs flashed pain with each ragged breath, and his abused muscles had already begun to lock up.

*Pull yourself together,* he thought. *You'll certainly never be of use to Noct if all you do is throw tantrums.*

But it wasn’t that easy, and Ignis had no idea how much time passed before he mustered the strength of will to stand back up. To follow the wall he’d leaned on, swinging his cane carefully, until he found the doorway Dr. Matthias had said led to the kitchen. He trailed his fingers along the counters, not sure what he was looking for, not sure what he hoped to achieve except maybe finding something recognizable.

His fingers slid over a sheet of paper, catching on a series of odd ragged bumps. Ignis paused, examining the paper, the raised lines naggingly familiar. Then they clicked, and his breath caught. It was writing, letters pressed into the paper to form raised lines. He backtracked, finding the beginning, tracing out the words: BANANAS + APPLES, and he slid his hand up to the top of the sheet and found, indeed, a wooden bowl full of fruit.

Ignis slid his hand further along the counter, found another set of papers: BREAD, read one of them tucked beneath a metal cupboard that was probably a breadbox, and PEANUT BUTTER, another, which had been taped around a glass jar. Dr. Matthias must have made these labels last night, writing backward on something soft so the shape of the letters punched through. She’d used an odd style of the old Solheim script instead of the newer sigil script that had grown popular in Insomnia over the last forty years or so, but the words were still perfectly legible.

Ignis nearly laughed aloud in sheer relief. There was nothing glamorous or even particularly special about making a peanut butter sandwich, but he could, he could do it, and that was what mattered. He kept exploring, finding a pair of prescription pill bottles (“TAKE FOR PAIN AS NEEDED” and “ANTIBIOTIC - TAKE ONE DRS ORDERS”), a label for SILVERWARE, with an arrow pointing down the edge of the counter to a drawer, and PLATES + CUPS with an arrow pointing up to a cabinet. He followed a soft electric hum to the refrigerator next, opened it and explored inside until he found the labels for MILK and GRAPE JELLY and BUTTER.
He started by pouring a glass of milk and taking the antibiotic as ordered; he remembered the nurse mentioning it during his discharge instructions yesterday. Debated for a time over taking the pain pill, and finally gave in when he realized that chewing would tug at the wounds on the left side of his face. He needed his wits about him in order to get back to Noct, but the steadily-increasing pain of his injuries was at least as disruptive as the medication, and the thought of not being in pain was alluring.

The sandwich Ignis produced was embarrassingly childish, the ratio of peanut butter to jelly uneven throughout, the bread not properly lined up. But it was food that he’d put together on his own, despite being unable to see, and it was the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted. He was hungrier than he’d thought, though in retrospect he hadn’t eaten anything for a day or two at least. He made himself a second sandwich layered with banana slices, cut carefully if unevenly with a blunt butter knife, then finished it all off with an apple.

After eating, he made his way back out of the kitchen, intent on exploring the rest of the house. But he only made it as far as what he thought was the living room and the large, soft sectional couch there before his body gave out, wounded exhaustion combining with the comfortable sleepiness of a full stomach and the insistent pull of the pain medication. He told himself it would just be a short nap on the couch, that he would be back up and working toward getting home in just a few minutes, but even as sleep took him he knew it was a lie.

* * *

Ignis woke to the sound of the door opening, unsettling dreams of mile-high waves crashing over Insomnia fading to Dr. Matthias's voice calling his name.

“Here,” he answered.

The hardwood floor creaked as the doctor came around the corner into the living room. “Hey,” she said. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” Ignis admitted. “Stiff.”

Fingers touched his jaw, making him jump. “Sorry,” Dr. Matthias said, though she didn't stop tilting his head so she could examine his injuries. “Did you find that antibiotic?”

“I did, thank you.” He hesitated. “And… thank you for the rest of it, as well.”

“Of course,” she said. “You were pretty zonked last night - it seemed easier.”

“Indeed.” He winced as she prodded the bruised skin around his right eye, heard her draw breath to speak and interrupted. “I don't need more painkillers, not yet. I have to figure out how to get home, and I can't do that if I keep falling asleep.”

“Okay,” Dr. Matthias agreed mildly. She let go of him; a moment later he felt the couch shift as she sat down on the other end. “How can I help?”

“I’d like to know more about this video game I’m supposed to be from,” Ignis said. “It's as good a place to start as any.”

“Sure,” Dr. Matthias said. “You haven't remembered anything, I take it?”

“Nothing,” he said. Hearing the frustration in his own voice. “But it may be that talking about the game joggs my memory.”
“Actually,” she said, “we’re right here, I can just turn it on and play a bit.”

Ignis listened to the small chorus of rustles, clicks, and beeps as the doctor started up the game, trying to build an image in his mind of what was happening based on his memories of Noct doing the same. A minute later, soft music began playing, and Dr. Matthias said, “My main save is in Chapter Fifteen, which is dubiously canon since it’s all post-game stuff, and—”

“Wait,” Ignis interrupted. “Come again?”

“So you know how a lot of RPGs let you run around and finish all the side quests before going after the final boss?”

“I’m afraid not,” Ignis said. “The only game I’ve played is King’s Knight.”

“...Oh,” she said. “Well, it’s a pretty common thing. Here it involves going back to the open world before the Leviathan fight, so you can run around and get royal arms you missed, do Ptitoss and the Menace Dungeons, finish the side quests, all that stuff.”

Ignis debated asking for further clarification, decided against it as a rabbit hole he didn't want to go down just yet. He nodded acknowledgement, and Dr. Matthias continued, “It might be a little weird, but I can just grab a hunt or something.” More blips and beeps, then a different tune began playing. “Right, I was in Meldacio for the Melusine hunt,” Dr. Matthias said, mostly to herself.

“Melusine?” Ignis asked. “The seductive snake daemon?”

“Yeah. They just added her in an update.” From the direction of the television, a man’s voice said, *What can I get ya?*, then, a moment later, *Be careful out there.* “I just grabbed the basilisk hunt in the Vesperpool,” Dr. Matthias said.

Noct’s voice came suddenly, *What’s the forecast?*; Ignis's own voice replying, *Clear skies, with the temperature rising.* The familiar slam of the Regalia's doors, the… rather less familiar rumble of a rougher engine than the Regalia’s. The difference was jarring, especially considering how accurate the other sounds had been so far. Before he could ask about it, though, Dr. Matthias said, “Just have to drive up there.”

Ignis raised an eyebrow, then winced as the motion tugged his wounded skin. “It's an hour by car between Meldacio and the Vesperpool,” he said. “The game makes you drive that?”

“No for an hour,” she said. “I think the longest drive in the game is six minutes and that's going from Ravatogh to Hammerhead. You can fast-travel places, which skips the drive, but you end up staring at a loading screen for almost as long, and this way I can watch the scenery. And sometimes Prompto asks to take a picture.”

“Only sometimes?” Ignis said before he could stop himself.

She laughed. “He only asks to stop at certain scenic spots, but he takes pictures all the time.”

On screen, game-Noct announced, *We’re here,* accompanied by the slamming of car doors. Ignis stopped asking questions and just listened to the voices of his friends, familiar chatter that sent a wave of sudden, aching homesickness through him. The additional video game sounds over top added a layer of dizzying unreality to it, and by the time Dr. Matthias had killed the basilisk and game-Prompto sang that irritating little ditty he popped out with sometimes, Ignis had developed a full-blown headache.

“Enough,” he said. “This is too strange.”
“Sorry,” Dr. Matthias said. “Do you want to stop altogether or try somewhere else in the game? They just added chapter select; I could load up Chapter Nine - the Leviathan fight.”

“It’s worth a try,” Ignis agreed.

“It’ll take a while to get to the fight,” Dr. Matthias warned. “The chapter starts on the boat to Altissia and goes until you guys leave for Cartanica. I can skip a few of the cutscenes, but it’s just a long chapter.”

“Don’t skip anything, please,” Ignis said. “Long it may be, but there may also be a clue that will help me get back.”

“Good point,” Dr. Matthias said. The game chirped and beeped, then the sound of rain faded in. “Okay,” she said. “Here goes.”
The Game

Chapter Notes

Welp, the new Episode Ignis trailer has officially jossed everything I was planning for this fic. XD If you guys still want me to continue despite that, though, I will!

As it turned out, the chapter did not start on the boat to Altissia. The rain was the backdrop for a conversation between Ravus Nox Fleuret and Ardyn Izunia, apparently in Altissia. “I forgot about this scene,” Dr. Matthias murmured, though Ignis paid her little attention. On-screen, Chancellor Izunia was talking: That obstinate secretary, standing in the way. While you rush off to slay the Hydraean for your poor sister’s sake. That was odd enough, given the commander’s widely-broadcast efforts to recapture Lunafreya, but even stranger - and more worrisome - were Izunia’s next words: I know the price of the covenant.

But the game gave Ignis little time to contemplate it. The background sounds changed, and then Prompto’s voice said, wistful, Y’know, I’ve always wanted to go sailing like this. That conversation proceeded more or less as Ignis remembered, though in a considerably more condensed fashion, given that in real life the boat ride had taken hours instead of the minutes in the game. Then their entry through customs, and Ignis heard his own lie about their purpose, which sounded considerably more smooth and believable in the game than it had felt in the moment.

“Now let’s see if I remember how to get to Maagho’s,” Dr. Matthias muttered. “First time I played it took me two hours to figure out how to get there.”

Ignis couldn’t help chuckling. “If it makes you feel better, it took us half a day, even with Cid’s directions.”

“Attis is not the easiest place to navigate,” the doctor said. “Gorgeous, though.”

“That it is,” Ignis agreed.

As she made her way toward the restaurant, Ignis thought back to the conversation between Ardyn and Ravus. What had the chancellor meant, when he’d said I know the price of the covenant? What was the price, and who was intended to pay it? Having seen how Noctis had suffered from Titan’s and Ramuh’s trials, Ignis worried that Leviathan would inflict - had already inflicted - her own manner of harm upon him. But Dr. Matthias had promised, back in the hospital, that Noct was fine. More tellingly, Ravus cared nothing for Noctis’s well-being - had no reason to be concerned over a price paid in Lucis Caelum pain.

Which meant the price was one to be paid by the Oracle instead, which in turn meant both that Ravus did still care for his sister, enough that Ardyn believed she could be used against him; and that Lunafreya’s role in the covenants had been greater than merely carrying humanity’s words to the gods. If she was truly dead now, as Dr. Matthias had said… what chance remained that Noctis would be able to secure covenants with the rest of the Six?

He was about to ask Dr. Matthias about it when Weskham Armaugh’s voice cut smoothly into his thoughts: Welcome to Accordo, lads. Cid mentioned you’d be dropping in. Weskham Armaugh, as you’ve gathered. My word, you’ve grown, little Prince. Ah, but of course—you were only a babe at
Ignis filed the questions about the covenants away for later, and focused instead on the conversation with Weskham. It was unsettling listening to that talk and the introduction to Secretary Claustra, stilted and condensed as they were; yet more so when it finished and Dr. Matthias steered game-Noctis’s company back onto the streets. Their game avatars chatted as they walked, in creepily repetitive bursts that were simultaneously perfectly accurate - he remembered Prompto saying that - and unfinished, hollow.

“It feels incomplete,” Ignis said. “None of it happened nearly so quickly.”

“Well, I’m ignoring all the side quests and stuff, and just not exploring the city at all,” Dr. Matthias said. “I can do more if you want, though.”

Ignis shook his head. “We spent more time than I’d like to admit both sightseeing and looking for a way to reach Lady Lunafreya, though the latter was to no avail.”

“Mm,” the doctor said. “Well, if I go talk to Camelia Claustra now, that kicks off the Leviathan fight.”

“Please do,” Ignis said.

“You’ll have to tell me how much of the dialogue is accurate,” Dr. Matthias said. “The conversation with her is a minigame challenge, you have to pick what you're going to say. You can actually be kind of a dick if you want.”

“...I see,” Ignis said dryly. “For what it's worth, Noct comported himself quite admirably during the discussion.”

“Hopefully I do him justice then,” she said, and he heard the smile in her voice.

Stilted and robotic as the in-game dialogue was, the doctor did manage a respectable level of diplomacy. The conversation between Secretary Claustra and Weskham Armaugh that followed was unexpected. Like the earlier scene between Ravus and Chancellor Izunia, it was something Ignis hadn’t been witness to, yet here it was presented like a scene from a movie. Still, he couldn’t help but agree with the secretary’s assessment about the Empire’s madness.

The scene faded to silence, then Dr. Matthias said, “The day of the rite.” Ignis turned his head toward her, remembering in time not to raise an eyebrow; she clarified, “The scene title. There’s a time-skip here, it’s the morning of the day of the summoning.”

“Ah,” Ignis said. They’d skipped over the mundanities of the planning which had taken place the night before, had gone straight to the part he couldn’t remember. He could only hope that there would be something in here he could use to get home.

His thoughts were interrupted by his own voice coming from the television: *During the rite, we must see to it the empire does not harass Leviathan.* Gladio answering, *Gonna be tough to pull off, before the king receives her power.*

Listening to this conversation was strange. Ignis didn’t remember the specifics - they were lost to that frustrating, sea-drenched emptiness which had swallowed all his memories of that day - but he had a sense of déjà vu as he listened to his friends speak, a feeling of knowing what they were going to say before they said it. It was almost a relief when the scene ended and a new one faded in, and Secretary Claustra said, *If worse comes to worst, you can threaten to throw the trident into the sea. Then they’ll listen. In the meantime, it will be well guarded. Better than the Oracle herself.*
With a jolt, Ignis realized that the secretary was talking to Lunafreya. Their words held no particular enlightenment, no information Ignis hadn’t assumed or guessed, but it was still strange to hear them talk as though he was in the room with them. Listening to these conversations, he felt like a common spy, eavesdropping on things to which he was not supposed to be privy. Yet it was all just a part of the game.

Another scene change, this time to Lunafreya’s speech at the podium, doubly heartbreaking knowing the fate that awaited her. Followed by a phone conversation between Ignis, Noct, Gladio, and Prompto as they prepared for their separate tasks. This, too, was familiar, in the way that meant a memory of living through this lurked somewhere in the sea-drowned depths of his mind. But to his frustration, it was nothing more than just familiar, nothing more than that nagging sense of déjà vu.

Before he could try to dig further into his memories, the scene switched yet again, this time to something entirely new: a woman’s voice singing an eerie melody, accompanied by the lashing of wind and waves. Dr. Matthias said quietly, “It’s Luna, she’s singing to call Leviathan.” An alien voice responded to the song, and Dr. Matthias added, “Leviathan says, ‘What fool mortal dares break the slumber of the Tide?’”

She kept narrating, translating Leviathan’s half of the conversation with Lunafreya. Even knowing what was to come, Ignis couldn’t help but admire the Oracle’s unflinching strength in the face of the goddess. Another brief interlude of conversation between Ignis and his companions - still distantly, tantalizingly familiar - then Dr. Matthias sat forward, the controller clacking softly in her hands as she worked through a battle sequence.

The fight ended, the scene swapping back to Leviathan, and the doctor’s translation of the goddess’s furious words sent a chill through Ignis. He had, perhaps foolishly, thought that Leviathan’s covenant would be similar to Titan’s or Ramuh’s: Noct would perform some feat of strength or magic which would prove him worthy in Leviathan’s eyes. Something potentially dangerous, but attainable, made risky only by the Empire’s interference. He hadn’t realized how deep ran Leviathan’s contempt for humanity, how close she had come to devouring the entire planet.

The sequence that followed, Noct and Prompto riding an Imperial flying machine, brought with it the first, painfully brief flash of real memory he’d managed yet: Prompto kicking off one of Altissia’s arched walkways on the back of a device that didn’t look nearly airworthy enough to trust with the prince’s life. But Prompto had flashed a grin and a wave before disappearing around a building, and Ignis had reached for his phone to alert Noct.

He almost thought that if the scene had kept going, if the game had chosen to follow Ignis and Gladio instead of Noctis and Prompto, he might have remembered something. Lurking at the edge of thought were hazy images of MTs, fire, shattered buildings. Sharp pain up his left arm, cold stone beneath his cheek. Terror gnawing at his gut, the certainty that he needed to get to Noctis right now. But no matter how he reached, how desperately he clawed at the briny gray fog, he couldn’t find more than that.

Then game-Noctis reached Leviathan and demanded her power, and the trial began in earnest. Listening to Noctis battle Leviathan via the doctor’s game controller was terrifying, even through the still-bizarre filter of video game sound effects. Then a cry of pain and a thump, and Ignis’s breath caught. Dr. Matthias said, “Leviathan just knocked him out of the sky. He hit the ground and isn’t getting up.” Her voice was calm, unconcerned, and Ignis made himself hold still, listen to her narration.
“Luna’s going to him,” she continued. A gasp and another thump; Dr. Matthias didn’t need to tell him that Luna had fallen.

Then Ardyn Izunia’s voice said, *Now, about that ring…*

“He just showed up next to her,” Dr. Matthias murmured. Ignis remembered that last flash of sight, the chancellor’s airship turning toward the altar.

*On second thought… You let him have it.*

Not all members of the Imperial army were MT units. Some were human, and Ignis had killed enough of them to recognize the noise Lunafreya made as Ardyn stabbed her. He’d known it was coming, yet his stomach still turned and he pressed his knuckles to his mouth, willing himself not to move. Not to protest. To do nothing but sit there, because all of this had already happened, days ago. He couldn’t stop it now - he could only listen, and gather as much information as he could so that when next they faced their enemies, he could stop them.

So Ignis made himself stay silent as Dr. Matthias narrated the rest of the scene, her voice quiet and solemn. Made himself focus on the questions raised, such as why Ardyn hadn’t taken the ring, why he wanted Lunafreya to pass it to Noct. The whole point of the Empire’s invasion of Insomnia had been to gain the Crystal and the Ring which controlled it - why was Ardyn, by all accounts the de-facto right hand to Emperor Aldercapt, giving up a chance to get the Ring? Not only giving up a chance, but actively passing it to Noctis instead?

Did this mean that Ardyn was a traitor to the Empire? As annoying and condescending as he’d been, he’d done nothing but help Noctis all this time. With the glaring exception of murdering Lunafreya in cold blood, of course. What game was Ardyn playing, that he sought to aid the ascension of the King of Kings even as he tore down the people and institutions which supported him? Did he hope to replace them? Become Noct’s right hand when Noct took his rightful place on the throne, and maintain all the power he’d grown accustomed to having as Imperial Chancellor?

Too many questions. Not enough information. When this was over, Ignis would interrogate Dr. Matthias, would find out as much as he could. She was occupied at the moment, battling Leviathan, game-Noctis empowered by the magic of his ancestors’ souls. Despite knowing the outcome Ignis found himself holding his breath, twitching at every grunt and cry from the screen. Finally Dr. Matthias sat back on the couch with a satisfied huff, and Noct’s voice, exhausted, said, *It’s done*.

“Alluna’s healing him,” Dr. Matthias said, even as Lunafreya’s voice said onscreen, *Blessed stars of life and light,* the gentle prayer familiar to all who’d seen the Oracle work. Then a terrible roar and an eruption of sound and fury from the television, undercut by a soft haunting melody that spoke of loss and tragedy, incongruous beside the violence of stone and water battling for dominance. Dr. Matthias’s narration of Titan’s appearance and attack was nearly lost in the onslaught, and all Ignis could think of was Noctis and Lunafreya, lying wounded and vulnerable in the midst of the devastation as gods fought above them—

Then, with jarring abruptness, it was over, the hideous roar fading away into the silence of Dr. Matthias’s living room.
The sound stopped abruptly. Dr. Matthias said cautiously, “The next part is Noct and Luna saying goodbye in a dream-vision-thing, and then after that it’s Noct waking up with the Ring and finding out about your injuries.”

Ignis heard the question in her tone. Forced his hand away from his mouth so he could answer. “It's not my place to eavesdrop on them,” he said. “And Noct will learn of my injuries soon enough.”

“Okay.” Beeps and blips as she closed out of the game, then, “That wasn't as helpful as we hoped, was it.”

“No,” Ignis agreed. His eyes hurt and his body ached and he’d just heard the Oracle's last moments of life as part of a Six-damned game. He pressed a hand to his right eye, wishing the pain would just stop, that he could just think, that he was in Altissia at Noct’s side where he belonged instead of this strange, impossible place—

“Ignis,” Dr. Matthias said. Cool fingers wrapped around his wrist and pulled his hand away from his eye. She pressed something into his palm: pills. Then a cold glass into his other hand. “I know you don't like them, but suffering isn't going to help anything. Also I’m sure you're overdue for your next antibiotic.”

He gave a bitter laugh. Clever of her, to combine the two. He couldn’t tell the painkiller from the antibiotic by touch, and he knew better than to throw away the antibiotic just to avoid the painkiller. Still, as much as he hated it, she wasn't wrong. So he swallowed the pills and the water, and tried to find a position on the couch that didn't make his bruised body or cracked ribs ache.

Then Dr. Matthias said, “It’s too bad Episode Ignis won't be out for months yet. It's supposed to cover what you were doing during the Leviathan fight.”

“I’m sorry, Episode ...Ignis?” he said, incredulous.

“Yeah,” Dr. Matthias said. “The episodes are DLC add-ons, short games to expand the story. Each of you has one - Gladio, Prompto, and you. You all spend time away from the party during the main game and your episodes cover what happened while you were separated. Gladio’s and Prompto's have been released already, but yours isn't due until late December at least.”

“I—” Ignis said and then stopped because he wasn't quite sure how to process that. Instead he went for, “I suppose Gladio left to challenge Gilgamesh, but Prompto has been with us the whole time.”

“Prompto, uh...” He could practically hear her backtracking. “His is later. After Cartanica.”

“Cartanica - that’s the old mine Cor spoke of, which he believes holds a royal tomb,” Ignis said. “But it's in Niflheim. What could Prompto possibly need to do alone in Niflheim?”

“Well, it wasn't his choice, he, uh...” The doctor broke off, sighed. “It feels really weird to say spoilers! when it's like... your life. But I also don't want to, I don't know, break something because I told you something you shouldn't know yet.”

“Frankly, I would rather know,” Ignis said. “I've felt since we first met Chancellor Izunia that
we’re missing a crucial piece of the puzzle. Listening to *that*—” he tilted his head toward the television— “only makes me feel more so. So, what happens to Prompto in Niflheim that makes him leave us?”

Dr. Matthias sighed, then, reluctantly, “Ardyn’s a raging bag of dicks is what happens. He tricks Noct into attacking Prompto and knocking him off the train. Episode Prompto is about Prompto trying to get back to you guys.”

“Trying,” Ignis echoed. Worried. “He doesn't succeed?”

“Uh.”

“Doctor Matthias, *please,*” Ignis said.

“You don't have to call me doctor,” she said. “My name is Kate.”

“As you wish, Kate,” Ignis said. It was an attempt at a diversion, and a poor one at that. “Does Prompto return to us?”

She sighed again. “Not under his own power, no. You guys find him later.”

“Alive?” Ignis pressed.

“Yes.”

He debated pushing further, but her tone made plain her reluctance to speak on the subject, so Ignis decided to be patient, come at the problem from a different angle. “You said I have one of these, er, *episodes* as well?”

“Yeah,” she said, and he didn't miss the relief in her voice at the change of subject. “All we know about yours is that it takes place in Altissia around the time of the Leviathan fight, and that it's supposed to have the biggest impact on the plot.”

Ignis frowned. “What does *that* mean?”

“Beats me.” A faint rustle of cloth as Dr. Matthias - Kate - shrugged. “There's a lot of speculation, but what's weird about it is that like… we already know the basics of what happened to you in Altissia - your eyes. And anything else that could affect the plot wouldn't make sense, because we know the whole plot afterwards. Unless…” She broke off abruptly.

“Unless…?” Ignis prompted.

A long enough hesitation that Ignis nearly spoke again, but finally Kate said, “So… I’ve seen a theory - and it's just that, a theory based on speculation and leftover rumors from Versus Thirteen —”

“What’s Versus Thirteen?” Ignis interrupted.

“Uh, before your game was a standalone numbered Final Fantasy, it was a spin-off of a previous game, Final Fantasy Thirteen. The plot and setting were very different, Luna didn't exist as such, Noct could see dying souls— Anyway. Nothing in Versus Thirteen is canon for Fifteen - your game - but there's leftovers still, and people like to use those for theorizing.”

“And there's a theory about what happened in Altissia,” Ignis said.

“Yeah,” she said, then sighed. “Crap, I just backed myself into a corner.”
“Something else you don't want to tell me,” Ignis said.

“More or less the same thing, actually,” Kate said reluctantly. “Basically, there's something about Prompto that is really not my place to tell you, he needs to do it himself—”

“Is this about that tattoo on his wrist?” Ignis asked. A guess, but not much of one; he’d had his suspicions for a while now.

“Uhhh—”

“He hides it well enough,” Ignis said, “but I’ve known him for half a decade. Until recently I thought it merely the result of a poor decision made by a teenager with insufficient adult supervision, and that embarrassment or fear of consequences led him to hide it. But ever since Insomnia fell…” He hesitated, considering how to phrase it, how to explain the nights of sleepless worry ever since he’d made the connection, without causing Kate to clam up again. “That barcode has some distinctive features which I have also noticed on various items of Imperial make.”

“You’re not going to let this go, are you,” Kate said.

“No,” Ignis agreed. “My first priority is and always has been Noctis’s well-being. If there’s anything about Prompto that could put Noctis in danger, inadvertently or otherwise—”

“No,” Kate interrupted, vehemently enough that Ignis believed her. “Prompto absolutely will not, and never does, put Noct in danger. He’s as loyal to him as you are.”

“But,” Ignis said quietly, because he could hear it coming.

“But,” Kate said, “the theory goes that he may have been involved, unintentionally or against his will, in hurting you.”

Ignis frowned. “Because of his Imperial tattoo. Is he an Imperial agent, then?” There’d been speculation amongst the Crownguard, back when Prompto had first befriended Noctis, that he was an Imperial spy, a sleeper agent perhaps, or just someone indoctrinated at a young age. Because none of the Guard had been able to believe the simple possibility that one lonely teenager might want to befriend another. Cor had been confident enough in Prompto's background check and official record to shoot down that idea, but Ignis couldn’t deny that he had begun to wonder again after noticing the same style of barcode on Imperial shipping crates.

“But,” Kate said. “The theory goes that he may have been involved, unintentionally or against his will, in hurting you.”

Ignis shook his head. “That can't be right. MTs aren't human, they're magitek. That's the whole point.”

“Right,” Kate said. “But what powers them?”

He thought back to the conversation with Aranea Highwind in Steyliff Grove. “Daemonic energy. The Imperials harvest daemons for their energy, Aranea said.”

“And where do daemons come from?”

Ignis suddenly, desperately wished he could see Kate's face. Her tone suggested there was a connection here, one he was missing, but… “I don't know,” he said. “No one knows where daemons come from. There's been speculation, of course, but studying them has always been incredibly dangerous, and there's very little credible research.”
“They come from the Starscourge,” Kate said. She'd fallen into that flat, clinical voice she’d used before to deliver bad news.

“But…” Ignis said. “Starscourge is the wasting disease which requires the Oracle's magic to—”

The realization hit him like a behemoth's claws. *Prompto was supposed to be an MT.* “No,” Ignis breathed, horror twisting his gut. “That's not—that can't be—”

“Daemons are humans who’ve succumbed to Starscourge,” Kate said quietly. “Niflheim needed more daemons than they could capture in order to power their MTs. So their chief scientist started cloning himself and turning those clones into daemons to harvest for energy. Prompto is one of those clones, stolen from the Imperial lab as a baby.”

Ignis shook his head. His hands had locked into fists at some point but he couldn't unclench them. “That's impossible,” he said. “Is he— does he know?”

“No really,” Kate said. “Not about the MT part, or daemons. He does seem to know that he's from Niflheim originally, and that the barcode is connected to that. But it's not very clear.”

Ignis nodded slowly. Made himself think, process this new information. He wanted it to be a lie, wanted Kate to be wrong, wanted that damned game to be something - *anything* - else so he could convince himself that it wasn't right. But the game had been painfully accurate so far, and he couldn't reasonably refute the likelihood that the rest of it was equally correct. So he considered it, both Prompto’s origins and those of daemons. Kate's theory about what had happened in Altissia. His own, frustratingly blank, memories.

Finally he said, “I don't believe Prompto was involved with what happened to me. While my memory is unreliable, I feel as though I would remember *something* had he been involved.”

“Fair enough,” Kate said. “And I suppose either way, Prompto has no abilities related to kicking people out of their own reality.” She paused. “The Ring of the Lucii does, come to think of it - that's what its Alterna spell does - but while Luna has the ring in Altissia, Noct doesn't start wearing or using it until weeks later in Gralea.”

Ignis filed that little tidbit about Noct and the ring away for later. Kate said quite a lot when she wasn't paying attention, and the more clues Ignis could gather about what was in store for his prince, the better. He said, “I must say it's quite strange to hear you call the Crown Prince of Lucis and the Oracle by such familiar nicknames.”

“Sorry,” Kate said, a rueful smile in her voice. “I've spent like a hundred and fifty hours playing the game and listening to you call each other by nicknames. I’ve been trying to remember not to call you Iggy, but honestly in the fandom no one uses your full names. Even Prompto gets 'Prom', despite no one calling him that in-game.”

Ignis chuckled. “Oh, he’d hate that if he knew. He doesn't even allow Noct to call him that.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Ignis yawned, then added, “I’ve no idea why, but it's been so for as long as I've known him.”

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind if I ever meet him,” Kate said, sounding amused. “You look like you're about to pass out. Vicodin kicking in?”

“I'm fine,” Ignis protested around another yawn. The painkiller *was* kicking in, but he was no
closer to figuring out how to get home, and moreover Kate had given him a lot to think about with that dual bombshell she’d dropped on the origins of daemons and Prompto’s past. Not to mention all his questions about Ardyn Izunia, though he doubted Kate would answer those directly.

“No, you’re not fine,” Kate said. “You’re injured. Badly. You need to let yourself rest.”

“I’ve no time to nap,” Ignis said.

Kate sighed. “Look,” she said. “The game’s not going anywhere. Noct isn’t going anywhere. Even if he was, you wouldn’t be much help to him if you collapse from exhaustion. —And,” she added, overriding his attempt to protest, “you aren’t going to be able to figure out how to get home if you’re too tired to think straight. You’re still in the game after Altissia, so clearly you do get back. Give yourself some time to rest while you have the chance, and we’ll get you back there so you can be with Noct when he wakes up. Okay?”

Her point was made more by the fact that Ignis couldn’t come up with a good argument to that; his thoughts had slowed to exhausted grey sludge. He settled for, “I don’t want to rest,” and tried to ignore the childish sulk that crept into his voice.

“Tell you what,” Kate said. “It’s just about dinner time and I’m hungry. You sleep, and I’ll get something started and wake you up when it's ready.”

He wanted to protest more, to insist on staying awake and helping with dinner and talking more about daemons, but found himself nodding instead. The fading of the pain in his eyes, in his body, was nearly a soporific in its own right, and combined with the drug-induced drowsiness was enough to pull him under. He felt Kate draw a blanket over him, and was asleep before her footsteps pattered away to the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Given how quickly the fandom adopted "Prom" as a nickname, I figure there has to be a reason why nobody calls him that in-game.
Thanks to the encouraging words of a couple of readers (you are wonderful - thank you! <3) I'm going to try to keep going with this fic, despite my post-Ep:I doubts. Please let me know if you're still interested - reader feedback is hugely helpful in making sure I'm staying on track and writing a fic worth reading!

Ignis and Kate spent dinner, and the remainder of the evening, theorizing about the events in Altissia, but came up with nothing of use. Kate did talk a little about the powers of the Ring of the Lucii, at least as they functioned within the game, which Ignis found fascinating - details of the Ring's abilities were a closely-held secret of the ruling line. She speculated that its Alterna spell might have somehow been involved with Ignis's transplantation, but neither of them could think of a reason for the Ring to have been used so. Nor, for that matter, who could have used it.

“The Ring is to be wielded by the Lucii only,” Ignis said. “I heard rumors of Kingsglaive men who tried to use it during Insomnia's fall, only to die when the Crystal deemed them unworthy. I also seem to remember hearing that the Ring was involved in the loss of Ravus Nox Fleuret’s arm, though I don't recall where I heard that. It seems absurd, even for a rumor.”

“Um,” Kate said.

She had that uneasy tone she’d used earlier when speaking of Prompto, and Ignis said carefully, “You know the truth of it?”

“Um…” Kate said again, then, “Yeah... I don’t think it’s anything you shouldn’t know. There’s a movie prequel to the game called Kingsglaive, which covers Insomnia’s fall and Luna’s escape from the city. Ravus thought he could be the True King instead of Noct, and tried to wear the Ring himself. It burned off his arm. Luna tricked one of the traitor Glaives into putting it on later, and it killed him outright. And Nyx Ulric yelled at the Lucii until they let him use the Ring’s power to summon the Old Wall and defeat Glauc, but the Ring killed him when he'd finished.”

Ignis took a deep breath, swallowing back all the questions at the tip of his tongue. It was incredibly disconcerting, how Kate spoke of these events in the same way Noctis or Prompto might talk about the plot of a comic they'd read or a game they’d played. But then, that was exactly what it was to her: a story, a fiction, not real people who’d suffered and died.

Kate said, “We could watch it, if you want?”

“I…” Ignis said, and hesitated. Part of him wanted to do it: wanted to know the truth of the fall of Insomnia, what had happened to Ravus Nox Fleuret, anything that might help him understand the Empire's plans and motivations. But another part of him balked at the idea of witnessing King Regis’s death, or that of Clarus Amicitia - the thought of returning to Noctis and Gladio with that knowledge ached in ways Ignis couldn't articulate. Still, turning down such information… “Perhaps later,” he said finally.

Kate, thank all the gods, only said, “Okay.”
There was one question Ignis wanted an answer to. “You said Ravus wanted to be the True King?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” Ignis demanded. “He’s of the blood of the Oracle. He of all people should know that only the Lucii can wear the Ring, and that it was the Crystal which chose Noctis. Why on Eos would Ravus believe he could override the Crystal to become the True King?”

A rustle of fabric as Kate shrugged. “Honestly? Because Ravus can't make a smart decision to save his life. Literally. He tries so hard to be a good terrifying brooding villain, but the more you see him, the more you just kind of want to pity him.”

Ignis raised his eyebrows, then winced as pain flared through his wounds. “You make the Imperial commander sound like a moody teenager.”

“I mean,” Kate said, and he heard the smile in her voice, “that's not exactly wrong.”

He couldn't help a snort. He only knew Ravus from those few things Noctis had passed along from his correspondence with Lunafreya, and what the news had said. Neither of those had given Ignis cause to believe Ravus was anything but competent and ruthless, but clearly Kate had a very different impression. “Regardless,” Ignis said, “I think I shall continue to err on the side of considering him a dangerous enemy.”

“Fair enough,” Kate said. “Anyway, I doubt the Ring was involved with getting you here. If the Lucii didn't even want to let Nyx borrow the Ring's power to save the city, I can't imagine they'd let anyone else use it.”

“Indeed,” Ignis agreed. “But if not that, then what?”

They couldn't come up with an answer, and eventually gave up and called it a night. Kate had to work again the next morning, so Ignis spent the day alternating between trying to follow her orders to rest and prowling about the house in restless frustration. Though prowling was perhaps not the appropriate word; Ignis was painfully aware of every stumble and bump and flailing panicked step. Still, by the time Kate returned, apologizing for being so late (“someone showed up in acute cardiac distress right as I was about to leave the floor”), Ignis had mapped out much of the house. They spent the evening speculating again, and again came up empty-handed. Kate had, on her way to work, swung past the alley where some anonymous stranger had found Ignis. “But it was just an alley,” she said, sounding disappointed. “No portals to other worlds, just trash bins and loading docks.”

The next day passed much the same: Ignis slowly teaching himself to maneuver without his eyes and sleeping when the pain grew unbearable. He hated it, hated that he was trapped here doing nothing while his friends, his prince, needed him. Even the thought that his situation would be little different, were he still in Altissia, was no comfort. Laid up by his wounds he would be, but at least he’d be laid up at Noct’s side instead of in this bizarre alternate reality.

When Kate returned that night, she burst in the door with an excitement Ignis didn't need sight to recognize. “Ignis - get this!” she said breathlessly. He heard her shoes clatter against the tile of the entryway as she kicked them off, the jangle of keys as she tossed them aside. “I was trawling the fan forums on the ride home, trying to see if I was forgetting something about Altissia, and there's something really weird going on.”

“How so?” Ignis asked. He’d been dozing on the couch, trying to convince himself to get up and
make another round of the lower floors despite the ache in his ribs. Now he sat up, head tilted toward her as she dropped onto the couch beside him.

“People are reporting that the game has started crashing after Chapter Nine - the Altissia chapter. It just won’t load anything past that. Only for new games, though. Ones started on accounts that didn't have any save files before about three days ago and were getting to the end of Chapter Nine for the first time. But more than that - for the games that are crashing, the scene where Noct wakes up after the Leviathan fight is different now.”

“Different from what?”

“Remember I said that after he says goodbye to Luna in that dream thing, he wakes up and talks to you and finds out you're injured?” Kate said. Ignis nodded and she continued, “Apparently that's changed. It's Gladio there, and—Hang on, someone uploaded a video.”

A pause while she pulled up the video, which Ignis used to consider the implications of her words. He and Kate had both assumed the game was static - that when Ignis returned to his own reality, he would return to the same time and place from which he’d left it. But if the game was changing… then time in his reality was moving forward without Ignis. Which meant that his friends must have searched for him, must have realized by now that he was missing. If they didn’t assume he was in a makeshift hospital somewhere, they probably thought he’d been captured by the Empire. And if that was true, then not even Gladio would be able to stop Noct from charging headlong into Imperial territory after him. Ignis needed to get back there now, before Noct did anything stupid.

His worries were interrupted by the static click of the TV turning on, then a familiar groan: Noctis.

“He’s waking up, looking around,” Kate narrated quietly. “Gladio’s in a chair at the foot of the bed, where you were before.”

Gladio's voice interrupted her: “Hey. You awake?”

Noct grunted something that might have been an affirmative; from the sound of it he was still quite bleary. Gladio didn't hide his sigh of relief, but just said, “Good. I’ll let Prompto know.”

Noct’s voice, rough at the edges: “Is Luna—?”

“Gone,” Gladio said. “I’m sorry.” Blunt and insensitive as usual, but there was something else in his voice that Ignis didn't recognize, something odd and worrisome.

Noct made a soft sound, not quite a sob. Gladio added, “Umbra left that for you, but there was nothing else. The tidal waves carried a lot out to the sea.”

“He means the notebook Noct and Luna used,” Kate said, still quiet like she didn't want to interrupt. “It’s next to Noct on the bed.”

From the TV, the scrape of a chair on a hard floor, probably Gladio standing to leave. Noctis said suddenly, “Where's Ignis?”

“Noct...” Gladio said. Then stopped, silence hanging heavy in the air.

In a tone of dawning horror, Noct yelled, “Where's Ignis?!”

A long pause, long enough for Ignis to realize his mistake. He hadn't remembered tidal waves, hadn't thought his friends would believe he was anything other than missing, captured.
Gladio said, in as empty a voice as Ignis had ever heard from him, “The tidal waves carried a lot out to sea.”

Footsteps. A door closing, with more force than necessary. Noct's shaky breaths, strangled at the end as if he was choking. Ignis was on his feet, reaching toward the sound, every part of him aching to be at Noct's side, barely aware of Kate's hand on his arm.

On the television, inside the game, a world away, Noctis screamed his grief.

A click, then silence. Kate tugged on Ignis's arm until he sat back down on the couch. “We’ll get you back to them,” she promised. “He’ll be okay until then.”

Ignis choked out a bitter laugh. “He believes me dead. He lost his father, his country, his fiance, and now…” Shook his head, dug his fingers into the edge of the couch to keep from trying to dive through the television. “He’s most certainly not ‘okay’.”

Kate didn't answer. Ignis took a deep breath, then another, until he was able to let go of the couch. *Focus on the problem at hand,* he told himself. *Start there. Deal with the rest as you reach it.*

“So,” he said. Ruthlessly shoving down the worry for Noct, forcing his voice to be steady. “The game is changing due to my absence. What do you think that means?”

“Other than raising really weird philosophical questions about how this whole thing works, I have no idea.” She paused, then added, “Square Enix is probably freaking out, though. It's gotta be bizarre, having your game suddenly do things you didn't tell it to do.”

“Pardon - who?”

“Square Enix,” she repeated. “The developers, the ones who made the game. They haven't released a statement or anything yet about the crashing or the new scene. None of the voice actors have said anything either - and some of them are pretty chatty on social media - so they're probably deliberately keeping a lid on it.”

Ignis frowned. Somehow it hadn't occurred to him that the game would have developers - it was strange enough to think of a video game narrating his life. That there were ordinary humans somewhere who has ostensibly created the whole thing, boggled the mind. But it did present an interesting new possibility.

“Could they be persuaded to help us?” Ignis asked. “These developers? If it's their game, then perhaps they know what happened to me and how I can return.”

“Maybe,” Kate said thoughtfully. “Getting in touch with them will be tricky, though. They're a big company; I can't just… call them up and say hey, I found Ignis Scientia in real life and that's why your game is acting up.”

“You’d have to be much more circumspect,” Ignis agreed.

“But *circumspect* may not get us their attention,” Kate said. “Square Enix is one of the most famous game companies in the world - people try to get their attention all the time just to fanboy at them or complain about things.”

“And if we turned up on their doorstep?” Ignis suggested. “It would be considerably harder for them to turn away evidence they’ve seen for themselves.”

“Well, their doorstep is in Japan,” Kate said dryly, “so probably not. —Across the ocean,” she added in response to his questioning look. “And you’d need a passport to get across the border,
which we can't get you because you aren't supposed to exist in this world. I could go, but without you there to back up my crazy story, they'd laugh me out of the building.”

“Nevertheless,” Ignis said, “contacting them appears to be our best lead.”

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “Let me see if I can track down their contact info. See if we can at least figure out where to start.”

Ignis’s fingers itched to help, but even if he’d still had his phone and it somehow worked in this strange world, there was nothing he could do without his eyes. He hated this more than words could express, hated his utter uselessness, his inability to participate in his own rescue. He gritted his teeth and waited; summoned one of his knives to toy with, as much to reassure himself that Noctis was still fine as to give himself something to do with his hands.

Eventually, the couch shifted as Kate sat back, and she sighed. “Well, I filled out three different contact forms and made a post on the user forum fishing for names I can look up on Facebook or Twitter,” she said. “We'll have to wait a bit to see if we get any responses.”

“Easier said than done,” Ignis admitted ruefully.

Her hand settled on his, squeezed his fingers. “We'll get you back to them,” she said.

He squeezed back, more grateful for the touch than he’d expected. The feel of her hand on his was a reminder that she was a real person, not just a disembodied voice. That he wasn't lost alone in the dark, that there was still a world out there even if he couldn't see it.

It hadn't even been a week. Stars - how could he possibly live the rest of his life like this?

The stars don't care, he reminded himself harshly. Remembering the conversation between Lunafreya and Leviathan, the Tide Mother's utter contempt for humanity. Bahamut’s absence, Ifrit’s long-ago betrayal. Shiva was dead, a divine casualty of the Niflheim Empire's thirst for conquest. Even Titan and Ramuh, who had nominally agreed to help Noctis, only appeared at their own will. No, the gods didn't care, which meant Ignis was on his own.

Kate’s fingers tightened around his, as if she’d sensed his thoughts. Not on my own, he thought. He had Kate here, and as soon as he got back to his own reality, he had his prince and his friends. If he tried hard enough, he could almost believe that would be enough.

*   *   *

Two days later, Kate’s various posts had received no useful responses. It was Saturday, so she was home, and had threatened to send Ignis outside to pace around her tiny lawn if he didn't stop hounding her for updates. Still, she sounded as frustrated as he felt when she read out the third generic form letter: Thank you for your message! A support agent will be in touch soon.

“I don’t think using their public contact forms is the way to go,” she said. Ignis heard a gentle clatter on the coffee table; she'd tossed her phone down in annoyance.

“If not the public forms, and if we’ve no way to privately reach them, then how?” Ignis asked. “Do they truly have no local presence at all?”

“They have an office in El Segundo, about seven hours south of here,” Kate said. “But if the job postings are anything to go by, it's just marketing and community management. No developers. And—”
She stopped abruptly. Ignis said, “And…?”

“I was going to say,” she said slowly, “that the devs don't have any reason to come over here anyway, but that's not true. Sometimes the developers and directors attend big fan cons or industry conventions. Especially this year - it's Final Fantasy's thirtieth anniversary, so they've been doing more than usual.” A flurry of faint movements as she scooped up her phone and began searching once more. Then, “Yahtzee,” she breathed. “The Fifteen dev team has a panel at LAXpo - a video game con and expo in Los Angeles next month.”

“Can we get there?” Ignis demanded. Leaning forward, wishing yet again that he could just see, that he didn't have to wait for her to read out the relevant information.

“Yeah, LA is near El Segundo actually. Drivable,” Kate said. “And… yeah, looks like you can still get passes.” She paused. “It's not until next month, though. Almost four weeks. Can you…”

“Can I wait that long?” Ignis finished for her, and sighed. “If there's no other choice, then yes. Obviously I would prefer to find a solution sooner, but at the very least we’ll have this as a backup in the event we are unable to do so.”

“Okay,” Kate agreed. “I'm going to reserve passes now just in case - if we get you home sooner I can always sell them online - but let's plan for that.”

“Agreed,” Ignis said. “In the meantime, we’ll continue reaching out via more conventional methods, as well as pursuing any other possibilities we come up with.”

It wasn't the best plan, and Ignis hated the thought of being trapped here for another month, but it was a plan. The people who'd developed this game would have to be able to help him. One more month at most, and he would be back at Noct's side where he belonged.

And if he was very lucky, his eyes would have healed enough by then that he wouldn't be more hinderance than help.
Grief

Chapter Notes

Someday I'll quit picking on Ignis, but today is not that day.

Also, as always: IANA doctor; please do not assume anything in this chapter is correct medical terminology or practice.

Time passed. Kate worked most days, often late - such was the life of an emergency physician - and Ignis stayed at the house and tried to relearn independence. It was by far the most miserably frustrating and difficult thing he'd ever done, and it was cold comfort that no one was around to witness his stumbling and groping and fumbling.

Still, the thought of not trying was unimaginable. Kate had let slip that after Noctis recovered from the events in Altissia, he would head for the abandoned mine in Cartanica and the Royal Tomb supposedly hidden there. If Ignis wanted to help them in that Stars-forsaken and most likely daemon-infested place, he needed to be able to not only walk without tripping, but to fight as well.

But walking, even with the aid of the hated cane, was difficult enough. Memory and practice allowed him to navigate the main areas of Kate's house reasonably well, but beyond that, he was all but helpless. His first attempt to venture into Kate's tiny backyard ended with scraped palms, bruised knees, and a sore ankle only a few steps in. Future ventures were no more effective: the uneven ground was more than a match for his tentative, off-balance steps, and the cane told him nothing of small but dangerous potholes.

He was never going to survive Cartanica, much less the dangers of Gralea beyond.

Kate found him there one evening some two weeks after he'd awakened in the hospital, sitting dejected on the grass where he'd fallen yet again. He'd flung his cane away in a fit of furious, desperate pique, heard it clatter against something only a few feet away but couldn't muster the will to crawl around searching for it. His wrists ached from taking the fall badly, his eyes throbbed, and he was so very, very tired.

“Hey,” Kate said quietly.

Ignis didn't answer. She seemed unreal, a disembodied voice floating in the dark, no respite from the sightless prison that trapped him.

He heard the rustle of grass and fabric as she moved, off to the side where he'd thrown the cane. Felt the shift in the air, the warmth of her body, as she crouched in front of him. “Ignis,” she said.

Worry in her voice, but he couldn't even look her in the eye to reassure her. He turned his head away instead. Managed to unclench his jaw enough to say, in a carefully level voice, “I need you to take this bandage off.” A gesture, tight and frustrated, toward his still-covered left eye.

Kate inhaled slowly. “Why?”

“Because I can't see anything with it on,” he answered, “and I need to be able to see.”
The bandages on the smaller wounds on his lip and nose had fallen off as Kate had said, and the one over the cut down his eyebrow didn't interfere with his sightless right eye. The bandage that still covered his left eye, though… That hadn't come off since he'd awakened in the hospital. That eye hadn't been tested yet. It hurt more, and more often, than his right eye, but he could almost believe that it was only because it had more healing to do. Two weeks had passed since the injury. His eye had to have healed by now. It had to be ready.

“Ignis—” Kate said.

“Please,” he said. His voice broke and he swallowed. Whispered again, “please.”

Silence, and a rush of breath over his skin from a soundless sigh. Kate touched the back of his hand, and he allowed her to pull him to his feet. To his (pathetic, childish, why must he be so helpless!) relief she didn't try to give him the cane, just tucked his hand into her elbow and guided him inside. She sat him down on the couch, made him lean back against a pile of cushions so that he was more lying than sitting. Pulled off the dark sunglasses he'd taken to wearing, more for the comfort of the familiar weight than because they did him any good.

The old wooden floors creaked as Kate walked away; she came back a minute later to set something heavy and rattling on the coffee table. Latches clicked and instruments clanked softly as she set them out. A distinctive snap, the sharp scent of latex as she pulled on protective gloves.

In the same clinical tone she'd used back at the hospital, she said, “There was quite a bit of surface damage around your left eye. Let me know immediately if you feel any pulling or pain, understand?”

“I understand,” Ignis said. Somewhere behind the frustration and grief, he knew it wasn't a good sign that she hadn't argued with him, hadn't protested his demand.

The rest of him didn't care.

Kate's hands moved with a professional's care, peeling back the edges of the bandage. It hurt, badly, the fabric sticking to his damaged flesh with dried blood and other fluids. Ignis breathed slowly, steadily, focusing on keeping his expression and body language neutral. If Kate thought he was in pain, she wouldn't let him do this.

But Kate hadn't got her medical license by collecting bottle caps. She stopped, her fingers settling under his jaw to check his pulse. “Ignis,” she scolded.

“I'm fine,” he said. His voice came out high, breathy, and internally he cursed.

“You are the furthest thing from fine,” she said brusquely. “Tell me what's going on.”

“Nothing,” he insisted.

“You're also a terrible liar,” Kate said. “Talk to me or we don't do this.”

Ignis swallowed. “It stings a bit.”

“I figured,” she said dryly. “Where?”

He gestured, fingers outlining the worst of the pain. Kate hmm'd to herself, and he felt her breath brush his jaw and ear as she leaned closer to look. He felt nothing but pain around his eye, and told himself it was only because the bandage wasn't off yet. That the pain was masking subtler sensations.
“Okay,” Kate said. “That’s expected, I’m afraid, but I’ll try to take it easier. Hold still, I’m going to use scissors to help get the bandage off and I don’t want to stab you.”

Ignis took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Tightened his fingers in the sides of the couch and held himself immobile. Kate kept talking, her voice doctor-casual. “It’s probably for the best that we’re doing this now, if it’s sticking this badly. You’re still going to have to be very careful with it, though. The skin around your eye—” here she picked up his hand and traced his index finger just above the surface of his skin, sketching an area that radiated from his eye out to his temple and halfway down his cheek— “was basically flayed off.”

“Can you tell what happened?” Ignis asked. “What caused it?”

“No,” Kate admitted. “Honestly, it’s not like anything I’ve ever seen before.”

“Can you take an educated guess?”

She made a thoughtful noise. “High-pressure water damage is most likely, given what happened in Altissia, but the wound pattern isn’t quite right. Same for a burn, which would be my next guess. You still haven’t remembered anything?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid,” he said. Fighting to keep his voice steady, his mind ruthlessly conjuring images of charred flesh, flayed skin, and hideous scars. “Will it scar?”

Kate hesitated, hands stilling their motion over his cheekbone. “Probably, yes.”

“Is that a doctor’s opinion, or something the game told you?”

She snorted. “Bit of both. The game doesn’t handle scarring at all accurately, so I wouldn’t take it as gospel, but in game, you do end up with a pretty epic scar. In real life - by which I mean, not the game’s limited character models - it should fade with time.”

Ignis gritted his teeth. A scar would be a disadvantage. Unlike Gladio, who as the King’s Shield was expected to fight hard and often, Ignis needed to appear refined, elegant, trustworthy. Not like a ruffian who brawled in the streets.

Still, there was no help for it now. Getting the bandage off and ensuring the proper functionality of his left eye was his priority.

More careful tugging around his eye as Kate worked the last of the bandage loose. The pain hadn’t faded, but Ignis had grown used to it by now, and he allowed himself to sink down against the cushions as Kate moved away. Soft clinks and rustles told him she was putting away her instruments, disposing of the removed bandage.

“All right,” she said when she’d finished. “I’m going to clean it now. When I’m done, do you want to try to open your eye?”

Ignis nodded. It will work, he told himself. It will be fine. In a moment, you’ll be able to see again.

“Okay,” Kate agreed. More rustling. Her fingers gripped his jaw, gentle but firm, holding his head still. He couldn't feel what she was doing except as a slight intensification of the pain, and occasionally a distant pressure. It didn't take long, to his relief, and Kate stepped back again, bustling over her supplies.

Finally she said, “Okay. Ready to try opening that eye?”
“Very,” Ignis said. *It will work,* he repeated to himself, a mantra beating back the churning fear. *In a moment, you’ll be able to see again.*

It wasn’t until Kate prompted gently, “Go ahead,” that Ignis realized he was stalling while he tried to psych himself up. He took a deep breath, let it out again. Opened his eyes.

Pain flattened him, but worse than the pain was the lack of sight, the lack of anything other than unending darkness. “*No,*” he gasped, and reached up, scrabbling at his eye, trying to pull at his eyelid with his fingers. Agony stabbed through his skull like a daemon’s claws and he only barely registered Kate grabbing his wrists, forcing his hands down. “*No!*” he screamed.

If he hadn't been weakened by his wounds, if he hadn't been lying flat with no leverage, he might have been able to throw her off. As it was, she pinned him down, kept him from trying again to pull his eye open, to force himself to *see.* “Ignis,” she said. “Ignis, *stop.* You're only hurting yourself. *Ignis.*”

He sagged, the wild madness leaving him as abruptly as it had come. Laid there, silent tears sliding down his temples into his hair. Kate let go of his wrists, rested a hand on his forehead instead and stroked his hair, gentle. “You already knew what was going to happen,” she said quietly.

“I suppose I did,” he admitted. The words tasted foul in his mouth. “But I had to. I had to know. *I can’t.*** I can't be blind. I can’t.***”

Her hand on his hair didn’t falter. “I’m sorry, Ignis. I wish I could tell you otherwise.”

“What use does a king have for a chamberlain who can't see?” Ignis said. His voice cracked; he couldn't bring himself to care.

“The same he’d have for one who can, I imagine,” Kate said. “You haven't suddenly become useless. You have a handicap, and once you’ve adjusted to it, there's no reason you can't continue to work for Noctis.”

“I can't read,” Ignis said. “I can't use a phone. I can't do any of the bookkeeping my position requires. I can't even *walk* on my own.”

“Yet,” she said. “You're learning to get around. Phones have accessibility features. And there's got to be something like Braille in Lucis. Raised writing for the blind.”

“There is,” Ignis admitted, “but it's not well known, and little used.”

“Then there are probably a lot of blind Lucians who’ll appreciate a king’s chamberlain who will make sure it's used more,” Kate said. “You’re one of the smartest people in Lucis, Ignis. Are you honestly trying to tell me you can't figure this out?”

Ignis laughed, harsh and bitter. “That damned game has given you quite the high opinion of me.”

“I’ve also been watching you for the last two weeks,” Kate pointed out. “Yes, the game shows how competent you are - *including* after Altissia,” she added when he opened his mouth to interrupt. “You save the guys in Cartanica and you’re a key player in Gralea. But it took you all of a day to make yourself lunch here for the first time. And you barely need the cane around the house.” Her hand moved from his forehead to his shoulder, squeezed gently. “It's only been two weeks. Give yourself time.”

Ignis shuddered. He wanted to protest that he didn't *have* time, that Noctis needed him - needed him whole and functional - *now.* But they hadn't come up with another plan to get him back to his
reality. He was stuck here until the convention, until they talked to the game developers. Short of a miracle, Ignis had at least three more weeks to adjust whether he liked it or not.

When he didn’t say anything, Kate smoothed his hair back one more time. “I’m going to clean this up,” she said. “You rest a bit, then we can make dinner. Okay?”

Ignis nodded. Dashed a hand over his right eye to brush away the tears and was surprised to find that his eye had fallen closed again. One last tiny speck of hope flickered, and he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Did it open at all? My left eye. Can it even open?”

“A little,” Kate said.

The speck of hope died a quiet death. His eye had opened, and nothing had changed. Ignis said, “Only a little?”

“Remember that part about your skin being flayed off?” Kate said, voice immensely dry. “I suspect you’ve got muscle and nerve damage in there that’s making it difficult to open. On top of that, your eye’s already starting to seal shut as it heals all that damage. I’m an EP, not an ophthalmologist, so I don’t know if that’s something you’d want to let it do. But if not, you’ll need to start cleaning it and working the muscles to keep it from fusing completely.”

The thought of being unable to open his eye at all - of losing any hope that in the future he might regain some tiny shred of vision, however small - made his stomach turn. “Whatever it takes,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll show you how to clean it later. For now, just take it easy. All right?”

He nodded again. Listened as she packed up the kit she’d used on him, and walked away to put it back. From the direction of her footsteps, the creak of a door opening, she kept it in a closet under the stairs.

_You figured that out just by listening_, he told himself. _You’ve three weeks to figure out the rest_. He could do it. Would do it, because Noct needed him.

Failure was not an option.
When Kate came home the next night, Ignis was in the living room, moving slowly through some of the Crownguard’s basic training exercises. Even if he’d had his sight, he couldn’t have done them at speed; his cracked ribs ached sharply with certain sudden movements, and the ankle he’d twisted trying to walk around the yard was still shaky. He didn’t stop moving as Kate kicked off her shoes, hung up her coat, and dropped her keys on the table beside the door, challenging himself to track her movements as well as his own.

He thought he was doing well enough until his fist, stretching out in a slow punch, cracked against something. “Damn,” he muttered. He groped around until he identified it as the bookshelf by the television, which meant he was turned about forty-five degrees off the line he thought he’d been on. Kate had stopped near the front door, probably watching him; he asked, “How long was I off-center?”

“Not very, I think,” she said. “Just those last couple of steps.”

He nodded. Moved back to the center of the room, which he’d identified by the throw rug in the middle of the floor. Started the set over again. Kate watched for a minute or two longer, then slipped away into the kitchen, her stockinged feet making a soft susurrus on the wooden floor. He heard the refrigerator door open and shut, heard the clink of glasses on the counter. From the edge of the rug under his feet, he was off-center again, and he turned farther on his next move, trying to correct his angle.

By the time Kate came back from the kitchen, he’d finished the set, several feet from where he was supposed to but at least facing in the right direction. She bumped his arm lightly with her knuckles, then when he lifted his hand, pressed a cool glass into it. “Water,” she said. “You look like you’ve been at it for a while.”

“Indeed,” Ignis admitted. “Walking outside might be beyond me for the moment, but I can at least do this. If I’m… if my eyes…” He paused, sucked in a breath around the ache in his chest. “I need to make sure I’m still fit to accompany Noctis.”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

He took a drink from the glass, the water cool against his throat. Made his way carefully to the corner where he’d pushed the coffee table and set the glass down, then went back to the center of the room and started the set again. The couch creaked as Kate sat down, another clink indicating that she’d set a drink of her own on the table. They were silent for a while, Ignis focused on his movements, Kate either watching him or fiddling on her phone.

He ran through three more sets, but the ache in his ribs was growing more and more unbearable, and his head had begun to pound in a way that made his eyes throb. So he finished the last set and dropped onto the couch, rubbing a hand across his forehead. He hadn’t been moving fast or hard
enough to get sweaty, but he was bone-tired nonetheless.

“Have you received any further response to your posts?” he asked Kate. It had been a week since she’d made them, so any useful response was unlikely, but he didn’t want to give up.

“Not really,” she said, sounding disappointed. “I got a couple names that I might be able to use at the convention, but I don’t think we’re going to get past their level-one support team via email. But,” she added, “I’ve been tracking the fan forums. There’s a ton of speculation going on about that new scene with Gladio and Noct. And Square Enix finally released a statement today about it.”

Ignis sat up straighter. “Oh?”

“It’s not that exciting,” she said dryly. Her thumb tapped the glass of her phone screen. “Here: ‘We are investigating reports that a small number of users’ games are behaving erratically. We are committed to providing the best experience for our fans and will resolve this matter as swiftly as possible. Players who are experiencing oddities or crashes in their games are encouraged to contact Square Enix customer support.’”

“That’s… generic,” Ignis said.

Kate chuckled. “No kidding. I mean, in fairness, they can’t exactly say ‘we aren’t responsible for this and we have no idea how it’s happening’, so generic’s probably the best they can do. But it’s definitely not doing them any favors in the fan forums.”

“You’ve mentioned these ‘fan forums’ before,” Ignis said. “What exactly are they?”

“Uh,” Kate said. “They’re places where fans of the game go to talk about it?” Her voice had that tone she got when she realized she was close to saying something she shouldn’t, and Ignis tilted his head pointedly.

When she didn’t continue, he prompted, “Talk about what?”

“Just… the game, the story, the characters…” Kate trailed off, sounding flustered, then rallied. “Um. They trade strategies for beating bosses, getting through the Menace dungeons and Pithoss. Talk about news, upcoming patches, DLC. Show off Prompto’s photos and in-game screenshots. Stuff like that.”

“And what are they saying about the changes?” Ignis prodded. He’d listened to Noctis and Prompto talk about King’s Knight enough to know that devoted fans of a game often noticed the smallest details. If Ignis and Kate couldn’t solve the mystery of how he’d gotten here on their own, perhaps they could tap into the collective investigatory skills of the game’s fans.

“Uh…” Kate said, but this time it was a thoughtful sound. “Honestly most of it is Ignis fans pitching an absolute shit-fit about you apparently being dead.”

Ignis paused, startled. “I have fans?”

“Yeah,” she said. “All four of you do. It’s not quite as bad as the Sam-girls and Dean-girls of Supernatural fandom, but most fans have a favorite chocobro.”

It took him a second to parse “chocobro”, and the moment he did he wished he hadn’t. “Er…”

“You asked,” Kate said, her tone very dry. “You get to deal with the fan slang.”

“Right.” He shook his head, resolutely not asking how that had come to be the collective term for
the Chosen King of Lucis and his Crownsguard, and changed the subject. “So… people are upset
that I’m dead? I suppose I ought to be flattered.”

Kate snorted. “If you want. There’s other speculation, too, but so far it’s all speculation.”

“Such as?”

“Well, some people have pointed out that in the new scene, Noctis doesn’t have the Ring of the
Lucii,” Kate said. “There was a quick little shot in the original version of him holding it in his
hand, and that’s not in the new one. But it might just be because it’s in a pocket or Gladio has it or
something.”

“But it might not,” Ignis said quietly. The thought was chilling. Noctis needed the Ring to control
the Crystal, to fulfill his destiny as the Chosen King; without it, their already-slim chances of
defeating the Niflheim Empire were all but nonexistent.

“It might not,” Kate echoed. “So there’s a lot of speculation about that. They’re latching onto
Gladio’s line about things being washed out to sea, saying maybe the Ring’s in the ocean. Or
maybe Ardyn took it.”

Ignis shook his head. “In the version you showed me, Chancellor Izunia instructed Lunafreya to
give the Ring to Noctis. I doubt he’d take it after all that.”

“Same,” Kate said. “And it doesn’t make sense that it was washed out to sea, unless that’s where
Lunafreya’s body went and she took the Ring with her. But her body vanished in the original
version, too, and she managed to give the Ring to Noct, so I doubt it.”

“It’s likely Gladio has it,” Ignis said, making his voice firm. The Ring couldn’t be lost - it was far
too important. “The simplest explanation is usually the most likely. If Noctis was unconscious for
that long, I can quite easily imagine Gladio holding onto it until he woke, to ensure it was safe.”

“Yeah,” Kate said, though she didn’t sound entirely convinced. “There’s a few people wondering if
the changes are somehow tied into Episode: Ignis, since the devs have been saying that that’s
going to have the biggest impact on the plot, but even in the forums most people think that doesn’t
make a whole lot of sense.”

“The developers wouldn’t have put out a statement acknowledging the aberrations if this was
intentional,” Ignis agreed.

“And neither of the other episodes had any direct post-facto effect on the main game,” Kate said,
“other than the bonus outfit, which is just cosmetic.”

“What other speculation is there?” Ignis asked. “Aside from the Ring.”

“Nothing much.” She blew out an annoyed sigh. “I mean, they're trying to figure out how the rest
of the game is going to go without you there, but that's kind of a butterfly problem.”

“B"
Ignis turned his head toward her, the closest he could get to a narrow-eyed glare until his eyes healed more. Waited, and when Kate didn't say anything, prompted, “Such as?”

“I told you, I don't want to break anything by telling you something you shouldn't know,” Kate said irritably.

“Things are already broken,” Ignis shot back. “My absence has changed this damn game once already, and it will almost certainly continue to change the longer I’m gone. What more damage could you possibly do?”

She sighed. “Look. You being gone is the butterfly wing flap causing a tornado, okay? If I tell you everything that happens next, it might cause an apocalypse that destroys the world. And I’m not being metaphorical,” she added when he opened his mouth to interject. “I don’t want to risk it. I thought your world was completely fictional until a couple weeks ago. Now that I know it isn't, I don't want to be responsible for destroying it.”

Ignis ground his teeth in frustration. He couldn't deny that her point was a valid one, even as he vehemently disagreed with it on a personal level. Whatever she knew that she wasn't saying, it was clearly something she expected would drastically change how Ignis approached things if he found out. Off the top of his head, he could think of only a handful of things that would do that: something about the nature of their enemy, something about Noctis, or something about his destiny as the Chosen King.

He already knew everything there was to know about Noctis; reticent as the prince could be, he didn’t keep secrets from Ignis. The prophecy about the destiny of the Chosen King was vague, in the manner of prophecies, though Ignis wasn’t sure what could be added to it that would have such an effect. After all, restoring light to the world had to be a good thing. But Kate had already told him about the Empire’s dirty little Magitek secret, its use of daemonified children to power its army. Was there more to the Empire's machinations? Or more to the prophecy? And if so, what?

The silence stretched out as he thought, Kate either as frustrated with his insistence as he was with her stubbornness, or biting her tongue to keep from saying more. Ignis wanted to threaten to look up the information, to point out that he could always turn the game on himself and flail his way through it until he found what he wanted to know. But they both knew he couldn’t actually do either. Kate kept her phone with her, and even if Ignis could get his hands on it secretly, he’d have to figure out how to use it without his sight - then figure out where to look, what questions to ask, to get the information he sought. And attempting to bull his way through the game would get him nothing but frustrated, homesick, and even more appalled at its existence than he already was.

He dropped his head into his hands, his fingers sliding through his hair where it had fallen over his face. He needed a haircut, badly - almost two months had passed since his last one a few days before they’d left Insomnia - but he was unlikely to be able to get a haircut here, or at least, not the correct one. He’d always had his hair cut by one of the Citadel’s best barbers, an ancient man who’d cut the royal family’s hair until Noct’s insistence on his current shaggy style led him to seek a more “hip” barber in the city proper. Now…

Now the thought of having to get his hair cut while blind and trapped in a foreign world was suddenly one thing too many, and Ignis swallowed against a scream rising in his throat. Gritted his teeth and took a deep breath, then another, and another, until he could choke back the scream. Focus on the problem at hand, he reminded himself. Focus on the things you can solve, rather than on what you can’t.

A haircut could wait until he could reliably walk around outside, or better yet, until after he’d returned to his own world, and they’d recovered the Crystal and restored Noctis to his rightful
place on the throne of Lucis. Ignis couldn’t learn the game’s secrets on his own, nor could he force Kate to tell him. He certainly didn’t intend to drop the subject entirely, but he’d have to come at it from a different, more subtle angle if he was to get anywhere. What he could do was continue to practice walking on his own, continue to run the Crownguard training exercises until he stood a chance of being more help than liability in battle. It wasn’t much, but it was all he had.

Out loud, keeping his voice carefully even, he said, “Fine. If you’ll not tell me, then perhaps you could assist me with something else. Eventually I’ll need to be able to navigate more complicated places than your home.”

“True,” Kate said. “What did you have in mind?”

Ignis gestured around the room. “I need a space in which to practice, one which I have not yet mostly memorized. Your backyard is, as I mentioned, beyond me for the moment, but perhaps we can set something up in here?”

“We can do that,” Kate said. She sounded almost excited, either out of interest in the project or simply glad he was no longer pressuring her for information. “Yeah,” she continued thoughtfully. “What do you think about me just… rearranging everything? The furniture and stuff?”

“That could work,” Ignis said. “Though, will it disrupt things for you?”

“Eh,” Kate said, and he heard her shrug. “I haven’t really rearranged anything in here since I got the house from my grandmother. It’ll be fun to change things up a bit.”

“Excellent,” Ignis said.

“Great,” she agreed. “I’ll start moving things around after you head upstairs for the night, then you’ll have all day tomorrow to work on it.”

He nodded. It meant more banged shins and stubbed toes, but the added independence would be worth it. He had to be sure he was ready to accompany Noctis into whatever terrible future Kate didn’t want to tell him about.

For that, he could endure such frustrations.
Fandom

Chapter Notes

This chapter is basically self-indulgence of the "video game character in our reality" kind... XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days later, Kate said, “This is going to sound really facetious, but I’m serious. Do you want to go in costume? To the con?”

Ignis frowned at her. She had the day off, and they were eating lunch at a little outdoor cafe two blocks from her house. It was more an excuse for Ignis to practice walking outside with Kate there to help, than because the cafe was especially good, and Ignis had been distracted trying to keep his sandwich from falling apart. “Beg pardon?”

“So you know what cosplay is, right?” Kate asked. “Noct seemed to in the Assassin's Fest, but it’s not clear how canon that is, and—”

“I know what cosplay is,” Ignis interrupted, amused. “You're suggesting I wear a costume?”

“Well, here's the thing,” Kate said. “You are very recognizably Ignis Scientia. If you don’t wear a costume, people are going to assume you're cosplaying yourself. So do you want to wear a costume, or go as yourself and get stopped by every Final Fantasy fan there for a photo?”

“I see,” he said dryly. He gave up on the sandwich and folded his hands on the table. “If I were to wear a costume, what options might I have?”

“Depends. If you want to incorporate the cane, you could be Matt Murdock, the blind lawyer who moonlights as a costumed superhero. If you want to play up the scar on your eye, we could put together a Fire Lord Zuko outfit. If you want to get in on a fandom joke you could go as Light Yagami.”

None of those names meant anything to him. He asked, “Will you be wearing a costume?”

“Probably,” Kate said. “I have a Lulu from Ten that I wore to SDCC last year, and a Black Widow from the year before, or I might be able to finish up the Aloy outfit I started. Depends on what you want to wear.”

“I’m surprised you’ve no costume from my game,” Ignis teased. There was a pause, in which Kate did not answer. “You do have a costume from my game.”

“Well, yes,” Kate said, sounding flustered. “I went as Aranea to SDCC this year. But I figured it’d be weird if I dressed up as someone you know.”

“No more so than my life being a video game,” Ignis said. He resettled his sunglasses on the bridge of his nose. “Wear your Aranea costume, and I’ll go as myself. I’m loathe to impersonate someone with whom I’m not familiar.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “It’ll be nice to get some more use out of it, and with the face mask on it
won’t be as obvious that I’m not nearly as perfect an Aranea as you are an Ignis.”

He snorted. “I should hope I’m better at being myself than you are at being someone else.”

“That’s not— I mean, I don’t look like Aranea at all. I have a wig and all, but I can’t change the shape of my face.”

“That raises an interesting question,” Ignis said. “I’ve no idea what you look like. Only that you’re shorter than I. You look quite different from Aranea, then?”

“Oh,” Kate said. “I can tell you, I guess?” Ignis gestured for her to continue; she made a thoughtful noise, and her coffee cup clinked as she lifted it. Finally she said, “I’m five-five, about a hundred twenty-five pounds. I’m tanned right now from summer, but I get paler in the winter. My hair is... a really ordinary brown, and, um... my eyes are brown, too, and...” She trailed off with an awkward laugh. “This is harder than I thought.”

Carefully Ignis reached a hand toward her, where he thought her face would be. “May I?”

“Oh - sure.” Her chair scratched over the pavement and he felt the shift in the air as she moved closer. His fingers found her cheek, and he traced across her face carefully.

He’d never done something like this before, mapping a person by touch instead of sight. Kate’s skin was warm from the sun, and loose wisps of her hair brushed the back of his hand. His fingers found high cheekbones, an upturned nose, a sharp jawline. Traced along her temple into her hair, which he discovered was pulled back into a low ponytail with long bangs framing the sides of her face. Leaning close like this, he could smell the faintest trace of soap, though he’d noticed before that she didn’t wear perfumes or scents - most likely because of her profession. He couldn’t quite get a portrait in his mind, not the same way he so clearly saw Noct’s and Gladio’s and Prompto’s faces, but it was perhaps a rough sketch, and far more than he’d had before.

Ignis pulled his hand away and sat back in his seat. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

“Of course,” she answered. A moment of hesitation, then, in a lighter tone, she added, “So... no, I don’t look like Aranea. But her outfit’s a lot of fun to wear.”

Ignis couldn’t help a smile. “It’s quite distinctive.”

“I have a few friends who cosplay - we’re hoping to do a group Highwind thing next year if we can all make it to ComicCon,” Kate said. “I’d go as Aranea, and they’d do Ricard, Kain, and Cid.”

“Cid?” Ignis repeated, raising an eyebrow. The cut through it had healed enough that doing so no longer hurt. “As in, Cid Sophiar? What’s he to do with Aranea’s family?”

“Not him - Cid Highwind from Final Fantasy VII,” Kate said. “‘Highwind’ is kind of a thing in Final Fantasy. There’s almost always a person, place, or thing called Highwind in the games, and they’re all related to dragoons somehow. There’s also usually a character named Cid who’s a mechanic. They just happened to be the same person in Seven.”

That conjured up a mental image Ignis very much didn’t want: gruff, wizened old Cid Sophiar in Aranea’s strappy, skintight leather armor, gyrating through the air on Magitek-powered heels. He shook his head to banish the image, in time to hear Kate say, “Cindy’s actually supposed to be your game’s version of Cid-the-mechanic, in an attempt to break the dude-mechanic stereotype.”

Which in turn produced a mental image of Cindy in Aranea’s armor. Then again, considering what Cindy normally wore… Ignis firmly shut down that line of thought and asked, “So... there are
mechanics named Cid in these other games, but they’re different people?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “There’s no continuity between Final Fantasy games - each numbered title is its own world, its own story. There’s a common… mythos, I guess, for lack of a better phrase, and common elements like Cid and Highwind and chocobos and crystals, but even those tend to be pretty different from game to game.”

“That is stranger to me than you dressing up as the Imperial commodore,” Ignis admitted. “That parts of my reality - people I know - are not their own unique beings, but… what, references to a greater universe?”

Kate chuckled. “I bet.”

He reached for his sandwich again, piecing it back together so he could lift it, keeping his motions casual. As he worked, he said, “Are there many other references in the game?”

“Tons,” Kate said. “Why?”

“Call it morbid curiosity,” Ignis answered. “It’s immensely odd to hear, but fascinating as well.”

That wasn’t his only reason for asking. Kate obviously enjoyed the game greatly, and occasionally forgot she wasn't talking to a fellow fan when she got going - as she was now. If she wouldn’t tell him directly about what happened in the latter half of the game, Ignis would have to get her to inadvertently let slip something useful, anything that might give him a hint about what Noctis would soon face. But he had to do it subtly, carefully, so that she wouldn’t immediately clam up again.

“Okay,” Kate said, and made a thoughtful noise. “References. Um… The six gods are all common summons from the games - powerful beings you can call to your aid with magic. In past games, you - the player - control when they show up, though.”

“So other worlds have the same gods?” Ignis asked.

“They're not gods in the other games,” Kate corrected. “Heck, in a lot of them, Bahamut isn't even sentient - he’s just a big scary dragon. They're spirits, or magical beings of some sort, but not gods. And speaking of summons, the Lucii are a reference, too - they're Fifteen’s version of Knights of the Round.”

“The Lucii?” Ignis repeated, startled. “As in, Noctis’s ancestors?”

“Yep,” Kate said. “The Knights of the Round are a reference to Arthurian mythology, King Arthur's thirteen loyal knights. Noct gets thirteen Royal Arms over the course of the game - although one of them is Luna’s trident, which is kinda weird, but anyway - he gets thirteen, and at the end of the game—”

She cut herself off abruptly, silent for long enough that Ignis thought she wasn't going to continue, and he had to work to keep his expression neutral. But finally she said, “I guess it's obvious that he has to summon the past kings; that's the whole point of collecting the Royal Arms in the first place. So when he does, there's thirteen kings, and their attack animation is very clearly Knights of the Round.”

“So even the Lucii are a reference,” Ignis said. The mention of the Oracle’s trident was interesting, too, but not especially useful except inasmuch as it was helpful to know Noctis would have to look for it. Ignis set down his sandwich; he’d gotten a few more bites out of it at least and wanted to focus on Kate’s words. “What else is there?”
“Um… Let's see. Gilgamesh - the guy Gladio fought while you guys went to Steyliff?”

“I remember,” Ignis said. “Legend has it he was Shield to the first King of Lucis.”

“He’s a recurring boss fight in the series,” Kate said. “And speaking of Steyliff, Biggs and Wedge are also recurring characters. They're—”


“Biggs and Wedge,” she repeated. “Aranea’s men? You met them outside Steyliff?”

It took Ignis a moment, but finally he pulled up a memory of two men in modified Imperial uniforms, with whom Noctis had traded for supplies while they waited for night to fall. “Ah, yes,” he said. Then paused, as it occurred to him that everyone else Kate had claimed was a recurring character had played a much larger part in things than Aranea’s men. “I take it we’ve not seen the last of Aranea or her men, then?”

“Uh,” Kate said, and he heard a soft rustle that might have been a shrug. “I guess that’s not too hard to figure out. Yeah, you’ll see her again, and Biggs and Wedge, too. They’re a double reference - their names are from Star Wars, a super-popular movie series.”

“Are there any people in my world who are not references?” Ignis said, only partially feigning annoyance. “This is absurd.”

“I told you there were a lot,” Kate said. “Lunafreya was modeled after Yuna from Ten, but she also has a ton in common with Aerith from Seven, including being killed by the villain in a cutscene halfway through the game, and coming back at the end in spirit form to help defeat him. ...Sort of,” Kate added. “It's a lot less clear for Luna than Aerith.”

That was interesting. Ardyn Izunia had been the one to kill Lunafreya. Up until now, Ignis had thought of the chancellor as a particularly competent underling to Emperor Iedolas Aldercapt - dangerous, but not the person they had to overthrow to restore Noct to the throne. Choosing his words carefully, Ignis said, “Is Ardyn a reference to any other villain?”

“His outfit was inspired by Kefka, the main villain of Six,” Kate said. “And that wing thing he wears sometimes is a reference to Sephiroth, the villain of Seven.”

“Wing… thing?” Ignis repeated dubiously. “I don't recall the chancellor ever wearing wings.”

“He may not have worn it around you guys,” Kate said. “It's this big black wing-shaped leather thing he wears on his left arm sometimes. Sephiroth has a single black wing on his left shoulder. He’s also the one who killed Aerith like Ardyn killed Luna. Or kind of - technically it was a Jenova instance that looked like Sephiroth—”

Ignis tuned out her explanation of Jenova and Sephiroth clones to mull over the more important fact, which was that Ardyn was apparently their ultimate enemy. Not Aldercapt, not the Empire, but the mysterious man who’d claimed he was of no consequence. Not that Ignis had believed him for a moment, but this information added an entirely new layer of meaning to his dissemination - and to his actions in Altissia during the covenant.

It also added a number of questions, primary among them being, what did Ardyn want? He’d never seemed especially interested in power - as Chancellor of Niflheim, he had that in spades already. Nor in the Crystal or the Ring of the Lucii, as evidenced by him telling Lunafreya to pass the Ring to Noctis. No, Ardy’s focus had so far been on simultaneously tormenting Noctis, and pushing him further along on his quest to recover the Crystal and regain the throne. So what goal did Ardyn
pursue, that moving his own enemy forward was a viable strategy?

As much as Ignis wished he had an answer, however, he simply didn’t have enough information - not yet, anyway. He filed the questions away for later, and tuned back into Kate’s explanation in time to hear her say, “—he kills the Midgar Zolom, which - oh, the Midgardsormr from your game, that big snake thing, is a reference to the Zolom.”

“So what you're saying, then,” Ignis said, “is that the only people in my world which are not references are Noct, Gladio, Prompto, and myself.”

Kate laughed. “I guess it does sound that way, huh?”

“Very much so.”

“So... I shouldn't explain that fandom in-joke I mentioned,” she teased.

If his right eye hadn't been closed - keeping it open for any length of time still hurt - he would have narrowed it at her in a mock glare. He settled for raising his eyebrows in pointed silence instead.

She laughed again. “C’mon, if you're done eating I’ll tell you on the walk home.”

Chapter End Notes

If you aren't aware of it, the fandom in-joke Kate mentions is the fact that, in Brotherhood, Ignis looks very much like Light Yagami from Death Note - and his voice actor also voiced Light. :)
The day before they were to leave for the conference, Ignis came downstairs to the sounds of a monster roaring and Noctis, Gladio, and Prompto’s voices shouting back and forth. He followed it to the living room, where he heard the creaking of the couch and the clatter of a game controller being violently manipulated.

“...Kate?” Ignis said.

“Hey,” Kate said, her attention clearly on the game. Then, startled, “Shit, I have to go to work in a couple—No stop that you jerk, come on, get out of the way!”

Ignis’s eyebrows went up. “Have you been playing all night?” She’d still been up when he’d turned in last night, planning travel routes for their trip, but he couldn't think why she'd have started playing the game.

“Apparently,” Kate said. The combat sounds stopped, replaced by the game’s pause music. “I checked the forums again last night, just to see if there was anything new about the convention, and get this: the game’s changed again!”

“Again? How so?” he demanded.

“Everyone whose game was stuck after Altissia is unstuck now, at least through the end of Chapter Ten,” Kate said, practically tripping over the words in her haste to explain. “But Chapter Ten is completely different. I mean, they still go to Cartanica and they still have that fight but—”

“Wait,” Ignis interrupted. “Start from the beginning. The game is unstuck?”

He heard a clunk as she set the controller on the coffee table. “Sort of,” Kate said. “I made a new profile on my console to test it, that's why I was up all night - I was playing through to the changed stuff. I thought I could get through it faster, but apparently not.” He heard the pop of bone as she stretched. “Anyway, the scene at the end of Chapter Nine is still the new one with Gladio, but now instead of crashing after the chapter closes, the game does the 'several weeks later' skip and goes into Chapter Ten.”

“The royal tomb in the mine beneath Cartanica,” Ignis said.

“Yep. Except before, Cartanica had been all about everyone coming to terms with your injury and Luna’s death. Noct and Gladio had a big fight, the whole group almost fell apart, you scolded them into shape, but now—”

“Now it’s about coming to terms with not just the Oracle's death, but mine as well,” Ignis guessed. “And I’m not there to, as you put it, scold them into shape.”
“Yeah.” Kate’s voice was solemn. “Without you there to yell at them, they don’t resolve it very well.”

Ignis winced. Gladio and Noctis’s relationship was far more complicated than their fathers’, based around mutual challenge and one-upmanship as much as simple respect. And they each processed grief very differently. For them to wind up at each other’s throats was frustrating but hardly unexpected. “What happens?” he asked.

“Well, that’s not—” Kate said, then had to stop for a huge yawn. “Sorry. That’s not all. Remember the speculation about that first new scene? Apparently the Ring of the Lucii really is missing.”

“What?” Ignis demanded. His hand found the edge of the door, fingers gripping hard enough that he was sure his knuckles had gone white. “The Ring is missing?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “The loading screen confirmed it - Noct never got it from Luna in Altissia.”

“So where is it?” Ignis asked.

“Missing,” Kate said; fabric rustled and he pictured her frustrated shrug. “Hang on, let me reload from the beginning of the chapter. You need to hear this.”

Another yawn cut off the tail end of her sentence, and Ignis detached himself from the doorway to head into the kitchen. He’d taught himself how to work Kate’s coffee machine by touch, and he needed to do something, anything, while he waited for her to reload the game, or he would explode. Menus chirped from the living room as Kate worked, and Ignis got a pot of coffee started and was back out on the couch in time for her to read out the loading screen information.

“Across the water and onto the rails, Noctis and his surviving retinue make for Gralea, the Imperial capital,” she read. “Their objective: reclaiming the Crystal, that they might reclaim their homeland. However, with both the Ring of the Lucii and his chamberlain lost to the waves, the weight of the mission proves too much for Noctis to bear.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Ignis muttered.

“It said more or less the same thing about the weight of the Ring in the old version,” Kate murmured back. She drew a breath as though to say more, but was interrupted by the sound of a train coming from the television. “It’s Noct and Prompto in a train car,” she said. “Sitting on opposite sides of the aisle. Noct’s staring at his feet and Prompto’s looking between him and the window.”

Prompto’s voice came from the screen then, his tone hesitant, almost afraid. “So… we’re going to stop at the royal tomb in Cartanica. And then… we’re gonna roll through Tenebrae.”

The train rattled on the tracks. Noctis didn’t answer.

Prompto said, “You sure you’re up to that?”

More silence from Noct. Ignis wanted to be there with his prince so badly his chest ached with it. Then heavy booted footsteps stomped up the train aisle, and Ignis didn’t need Kate’s whispered “It’s Gladio” to know who had arrived.

“The hell is wrong with you?” Gladio demanded.

Ignis winced. He knew that tone of Gladio’s, the one that meant Gladio was as frustrated with his own inability to act as he was with the target of his anger. Ignis also knew how badly Noct reacted
to that tone.

“What,” Noctis said, his voice dull and empty.

“We’re not stopping in Tenebrae,” Gladio snapped. “You need to grow up and get over it.”

A rush of leather against fabric, the clank of Noct’s boots against the metal floor as he stood. Ignis pictured him glaring up at Gladio, all but vibrating with the tense, dangerous fury he hated to release. Noctis said, “I am over it. I’m here, aren’t I?”

More sounds, harsh noises like some kind of physical confrontation. Gladio said, “Maybe when you’re not too busy moping, you can pull your head outta your ass and give a shit about the people who died for you.”


“Everything they went through for you,” Gladio spat. “She and Ignis gave their lives so you could do your duty, and you lost the Ring.”

“You think I don’t know that?!” Noctis shouted. “I’m trying—”

“You’re not!” Gladio yelled back. “You’re sulking—”

“What do you want me to do?!” Noctis roared. “It’s gone, Gladio! We spent weeks looking for it and couldn’t find it. If the Imperials don’t have it it’s at the bottom of the Six-damned ocean by now. I told you, we go to Gralea and hope it’s there. If not…”

“If not,” Gladio said, his voice low and ugly, “then what?”


“You don’t know,” Gladio mocked him. “You mean, you’ll give up and let the Imperials have the world. Let Lunafreya’s death, Iggy’s death, mean nothing—”

“Gladio!” Prompto cut in. He sounded terrified. “Gladio, stop!”

“You think you’re a king,” Gladio spat. “But you’re just a coward.”

“SHUT UP!” Noct yelled.

More sounds of a physical confrontation, a jumble of noise Ignis couldn’t begin to interpret. Prompto pleaded, “Don’t do this—!” but cut off with a heavy sound of impact, as though he’d been shoved against something hard enough to knock the wind out of him.

Noctis spoke again, then: “I get it, all right? I get it!”

“Then get a grip!” Gladio shot back. “Pull your head outta your ass already!”

Boots clanged on the metal floor as one of them stormed away; Prompto called, “Noct—!”


Silence for a long minute. Kate said, very quietly, “Prompto doesn’t know who to go after. Noct went to the next car over. He’s sitting down, looking at his hands.” A pause, then, even softer, “His hands are shaking.” A soft interface noise, jarring and strange after the violence of the argument. “Cutscene’s over. Noct can walk around the train until it arrives in Cartanica.”
Ignis took a deep breath. His own hands were shaking where they gripped the edge of the couch. It took effort to make himself let go, to stand up and walk into the kitchen to check on the coffee. To feel his way to the cupboard where the mugs were kept, and pull down two of them. From the living room came quiet sounds of Noctis moving about the train, background chatter between other passengers, various interface chimes and beeps. Ignis poured the coffee and made his way back to the couch, holding the mugs carefully, hating how he had to feel his way with his feet to avoid bumping anything.

Kate set the controller down and took one of the mugs from him as, on the television, a whistle and a change in the steady engine chugging heralded the train’s arrival in Cartanica. Ignis said, “What now?” and even managed to keep his voice steady.

“You can run around and talk to people, get some food and stuff before heading down there, but it’s all optional.” She took a sip of coffee, then added, “I’m going to grab some food, since I’m not as overleveled in this run as I was in the first one and there’s some tough fights down there, but after that I can head straight down if you want.”

“I see. And you expect to need food if you’re not overleveled?”

“In the game, eating food at campsites and restaurants gives you bonuses and defensive boosts and stuff. You - game-you Ignis - are the one doing the cooking at campsites, and you can make almost any recipe you encounter at restaurants, as long as you have the ingredients. The restaurant fare is a lot more limited, but…” She trailed off, and Ignis mentally finished the sentence: *It's all that's available now.*

Out loud, though, he only said, “I see. And you expect to need bonuses in the mine?”

“I’ve done it enough times that I’m pretty sure I can blitz through fast enough to still have the food bonus by the time we get to the malboro lair—”

“**The malboro lair?!”** Ignis demanded. Ice curled in his stomach. He’d read about malboros. Very few hunters encountered them and survived.

“It’s where the royal tomb is,” Kate explained. “No idea why. But yeah, train food bonuses aren’t great but it’s better than nothing.”

In his stomach, Kate set the controller down and took one of the mugs from him as, on the television, a whistle and a change in the steady engine chugging heralded the train’s arrival in Cartanica. Ignis said, “What now?” and even managed to keep his voice steady.

“Now the mine,” Kate said. “You can run around and talk to people, get some food and stuff before heading down there, but it’s all optional.” She took a sip of coffee, then added, “I’m going to grab some food, since I’m not as overleveled in this run as I was in the first one and there’s some tough fights down there, but after that I can head straight down if you want.”

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“He’d read about malboros. Very few hunters encountered them and survived.

“It’s where the royal tomb is,” Kate explained. “No idea why. But yeah, train food bonuses aren’t great but it’s better than nothing.”

Ignis gritted his teeth, wrapped his hands more tightly around his coffee mug to keep from summoning his daggers, useless here when the danger was a world away. Kate didn't seem terribly concerned by the situation; he’d have to trust her that Noctis would be fine. She steered Noctis through the meal, then said, “Prompto’s standing alone looking out over the valley.”

Onscreen, Prompto said, “There’s an elevator that should take us straight down to the mine. Wonder if the tomb’s inside.”

Noctis didn’t answer, but a moment later mechanical whirring and clacking noises indicated the arrival of the elevator. Heavy footsteps clanged over a metal walkway as Gladio joined them, then the elevator began to descend, carrying Noctis closer to the next royal tomb and the dangerous monster which waited there.
The status of malboros is a little weird in the game. You can run into them in Lucis on high-level hunts and around Pithoss, and there's the Malboro Chef from *Kingsglaive*, but based on how the guys react in Cartanica, it's implied that they're not actually well-known or easily recognized. Or possibly that most people in Insomnia only know of the cute lil cartoon version and therefore wouldn't recognize the ugly plant-tentacle-abomination that is a real malboro.
This was a hard chapter to get right. The game doesn't do an especially great job of explaining why Gladio reacts the way he does after Altissia, and a lot of people hate him for how he treats the guys in Cartanica. And in this fic, Ignis's apparent death magnifies the grief and guilt in play, making Gladio and Noct's conflict far worse. Hopefully I managed to convey why Gladio acts the way he does, without making him out of character.

The elevator doors rattled open at the bottom of the mine shaft, and Gladio immediately said, “Well? Let’s get a move on.”

Ignis pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew that tone: Gladio was still upset, not just from the fight on the train but also from everything that had happened before it: the destruction of Altissia, the death of the Oracle, the loss of the Ring. Ignis’s own apparent death, too, and Ignis hated his culpability in this mess, his failure to prevent whatever had led to his transportation out of his reality. Noctis couldn’t deal with Gladio when he was like that, and while it was unfair to expect Prompto to manage it, he was the only person left to keep them from killing each other.

“Sure,” Noctis sniped back to Gladio. “Back home you’d yell at me for rushing in too fast, now you’re telling me I’m not rushing fast enough. Make up your damn mind.”

“How ‘bout you make up yours,” Gladio growled. “Do you want this Royal Arm or not?”

Noctis growled under his breath but didn’t answer.

“It’s not like rushing’s going to do any good, anyway,” Kate muttered.

“Why not?” Ignis asked. “Because of the malboro lair?”

“That’s the end of the dungeon,” Kate said. “There’s a bunch of fights and a puzzle to solve before you can get down there.”

“Fights against what?”

“Those crocodile things, the ones with the long narrow jaws and vertical headfins,” Kate said. “The place is crawling with them.”

“Gurangatches,” Ignis supplied automatically, though his stomach knotted at the thought of Noctis fighting through a mine full of hungry beasts while unable to rely on Gladio for support. Prompto was a decent fighter for someone who hadn’t touched a weapon until a few months ago, but he was no trained and hardened Shield.

“Right, those things,” Kate said. “On my first playthrough I was overleveled enough that they were just annoying, but they’re almost a challenge this time.”

“I see,” Ignis said. His hand clenched on his coffee cup. His friends, his king, were fighting and suffering while Ignis sat around drinking coffee.
“We’ll get you back to them,” Kate said quietly.

“Not soon enough,” he answered, just as quiet. Took a deep breath. “Let’s see the rest of it, then.”

Listening to Noctis and Gladio snipe at each other as they fought, to Noct’s grunts of pain and Prompto’s worried cries, was a hideous exercise in patience. Ignis survived it by gripping his coffee cup so hard his hands ached. Finally the battles ended, though Gladio continued to harangue Noct as they walked: *How about you quit dragging your feet, Princess, and I didn't realize your plan included staying down here to sulk forever, and Isn't it about time to stop screwing around while you're at war?* Even Kate muttered, “Oh my God, Gladio,” under her breath at one point.

At least solving the puzzle to open the entrance to the lair was straightforward enough, since Kate already knew where to go and what to do. “One more argument,” she said after the mining vehicle rolled out of the path.

Sure enough, the background music faded away and Gladio’s voice cut in: “Hold up. You sure you’re ready for this? You got what it takes?”

“To do what?” Noctis demanded, his voice rough.

“To face your ancestors and convince them to lend you their strength,” Gladio shot back. “Got a long road ahead. Can you see this through? To the end?”

A pause. Kate said, a question in her voice, “I can choose to have Noctis show frustration or show resolve.”

Ignis’s throat tightened. It felt wrong to have that even *be* a choice, for someone else to control what Noctis said or did or felt. But Kate was asking him, so Ignis made himself think about it for a moment. Finally he said, “Frustration. I need to know how bad things are.”

“Okay,” Kate agreed.

He regretted it immediately when, on the screen, Noctis said, “As if I have a choice! You think I like the idea of people sacrificing themselves for me, one after the other?”

“Enough,” Gladio snarled. “Forget it.” Footsteps, then he added in a voice that was little more than a growl, “I thought you’d accepted your duty. I thought wrong.”

“It says Gladio’s words lit a fire in Noctis’s heart,” Kate said.

Ignis rubbed at his forehead. “I suppose that’s better than the alternative,” he admitted. “But I don’t know how much longer Noctis can go on like this.”

“That part’s actually not much different than the original version with you there,” Kate said. She paused while on-screen, Prompto complained about the stench of the muck, then added, “He’ll get through it.”

“I hope so,” Ignis said.

Listening to the malboro’s appearance, complete with dramatic boss music and terrified cries from his friends, was even worse than listening to them traverse the mine. Kate, though, sounded unaffected, even bored, as she grumbled under her breath at the malboro while she fought. When Ignis’s jaw started to hurt from gritting his teeth, he made himself say, “You don’t seem to think this is particularly concerning.”
“Not really,” Kate said. The clack of the controller in her hands didn’t falter. “I mean, it was easier when I was way overleveled, but it’s still not that bad a fight. I’ve got Star Pendants on all the guys so its poison doesn’t hurt. Though I’m curious how the game is going to handle the part where you were the one to figure out how to defeat it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It can’t die from normal physical attacks - it has to be hit with fire before it can die. In the original version you—dammit, Prompto, get out of there—you realized what was going on and blew it up with a fire blast, but I don’t know how it’s going to work without you there.”

On-screen, Gladio yelled over the malboro’s roar, “It’s useless!”

“What do we do?!” Prompto called back, an edge of hysteria in his voice.

“This might be a good time to panic,” Noctis suggested dryly.

Ignis clapped a hand over his eyes and sighed. “Think, Noct,” he muttered, even though it was impossible for his prince to hear him. “You can figure it out. Use your head.”

“There’s gotta be something,” Kate said. “I don’t—Oh.” She broke off at an insistent beep from the television, paused, then said, “It’s giving me a choice. I can ask Gladio for advice, ask Prompto for advice, retreat, or keep fighting.”

Ignis hesitated, but really he knew there was only one real choice. Prompto wouldn’t have the first idea what to do - not that he was stupid, just untrained and not especially tactically-minded - and retreating or continuing to fight would get them nowhere except further injured. “Ask Gladio.”

The game beeped as Kate selected the option. On-screen, Noctis shouted, “Gladio, got anything useful to contribute?” and Ignis rolled his good eye hard enough that it twinged with pain. He shouldn’t have expected diplomacy from a furious and terrified Noctis.

Gladio snarled back, “You’re supposed to be the damn king - got any magic you can throw at it? Or are you too lazy to do that, too?”

“You think magic’s going to do anything when our swords aren’t even scratching it?” Noct said.

“You asked me for advice,” Gladio spat, “I gave it. Up to you whether you do anything with it.”

“Whatever we’re gonna do, let’s hurry it up,” Prompto said. “It stinks like a freaking gas leak in here!”

“Gas,” Noctis muttered, then, “Wait. Fire!” Leather snapped as he made a sharp gesture. “Guys! Get back!”

Ignis sank back against the couch with relief. The jumble of sounds from the screen was hard to interpret, but he distinctly heard the whoosh of fire as Noctis called upon the power in his blood. Before long, the fight was over, the game’s interface sounds announcing the victory. From the television, Prompto said, “It’s dead! We did it!” In a forced-cheerful voice, he added pointedly, “Together!”

“Sure,” Gladio muttered. “Once His Royal Laziness finally got off his ass.”

“You didn’t like how I was handling it,” Noctis growled, “you should’ve spoken up sooner.” Another sharp snap of cloth as he moved. “Let’s open this tomb and get what we came for.”
Ignis wanted to throw his coffee mug at them, and had to set it down on the coffee table before he did anything stupid. “You know better, Gladio,” he said, too frustrated to keep quiet despite knowing they couldn’t hear him. “Don’t let your emotions interfere with your duty.”

But it wasn’t that simple. Gladio was expressing anger, but Ignis knew him well enough to be certain he was feeling grief, feeling the awful guilt of - in Gladio’s eyes - failing to protect Ignis. And grief was not easily gotten over, nor ignored. At least Kate didn’t say anything, apparently focused on firebombing a cluster of malboro eggs to open the entrance to the royal tomb.

When the game music indicated that Noctis had retrieved the Royal Arm and the group had left the malboro’s lair to return to the swamp, Ignis said, “What next?”

“Back to the train, I guess,” Kate answered absently. “The forums say the game crashes again at the end of this chapter, after they get back on the train and head for Tenebrae.”

“Nothing else inside the mine?”

“Don’t think so.” The regular battle music started up and Kate paused to focus on fighting, from the sounds coming from the television, a small group of gurangatches. “No, wait, the forums said there was one more argument on the way out.”

Ignis sighed. “Of course there is.” Because both Noctis and Gladio were too stubborn to let this go, too stubborn to see that they were both drowning in grief and pulling each other down as well. On-screen, they were still taking verbal shots at each other, just like before: Gladio snarling about Noctis being lazy and wasting time; Noctis sniping back with increasing frustration.

It was painful to listen to, and Ignis was almost relieved when they finally made it to the elevator out of the mine. Almost, because Kate had said another argument was coming. Sure enough, as the elevator rattled into motion, the background music changed and Kate sat back on the couch as she did when a cutscene had begun.

In the tight, angry voice that meant he was a hair's-breadth from losing it, Noctis said, “There's a train back to the port tomorrow morning. You can get on with whatever real business you have that's so damned important.”

“What's so damned important,” Gladio shot back, “is saving Lucis. Or are you waiting for more people to die for you before you’ll get off your ass and—”

“Stop it!”

Prompto's voice. Kate made a startled sound, her shoulder brushing Ignis's as she sat up in surprise. Ignis, shocked himself, barely noticed.


“Prompto—” Noct's voice, thick with guilt. Gladio just huffed angrily; Ignis pictured him crossing his arms and turning away.

“This is stupid,” Prompto continued. He sounded near tears. “If Ignis was here he’d know what to say, he’d have a bunch of fancy fifty-gil words that would help, but he's not here. You only have me, and I’m sorry for that, but you—you’ve got to stop fighting.”

“Prompto's right,” Gladio said, his voice little more than a growl. “If Ignis was here, he’d know what to say. But he's not, because he died so you could become a king worthy of his faith in you. But you can’t, can you? You're not up to the job.”
“I’d be up to it if I didn't have your useless ass dragging me down,” Noctis snarled.

A sharp gasp from Prompto, then grim silence. Ignis didn't need his sight to know Noctis and Gladio were glaring at each other, fists clenched, inches away from striking blows. He was honestly surprised that they didn’t, that Gladio hadn’t immediately lashed out. Noctis couldn’t deal with Gladio when they were like this, but that didn’t mean he didn’t know exactly what to say to hurt Gladio the most.

Then Gladio spat, “I ain’t leaving. I swore an oath to protect you, and at least one of us oughta do his duty.” His furious tone didn’t quite hide the shaking in his voice. “But you better shape up fast, before you get more people killed.”

The elevator door hissed open and footsteps clanged on a metal catwalk as Gladio stormed away. More silence, followed by a sigh from Noctis, and slow tired footsteps as he, too, left. Prompto made a quiet agonized noise, then hurried to catch up. A train whistle blasted and an engine rumbled to life. As the music turned ominous, Ignis heard a chilling sound: Ardyn Izunia’s voice, humming thoughtfully. The game played a grim chapter completion tone, then fell silent except for the unhappy whirs and clicks coming from the console.
Planning

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! It's been a hectic month. I can't promise more regular updates but I'm certainly gonna try.

“That's it,” Kate said, setting the controller down again.

Ignis swallowed and took several deep breaths before allowing himself to speak. “Those utter idiots,” he said. It came out a hoarse whisper.

Kate squeezed his arm. “Do you think they’ll be okay?”

Ignis shook his head. He didn’t have an answer for that, and wasn’t sure he wanted to consider what such an answer would be. “What's supposed to happen next?” he asked instead. “You said they were en route to Tenebrae?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “The next chapter is pretty short, it’s when Ardyn does the body-swap thing with Prompto, and—”

“What body-swap thing?”

“It's not explained very well,” Kate said apologetically. “Or at all, really. But Ardyn can swap appearances with people somehow. He does it to Prompto on the train between Cartanica and Tenebrae, and Noctis knocks Prompto off the train and nearly kills him, thinking he's Ardyn.”

Ignis frowned. “Ardyn was there when they boarded the train. You said some time ago that he tricks Noctis into attacking Prompto, which results in Prompto being separated from us. This is what you meant?”

“Yeah,” Kate said again, solemn.

Ignis waited, but it seemed that was all she was willing to say on the subject, and he didn’t have the energy right now to fight with her about what she wasn’t telling him. So he said, “How long, do you think, before the game moves forward again? Another month?”

“Hard to say,” Kate said, and he thought she sounded relieved that he hadn’t pressed the issue. “It almost seems to be following you real-time, though. The first change happened about three days after you came here, which is about the amount of time Noctis spends unconscious after the Leviathan fight. Then there’s a time skip to Cartanica that just says ‘several weeks later’, and, well, it's several weeks later, right?”
Ignis considered that. “How long between this chapter and the next?”

“I don’t know,” Kate admitted. “I don’t think the game specifies. Not long, though - maybe a couple days, however long it takes to get from Cartanica most of the way to Tenebrae.” She hesitated, then added, “What do you want to do?”

Ignis rubbed the bridge of his nose under his sunglasses. His heart ached for his friends, for what Noctis - and Prompto and even Gladio, stubborn ass that he was being at the moment - were suffering. He wanted nothing more than to be there with them, even blind, even useless as he was. He hadn’t lost his voice, and they needed words more than they needed another weapon just now. But he could only be there for them if he found a way back to his own reality. And the only thing they’d come up with on that front was their long-shot attempt to make contact with the developers.

“We stick to the plan,” he said finally, the words sour in his mouth. “I don’t see any other possibilities, much as it pains me to admit it. But keep a close watch on those forums. I want to know the moment the game moves forward again.”

“Got it,” Kate agreed. She blew out a breath of air in a frustrated sigh. “Is it just me, or does it feel like we’re missing something?”

“It’s not just you,” Ignis said. “Though given that you have far more pieces of the puzzle than I, it’s worrisome you also feel as though you’re missing something.”

“Well, all the pieces of the puzzle I have are from the original version of the game, where you were still there and they had the Ring,” Kate pointed out dryly. “So I’m not sure—”

Ignis lost the rest of her words as a realization hit him. The Ring. He and Kate had talked about it weeks ago, had considered that perhaps it had played a part in his transportation here, but had dismissed the idea as impossible. But now the Ring was missing, confirmed by both the game’s narration and Noctis himself. That couldn’t be a coincidence, that it had vanished from his world at the same time he had, when in the original timeline they’d both been there.

“...Ignis?” Kate said, in a tone that implied it wasn’t the first time she’d called his name. “What’s wrong?”

“When I was found,” Ignis said. “By your ambulance crew. Did they gather everything that might have belonged to me?”

“What?”

“The Ring,” Ignis explained. “What if we were right, all those weeks ago? What if I had the Ring, when I came here? I still don’t remember what happened in Altissia, but I’m certain I would have done everything possible to reach Noctis. If I succeeded, and picked up the Ring along the way, then it may have come here with me.”

A long pause. Kate said, “But if you had it, you’d know, right? I mean, you didn’t have it in the hospital as far as I know, the nurses are incredibly careful with patients’ personals—”

“I may have dropped it before your crew found me,” Ignis pointed out.

“Well, I didn’t see it when I checked the alley, but I wasn’t exactly digging around the trash on the ground,” Kate said reluctantly. “But if you dropped it in an alley in San Francisco, it’s long gone by now. Picked up by a lucky tourist, or by a homeless person and pawned for cash.”

Ignis clenched his fists. This felt right, in a way he couldn’t articulate but had to do with the
saltwater haze hiding his memories of Altissia. He could picture the Ring, imagine its weight in his hand, in a way he was certain shouldn’t have been possible unless he’d held it. He wasn’t about to give up on it. “We have to look for it,” he said. “There must be a way.”

“The ambulance crew might know something,” Kate suggested. “Although I don’t know if it’s the same people on shift today.”

“Can we go there ourselves?” Ignis asked. “To the place I was found? Even if it’s unlikely, it’s worth checking if the Ring is still there.”

“Sure,” Kate said. “I’m supposed to be at work in an hour, but I’ll pick you up after my shift and we can go looking for it then, okay?”

“No,” Ignis snapped, frustrated. “No, it’s not ‘okay’. I’ve been patient, I’ve bitten my tongue and sat here for weeks while Noctis needs me. If there’s any possibility that I can do something to help him, I want to do it. Not sit here longer!”

She reached over and wrapped her hand around his. “Ignis—”

“No,” he interrupted. “I know how late you get home on a normal day, how likely it is you’ll have to work late. A few minutes of cursory searching when you’ve been on your feet for well over twenty-four hours is hardly better than not searching at all.”

Kate sighed, and didn’t answer right away. Ignis wished he could see her face, read her expression, but the tension in her grip on his hand was the only clue he had. Finally, in a voice that was carefully flat, she said, “What do you want me to do?”

“Call off your shift at the hospital,” Ignis said. “Help me search now.” He tightened his fingers around hers, trying to convey some of the desperation that buzzed under his skin. “Searching will take time - of which we have very little. We leave for the conference tomorrow - we can’t afford to waste any time. If the Ring really is here, then I need it in hand before we ask the developers to send me home. And—”

“Okay!” Kate broke in. “Okay. We’ll go today. But... I need my hand back.”

He realized abruptly that he was gripping her fingers hard enough to bruise. “Apologies,” he said, and let go. Took a deep breath, trying to get himself back under control, to rein in the frustration that had broken through.

“It's fine,” she said, a wry smile in her voice. “You’re right. I think….” She hesitated, seeming to search for the right words. “I think it’s more urgent for you than me, if that makes sense. I guess... I’m used to it being a game still, y’know? Where time doesn't matter and plot stuff doesn't happen until you're ready.”

“It's not a game,” Ignis said. “I'm real. Noctis is real. He’s hurting right now, and this is the only thing I can do to help him.” His hands were shaking, and so was his voice. “My world is as real as this one, and it’s suffering without the Ring and a king to wield it. If I don’t get back there, if I can’t bring the Ring to Noctis… You said you don’t want to risk causing harm to our world. Then help me save it.”

“Yeah,” Kate said softly. “Okay. I have some favors I can call in with someone but I’ll need to be on the floor for an hour or two until he gets there. But you can come with me and wait in the lobby, and as soon as I’m clear we can go looking.”

Ignis nodded. His throat was tight with frustration and fear and worry, and he didn’t trust his voice.
Kate rested a hand on his arm, the touch apologetic. “Let me grab a shower and change, and we'll head out.”
Gathering Clues

Chapter Notes

I continue to have no idea how hospitals (or in this case, ambulance crew shifts) work.
Shh. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Half an hour later, they were on the road in Kate's car. “I don't normally drive in the city,” she said, “but taking transit from the hospital to where you landed will be even more of a pain.”

“Fair enough,” Ignis agreed. “What kind of vehicle is it? The engine has quite the unusual sound.”

“It’s a Prius,” Kate said. “Gas-electric hybrid, so I can use the HOV lane if I need to get to the hospital in a hurry. Does Insomnia have electric engines?”

Ignis shook his head. “There are - were, I suppose - a handful of companies looking into the possibility, but the infrastructure wasn't in place beyond Insomnia, so it hadn't caught on yet.”

“And I guess gas is cheap,” Kate said.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“It's only ten gil to fill the Regalia's tank in the game, no matter how much you need,” she said. “Five if you buy the travel add-on pack.”

“If only,” Ignis said ruefully. “The Regalia has many good qualities, but fuel economy is not one of them. We spend a far higher portion of our funds on fuel than I would have preferred.”

“Huh. Well, it never did make sense that a full tank of gas was a tenth of the cost of a vending machine soda.”

Ignis snorted. “Not remotely. Though, why on Eos does the game make you buy vending machine sodas?”

“According to the item description, Noctis turns them into potions and elixirs,” Kate said.

“Into what now?” Ignis asked, confused.

“Health potions,” Kate clarified. “Y’know, to refill your life bar?”

“Ah,” he said, and thought about all the video games he’d seen Noctis and Prompto play over the years. “I’m familiar with the concept.”

“Right,” Kate said. “So in the game, you buy sodas at vending machines and gas stations and whatever that are actually health potions. Which doesn’t make sense either - sodas don’t match the in-game item model or the fact that you guys crush them in your hands to heal instead of drinking them.” She paused. “I take it they don’t actually work like that?”

He shook his head. “Noctis can and does infuse magic into some of the hunters’ curatives we buy
to improve their general efficacy, and he’ll also inject magic into our canned beverages to give them an extra…” He paused, trying to figure out how to explain the sensation of royal magic rushing through his body, bolstering his energy, giving him a second wind to fight. “…energy boost, I suppose. But they don’t directly repair injuries.”

“Makes sense,” Kate said. “I always wondered why, if you guys had that sort of magic, Gladio had his scars. And you in the original version with your eyes, and why nobody gave Luna a potion or something in Altissia.”

“Only the Oracle herself is able to heal wounds directly, and even her power works best against the Starscourge rather than mundane injuries,” Ignis said. “The hunters have developed curatives which aid in wound closure in the field, and which can speed the healing process, but even with Noctis’s magic to boost them, they do little for anything more severe than surface wounds.”

“So the hunters’ curatives aren’t magical?” Kate asked.

“Not until Noctis gets his hands on them,” Ignis said. “Why? Are you thinking of making some?”

“I’m an emergency physician,” she pointed out. “If you can tell me how to make something that could potentially save lives in my ER, I’d jump at the chance.”

“I do know the basic formulae,” Ignis said. “Whether or not you have the necessary ingredients in this reality to make them is another matter, but I’d be happy to give you the recipe.”

Kate made a sound that might have been an attempt to hide a giggle. “What?” Ignis demanded.

“Nothing,” she said, much too quickly.

He stretched a hand out, found her cheek with his fingers and felt the muscles twitching at the corner of her mouth as she tried not to smile. “Kate,” he said.

“Nothing,” she repeated. “Another dumb fan joke. You don’t want to know.”

Considering the last joke she’d tried to explain had involved a story about a killer notebook, clown death gods, and entirely too dramatic potato chips, Ignis decided to let this one go. He said only, “Well, as I said, I’d be happy to tell you how to make the hunters’ curatives.”

“Great,” Kate said. There was still a bit of a giggle in her voice, but Ignis ignored it as the car slowed and turned a couple of corners in quick succession. “We’re here,” she added. She parked and led him through an employee entrance, navigating a couple of narrow hallways lined with things they had to dodge before emerging through a door into a space filled with voices and echoes. “This is the main lobby,” Kate said. “You can hang out here until David gets in and I can leave. The front desk is over here—” nudging his arm to indicate— “about twenty feet away. The receptionist can help you with anything if you need it. Her name’s Chen, she’s really nice.”

Ignis nodded and let her steer him to a seat on what felt like the sort of generic faux-leather couch common to high-end reception areas everywhere, including, apparently, alternate realities. “I’ll be fine, I’m sure,” he said.

“Okay,” Kate said, and squeezed his shoulder. “I should be back out in an hour or so. I’ll let you know if I think it’s going to take longer. And,” she added when he drew breath to interject, “I promise I will do everything I can to keep it from taking longer.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, and smiled a little.
She squeezed his shoulder again, then let go and strode away, the clicking of her shoes on the floor fading quickly into the background hubbub of the lobby. Ignis gave her a minute to get out of sight, then stood. An hour - realistically, probably more - with nothing to do but sit here was going to grate on his nerves almost as badly as sitting in her house. And Kate had mentioned the ambulance crew might know something about what had happened to the Ring.

The reception desk was right where Kate had said, and Ignis somehow managed not to trip over anyone or anything walking over to it. He still hated walking with the cane, but there was some small pride to be taken in the fact that he could manage that much. He didn’t hear anyone close by that seemed to be talking to the receptionist, so he said carefully, “Excuse me, Chen?”

“Hi!” a young woman chirped, closer than he’d expected, and he had to fight not to flinch back. “How can I help you?”

“I’m waiting for Dr. Matthias,” Ignis explained. “She’ll be back out in an hour or so, but in the meantime, I was hoping you could help me with something.” He gestured at the scar around his left eye. “I was treated here about a month ago, but I wasn’t able to thank the ambulance crew whose quick response was what kept me alive to be treated. Is there any chance they’re available now, and that I might speak with them?”

“Hm,” Chen said thoughtfully. “I’m not sure, I’ve never had anyone ask that before! Let me call down there and find out for you.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said. He leaned on the counter and waited while Chen spoke on the phone, her voice professionally quiet enough that he couldn’t make out the words over the background noise of the lobby.

Finally Chen said out loud, “Okay! They agreed to come out and talk for a little bit. They’ll be up here in just a minute.”

“Excellent,” Ignis said, and smiled at her. “Thank you for your help.”

“No problem!” Chen said. Footsteps and a shift in the air told Ignis someone else had walked up to the desk, and as Chen greeted them, he turned and felt his way back to the couch.

He’d only been sitting there for a few minutes when heavy footsteps approached him. A man’s voice said, “Hey! You’re looking pretty good!” Ignis turned his head toward the voice, and the man added, “Hell of a scar, though. How are you managing?”

“Well enough,” Ignis said politely.

“We don’t usually get to see the people we bring in after they’re recovered,” the man continued. “I’m glad you could stop by.”

This had to be one of the ambulance crew. Ignis stood up, mostly out of habit as there was little point to being at eye level with the people he spoke to now, and smiled. “I appreciate you taking the time to come up. If I owe my life to someone, the least I can do is thank him.” He held out a hand. “Ignis.”

“Adam,” the man said, and shook Ignis’s hand. His voice shifted, giving the impression of turning, and he said, “This is Ian. He wasn’t working the day we brought you in, but he’s my partner for today.” In a teasing voice he added, “Unfortunately.”

Another voice laughed as a new hand clasped Ignis’s. “Hey, at least you’re not stuck with Kevin,” Ian joked.
“True that,” Adam agreed. To Ignis, he said, “Anyway, it’s great to see you up and around. When we found you, you were... pretty rough.”

“That’s rather an understatement,” Ignis said dryly, and braced himself. This was going to be the tricky part. He needed information, but simply asking would almost certainly cause them to write him off as a freak, a lunatic. So he needed to steer the conversation where he wanted it to go, without them realizing he was doing it. “But yes, I’m doing quite well, all things considered. It’s not every day one has a freak accident with a lighter and an unexpected methane leak.”

“Is that what it was?” Adam said. “Gotta admit, we wondered. Your injuries were pretty weird.”

“I don’t remember much of it,” Ignis said, “but yes, that’s my understanding. A one-in-a-million accident.” He was suddenly, strangely grateful to the game, for the chance he’d had to hear himself lying in Altissia. He might feel like the men could see straight through him, but with luck he sounded at least as normal as he had then.

“Man,” Ian said. “That’s nuts.”

“Come now,” Ignis said, feigning surprise. “That can’t be the strangest thing you’ve seen, driving an ambulance in the city.”

Adam laughed. “It’s up there.”

“Really?” Ignis said. “I’ve a former schoolmate who works in emergency care, and he tells stories of everything from knives stuck in skulls to spontaneous combustion.”

He had to fight not to hold his breath - and then fight not to let it out in a sigh of relief when Ian said, “Y’know, actually, we did have a case of spontaneous combustion.”

“We did?” Adam said, sounding confused. “When?”

“About a month ago,” Ian said. “You weren’t working that day, but we got a call over on Mission. Some homeless guy just up and burst into flames, according to the people on the scene.” Fabric rustled; he was shrugging or shaking his head. “That was a weird one. If there hadn’t been witnesses, you wouldn’t even have known it was a person - by the time we got there, it was just a heap of ash and bits of metal.”

“Bizarre,” Ignis agreed. Keeping his voice casual, he asked, “Did you find out what happened?”

“I think the cops wrote it up as an accident,” Ian said. “I mean, spontaneous combustion isn’t real, right? The victim was homeless and his friend was all kinds of strung out, so we figured it was just a real nasty fuckup with alcohol or lighter fluid or something. Tragic, but not much we could do at that point.”

Ignis nodded. “Well, I hope that’s the strangest thing you ever have to deal with.”

Both men chuckled, and one of them - probably Adam, given the angles of their voices - clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re an optimist,” he said, a smile in his voice. “Still, I’m glad you stopped in. Kinda makes up for all the weird shit, to see someone who came out okay.”

“Then I’m also glad I made it in,” Ignis said, and smiled back. “Thank you again for saving my life.”

“I’d say ‘anytime’, but I don’t want you making a habit of it,” Adam said. “We gotta get back to work - you take care, okay?”
“I will,” Ignis said. He held out his hand for them both to shake again, then they said their goodbyes and left.

It seemed to take forever for Kate to return, after that, but finally her shoes clicked across the floor and stopped in front of him. “Hey,” she said. “David just got here. Ready to head out?”

“Not quite yet,” Ignis said. “I spoke with the ambulance crew.” He told her about the case of the homeless man who’d burned. “Spontaneous combustion of a homeless man, not long after I arrived here,” he said. “You said the Ring burned a man to death whom it deemed unworthy, and that the Ring most likely would’ve been picked up by a homeless person hoping to pawn it.”

“That can’t be a coincidence,” Kate agreed. “Where did you say it was?”

“He said ‘on Mission’, whatever that means,” Ignis said.

“It’s a street,” Kate said. “You were found on Market, which is one street over. Long and busy streets, but still. I think you’re onto something here.”

“Can you get the exact location?”

“Yep,” Kate said. “Wait here; I’ll be right back.”

It didn’t take her long. Just a few minutes later she returned, and her voice was excited when she said, “Yahtzee. I have an address.”

Ignis grinned fiercely. Finally, something that felt like progress. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of inconsistencies with how health potions and elixirs are portrayed in FFXV. As Kate said, the in-game usage animations don't match the item descriptions, and the way they work is wildly inconsistent. They apparently do nothing for Gladio's scars, Ignis's eyes, or Lunafreya's mortal injuries, yet in Episode: Prompto's campfire scene, a single potion not only instantly and completely repairs a nasty burn, it also restores the surface skin to its former condition, complete with RFID tattoo. And despite phoenix downs being used to bring someone "back from the dead", the bros are still very much alive and conscious when they use them.

For purposes of this fic, I'm declaring that FFXV hit points and healing magic work the same way as in D&D 4e: "hit points" aren't so much a representation of bodily injury, as an abstraction of "ability to keep fighting". "Healing potions", therefore, don't directly repair injuries: they give you energy, a second wind, restoring your "ability to keep fighting" rather than your physical health. And the "hunters' curatives" Ignis mentioned are the stuff that the Witch of the Woods creates: a pseudo-magical, highly effective Neosporin/superglue-wound-closure. :)


Despite Kate’s claim that driving was better than taking transit, it took them the better part of half an hour to drive the three and a half miles to the site of the apparent spontaneous combustion, most of which time was spent at a standstill in gridlocked traffic. Ignis drummed his fingers on his knee and fought for patience, until finally Kate said, “Ooh, parking,” and swung the car around a couple tight corners before coming to a halt.

She went to get a ticket from the lot attendant as Ignis climbed out of the car and unfolded his cane. He smelled engine exhaust and old trash, heard dozens of voices and even more footsteps bustling around him. Cars whizzed past, horns honking and tires squeaking as drivers fought the gridlock. That whine-hiss was most likely a bus or truck’s hydraulic brakes, and that sudden rustling might be birds spooked into the air by a passing vehicle. It was far, far noisier than Kate’s quiet suburb, and sudden terror clenched Ignis’s gut and locked his throat.

He’d spent enough time in Insomnia’s bustling downtown, courtesy of Noctis’s love of arcades, to have an idea of what he was about to step into. Walking the neat, empty sidewalks around Kate’s house was vastly different from navigating blind through a busy city, filled with people who wouldn’t care about his inability to see, and unexpected obstacles like benches, bus stops, telephone poles, and statues. The cane only told him so much.

Get ahold of yourself, man, he told himself firmly, but the thought did nothing for the fear that had frozen him in place. He realized that he’d lost track of Kate and turned his head, his ears straining, the fear rapidly turning to panic at the thought that she might have walked off and left him—

“Ready?” Kate asked, right at his elbow, and Ignis all but had a heart attack. Kate touched his arm, concern in her voice. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Ignis said, too quick and too high. “Just…”

“Scary,” Kate said softly. She tucked his hand into the bend of her elbow. “I can’t imagine what this must be like for you,” she continued, “but for what it’s worth, I’m right here.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, and meant it. He straightened his shoulders and adjusted his grip on his cane. The fear hadn’t disappeared, not by a long shot, but having a familiar presence at his side helped hold it back. With more bravado than he felt, he added, “I’m going to have to get used to it. Let’s go.”

“We’ve got a couple blocks to walk,” Kate warned him. “Parking’s scarce in the city so I grabbed the first lot I saw with open spaces.”

Ignis nodded. Her arm was steady under his hand, reassuring; they’d walked through her suburb like this often enough over the past few weeks. He let her steer him, his cane tapping a steady rhythm on the ground, and though he bumped shoulders with a handful of people, it wasn’t much worse than the busiest parts of Insomnia.
Finally Kate came to a stop. “It’s around here somewhere,” she said. “The ambulance crew’s write-up just said ‘Mission and Eighth’.”

“You said I was found one street over,” Ignis said. “Which direction?”

“This way,” Kate said, pointing with the elbow on which his hand rested. “Looks like our options are gated alley, walled-off alley, and the street itself.”

“Any sign of burn marks?” Ignis asked. “I imagine flames hot enough to consume a man would leave some kind of mark.”

“Good call,” Kate said. They walked up and down the sidewalk, back and forth a couple of times before Kate stopped so suddenly he bumped into her. “There. That is definitely a giant scorch mark.” She shook her head, her ponytail rustling against her jacket. “I can’t believe the cops would write it off as a liquor accident. You can’t get the heat you’d need to thoroughly cremate a body with just an open liquor fire.”

“If ancient magic rings are even less common in this reality than in mine,” Ignis pointed out dryly, “then they’d have no other explanation.”

“True.” Kate started walking again, more slowly this time; Ignis guessed she was searching the ground for any sign of the Ring.

He let her pull him along, focusing his own attention inward. Noctis had bound Ignis to himself, granting him the magic of the armory and - hopefully someday, once Noct was strong enough - the ability to warp. He’d described it as connecting Ignis to the magic of the Crystal via Noct’s own magic - the same Crystal to which the Ring of the Lucii was bound. Ignis had sometimes been unnaturally aware of where Noctis was, or even Gladio and Prompto, thanks to the magic they shared. It was a subtle sense, and an unreliable one, working only over short distances and then only in brief flashes, usually only while they were drawing on the Crystal’s power. Noctis was only slightly better at it, and he’d told Ignis once that he worried he was disappointing his father with his inability to wield magic anywhere near Regis’s own skill. But perhaps that sixth sense would come in handy now - if Ignis could make it work.

He fought to calm his mind, to push away the fear that still lurked in his gut, to focus only on the quiet hum of royal magic deep within himself. His hand tightened around the grip of his cane, an awareness of his daggers in the armory itching across his palms. The din of the city around him faded, noise and stench slipping away until all that remained was a thin, tenuous awareness of the Crystal’s magic.

And a soft answering thrum from somewhere close by.

“There,” Ignis breathed, and tugged on Kate’s arm. “It’s over there. Not far.”

“Are you sure?” Kate said. “It’s away from Market Street and the scorch mark both.”

“I’m sure,” Ignis said. He wasn’t, not completely - already he’d lost track of it in the simple distraction of talking to Kate - but it was far better than wandering around aimlessly.

Kate seemed to be looking back and forth, based on the movement of her arm under his hand; after a moment she said, “We need to cross the street. C’mon.”

She guided him up the block, along a crosswalk, and back down the other side of the street. As they got closer, he felt it again, just a brief flash of familiar magic but enough to reassure him they were on the right track. He pointed. “There.”
Kate made a thoughtful noise. “There’s a few guys sitting against the wall. Can you narrow it down any further?”

Ignis hesitated, pacing forward a few more steps, trying to focus and failing. All he could pick up was that vague, amorphous sense of that way. “Unfortunately not. Can we ask them? Perhaps one of them has seen it.”

“Oi,” an unfamiliar voice interrupted, rough and slurred. It came from the direction in which Ignis had sensed the Ring’s presence. “Whatcha lookin’ for?”

Kate tensed, but answered, “A ring. My friend lost it around here a month or so ago.”

“A ring?” a different voice said, then barked out a laugh.

There was a shuffling sound of movement, and even as Kate flinched back, the first voice shouted something unintelligible from much closer than he’d been a moment ago. Ignis pushed Kate behind him, hands poised to summon his daggers. Blind he might be, but he was still a trained Crownsguard.

Shuffling footsteps warned of the man’s approach; a wave of stench hit Ignis’s nostrils and he hid a wince. “We don’t want trouble,” he said, making his voice calm. “We just want the ring back. Have you seen it?”

“Good luck,” the second voice said, somewhere between sarcastic and bitter.

The first man shouted again, not at Ignis this time but off to the side, though he didn’t back off. Ignis hesitated, calculating his options, but before he could move, a third voice said, “What has it got in its pocketses, precious?” The voice was low and sibilant and oddly accented, crawling along Ignis’s spine like cold fingers, and at the end of the last word, broke into a weird gulping cough.

Behind him, Kate stiffened, and he started to shift to put himself between her and the new voice. But then Kate said, deliberately, “Riddles in the dark.”

Something changed; Ignis couldn’t have said what, but Kate had turned slightly toward the voice and there was an odd cadence to her voice that somehow fit with the creepy way the third man spoke. The first one huffed and stomped away, still occasionally shouting unintelligibly but apparently no longer interested in them. The second man said, “He’s been like that since Billy burned. Ain’t worth talking to him.”

“Billy?” Ignis asked.

“It’s dangerous, my precious,” the third man hissed. There was no reason in his voice, nothing sane. “It burns. It kills. He thought it was pretty and it killed him.”

“It happened a month or so ago,” the second man said, echoing Kate’s words with grim irony. “I wasn’t there.”

“Why do you wants it, precious?” the third man cut in. “What will you do with it?”

“We want to take it to Mordor,” Kate answered, as if that made any sense at all, “and cast it into the fires of Mount Doom.”

“They won’t let you,” the man said. “They see you. They see me. They’re angry with me.”

“They’ve been bound in servitude a very long time,” Kate said. “If we destroy the ring they will no
longer be bound. No one else will be in danger from them.” She stepped forward, out from behind Ignis, but the man made that awful choking noise again and she flinched back. Ignis shifted to keep himself between her and the man; he still had no idea what they were talking about but clearly it meant something to both of them.

“Will you give it to us?” Kate said gently. “Please. We’ll take it to Mordor.”

Silence for a long moment, under the background roar of the city. Ignis held his breath. Then a faint sound of movement, and the Ring of the Lucii appeared.

He still couldn’t see it, of course, but he sensed it, its subtle hum rising to a throbbing drumbeat for a moment before fading again. Without thinking, Ignis stepped forward, holding out his hand. “Please,” he said.

Another long hesitation. “Promise,” the man said finally, and for the first time almost sounded sane. “Promise you’ll destroy it. It killed him.”

“We’ll take it to where it was forged and destroy it,” Kate said. “I promise.”

A flutter of motion and hot fingers pressed the Ring into Ignis’s outstretched hand. It throbbed against his palm, and for a horrible moment his left eye throbbed with it, pain roaring through his skull more intense than it had been in weeks. Ignis gasped and doubled over, curling protectively around the Ring even as he pressed the heel of his free hand into his eye. Somewhere far away he heard Kate calling his name, and made himself take a breath. His eyes still screaming with pain, he straightened and gasped out, “I’m fine. It’s the Ring, it’s real.”

Kate wrapped an arm around his waist, steadying him. “Thank you,” she said to the men. “Here.” She moved, reaching; Ignis heard another flurry of motion as one of them took whatever she’d held out. Money, probably; recompense for their aid. Kate said again, “Thank you,” then tugged Ignis away, leading him up the sidewalk back to the car.

He let her steer him, barely aware of the city around him. The Ring’s magic pulsed in time with his heartbeat, blood pounding in his head, behind his eyes. Saltwater memories of Altissia flickered through his mind, brief useless flashes of waves and crumbled stone and Imperial soldiers. Over all of it echoed another memory: standing on wet stone, Noctis sprawled at his feet, and King Regis’s voice, whispering in Ignis’s ear as the Ring’s magic engulfed him:

Save my son.
Phantom Memories

Chapter Notes

So this chapter is slightly less dramatically revelatory now that Episode: Ignis has scooped my plot, but I managed to steal some stuff from Ep: I in return...

“So what the hell was that about?” Kate asked as she pulled the car out of the parking lot.

Ignis fought the urge to press his hand against his left eye. He held the Ring clutched in a fist, and its magic pulsed in time with his heartbeat, making his eye throb and burn. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “The Ring’s magic is… resonating with me.”

“That’s ominous,” Kate said. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I think so, yes.” He took a deep breath, trying to shove his awareness of the Ring’s power as deep within himself as he could, reversing the process by which he’d awakened it while searching. “What about you? What was that business with… what was it, Murder?”

“Mordor,” Kate corrected. “This reality doesn’t have superpowered magic rings, but we have more than one story about them. That guy was referring to one of the best-known fantasy stories in pop culture, the Lord of the Rings.” She took a deep breath, then recited, “Three rings for the elven-kings under the sky, seven for the dwarf-lords in their halls of stone, nine for mortal men doomed to die, one for the Dark Lord on his dark throne; in the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie. One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them, one ring to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them; in the Land of Mordor where the shadows lie.”

“Now that’s ominous,” Ignis said.

“Yeah,” Kate agreed. “The One Ring is… okay well it’s not actually that much less friendly than the Ring of the Lucii, given the Lucii’s tendency to barbeque people, but it has a much scarier purpose. Basically, the Dark Lord Sauron created it, and the other rings in the poem, so that he’d have ultimate power over the leaders of the races. He was defeated and lost the Ring, but eventually someone finds it and he wakes up and tries to take over the world again. The story is about taking the One Ring back to Mount Doom in Mordor, where it was forged, to destroy it.”

“I see,” Ignis said. “That man made you promise to destroy this ring—” holding up his hand with the Ring of the Lucii clenched in his fist. “I hope you were being metaphorical.”

“…Yeah,” Kate said. There was something odd in her tone, but before he could call her on it she added, “I mean, I don’t even know where the Ring of the Lucii was forged. Didn’t the gods give it to the first Lucis Caelum?”

“So says the Cosmogony,” Ignis said. He hesitated, but whatever oddity had been in her voice was gone now. Perhaps he’d imagined it, or perhaps it was simply the stress of dealing with a man whose grip on reality was less than solid. “What about the… they that man spoke of? The ones he said were angry with him? You said they’d been bound for a long time. Was that also a reference to this One Ring?”
“Maybe?” Kate said. “In Lord of the Rings, Sauron uses the One Ring to communicate with the nine Ringwraiths, the ‘mortal men doomed to die’ in the poem. But in your world, when Nyx put on the Ring of the Lucii, he was able to see and speak with the Lucii themselves, the kings and queens of old. I don’t know if that guy was actually hearing the Lucii or just hallucinating the Ringwraiths.” She shrugged, her jacket rustling. “I guess it doesn’t matter either way. Unless… can you hear them? The Lucii?”

Ignis shook his head. “I only sense the magic of the Crystal.”

Kate made a sound of acknowledgement, and they fell silent for a minute. He didn’t know what was going through her mind, but Ignis was thinking about the poem she’d recited and what the man who’d held the Ring for a month might have heard, or sensed. He wished they’d been able to talk to the man more, but even if the Ring hadn’t caused Ignis to react as it had, the man hadn’t seemed lucid enough for further conversation.

“So…” Kate said suddenly, breaking the silence, “we have the Ring now. You _did_ bring it here. Which means you would’ve had to have reached Lunafreya in Altissia to get it. I don’t suppose that’s ringing any bells?”

Ignis hesitated again. He didn’t want to mention the memory of Regis yet, not until he was more certain of it. Of what it meant. It might be no more than a hallucination of his own - or it might be that Regis’s spirit had joined those of his ancestors in whatever astral domain they slept in while they awaited the coming of the Chosen King. Had Regis somehow intervened in Altissia? Was it he who’d sent Ignis to this reality with the Ring? But if so, _why_? Save Noctis from _what_?

Finally he said, “Nothing especially helpful, no. But… you said the other day that Noctis gets thirteen Royal Arms, that there are thirteen Lucii.”

“Yeah?”

“There were a hundred and thirteen crowned Kings and Queens of Lucis before Noctis,” Ignis said. “Twelve of them were immortalized in the form of the Old Wall of Insomnia, and I noticed some time ago that despite there being a hundred and thirteen Arms and tombs, we’ve only found those which correspond to those twelve Lucii - except for the Trident of the Oracle, which you said is yet to come.”

“Right,” Kate said, her tone cautious. Ignis would have to be careful with his next question, or she might refuse to answer on the grounds of it being something he wasn’t yet supposed to know. He thought about the rumors that had swirled since the fall of Insomnia, the burning pain of the memory of Regis’s voice, the very few things which Kate had said about the Lucii.

Finally he said, “Is Regis the thirteenth Lucii?”

A long pause, probably Kate trying to figure out how to answer - but the pause itself was answer enough. “If he wasn’t,” Ignis said, “you’d have already said so.”

Kate chuckled. “Fair. Yeah, he’s the thirteenth.”

“Regis has no tomb,” Ignis said, thinking out loud, “but Ravus Nox Fleuret has taken to carrying around the king’s sword.” The tattered edges of a memory flickered through his mind, there and gone almost before he realized it: Ravus stalking past him, close enough to touch. He reached for the memory, struggled to pull it back, but came up empty. Still, even that momentary flicker was _something_. Ignis had no solid memories of being so close to the Imperial High Commander, not even during the confrontation in the Imperial base at Aracheole Stronghold. Which meant he must
have seen Ravus during the Leviathan covenant in Altissia. A lone puzzle piece with nothing to which to connect it, but at this point every piece was critical. “I take it Noctis acquires Regis’s sword from Ravus at some point?”

“...More or less, yeah,” Kate said, her tone implying more.

Ignis nodded. Noctis hadn’t got the sword yet, which meant Ravus would certainly turn back up - most likely in Gralea. That was a matter for after Ignis rejoined his prince, but there was another question he needed an answer to. “If I recall correctly,” he said, “back when I first arrived, you showed me a scene from the game which indicated Ravus was in Altissia shortly before the covenant took place. Is it known whether he was present during the covenant itself?”

“I… think so?” Kate said. “It’s implied, at least - he’s the one in charge of the Imperial attack on Leviathan. But aside from that scene at the beginning of Chapter Nine, we don’t see him again until—” She broke off. “Until later.”

“In Gralea,” Ignis prodded.

A long pause, though this time he could feel the weight of her gaze on him: assessing, trying to determine what he’d figured out. Finally Kate said, “I still don’t want to break your world.”

“I’m not asking you to,” Ignis said. “But it’s not that difficult a guess. Ravus *is* the Imperial High Commander, after all. Gralea - the Imperial capital city - is a logical place to find him.”

“True.” Kate sighed. “For what it’s worth, I’m not hiding anything about that part. He just goes AWOL between that scene at the beginning of Chapter Nine and when he turns up again for like five seconds in Chapter Thirteen. A lot of people complained about it, actually.”

“Really? Why?”

“This is going to sound… I don’t know,” Kate said, “but… remember I talked about all those references in the game to previous games?” Ignis nodded and she continued, “Ravus *is* composed *entirely* of Square Enix villain tropes. Badass longcoat, long white hair, tragic backstory, dramatic introduction, acts stuck-up to hide deep-seated anxiety over who and what he is… He follows Sephiroth, Seymour, Seifer, and Riku’s playbook beat for beat until he just kinda… vanishes after that conversation with Ardyn in Altissia.”

“But Noctis gets Regis’s sword from him in Gralea,” Ignis pressed. He was taking a risk pushing so hard, that she might stop talking altogether, but he thought she’d slipped into full-blown fan ranting. He might be able to get her to say something she wouldn’t otherwise.

Kate sighed, but sure enough, it sounded less like annoyance at Ignis and more exasperation with what, to her, was nothing more than a poorly-written piece of a video game story. “Yeah. The whole thing just felt like the writers went, ‘sh*t, we need to do something with Ravus’, and came up with a quick and mostly off-screen way to write him out. So Ravus fans, and honestly even just people who were expecting the usual Square Enix character arc for him, felt let down.”

“I see,” Ignis said. He was tempted to push for more details; he’d stretched his luck quite far already but he needed every bit of information he could get. Carefully he said, “I’m not at all certain of it, but I think I remember being with Ravus in Altissia.”

“Yeah?”

He nodded. “Based on our encounter with him in Aracheole Stronghold, I had thought he and the Lady Lunafreya were at odds with each other, but the Altissia conversation between Ravus and
Chancellor Izunia suggests otherwise. Do you think it’s possible he managed to meet with Lunafreya there, and got the Ring of the Lucii from her at some point?”

“No,” Kate said immediately. “I mean, yes, he met with her and she actually tried to give him the Ring to give to Noctis - there’s a flashback later that shows it - but he told her to keep it, that it was her calling to deliver it to Noct. Why do you ask?”

Ignis drummed his fingers on his leg. “I had thought perhaps he’d been involved with my transportation here. He did try to use the Ring once already.”

“I kinda suspect that after having his entire arm burned off, he wouldn’t be too eager to try it again,” Kate said dryly. “Anyway, if he put it on to send you here, then how did it end up here with you?”

Ignis froze. The Ring throbbed in his palm, sending a spike of pain through his eyes. The answer was so obvious, yet neither of them had realized it. “I put on the Ring,” he breathed. “It was I who used it.”

Kate was silent for a long time, and Ignis was distantly grateful for the standstill traffic because he suspected she was staring at him. Finally she said, “But… why? I mean, you’re not a Lucii - you’d have to have known you couldn’t use the Ring.”

“I’ve no idea,” Ignis admitted. “But evidently something made me believe I could, and moreover, I was apparently able to tap into its power enough to send myself here.” The memory of Regis’s voice echoed through his mind once more: save my son. What did Regis know - what had Ignis himself known, before trauma swallowed his memories - that had made him willing to risk something so dangerous?

“It… kinda makes sense, I guess,” Kate said thoughtfully. “I mean, the Ring does have that Alterna spell. And it might even explain what happened to your eyes - the Ring’s power is associated with burning. Ravus’s arm burns off, Nyx’s body burns up from the inside out, and even when Noct uses the Ring’s power, his arm starts to charcoal.” Ignis turned to stare at her in horror, and she added quickly, “It goes away once he stops using the power, though.”

“That’s not reassuring,” he said. He’d known - everyone knew - that drawing on the power of the Crystal via the Ring caused horrendous physical stress to the Lucis Caelums. He’d secretly dreaded the day Noctis would ascend the throne, because it meant watching his prince, his brother, wither away as Regis had. His eyes throbbed again, the Ring’s power pulsing against his palm, as if to remind him of its deadly potency. To distract himself, he pointed out, “The Ring never ‘charcoaled’ Regis, nor any of the past kings. Why Noctis?”

“No idea,” Kate admitted. “There’s a kind of semi-confirmed fan theory that Noctis’s magic is weaker than his dad’s because of that daemon attack when he was a kid. Maybe that’s it?”

“Possibly,” Ignis said. “He and the king both believe that attack stunted his ability to use magic, that it was staged by the Empire specifically for that reason, if not to kill him outright.” He shook his head, then stopped when the movement made his eyes hurt more. “But that doesn’t make me feel any better about the fact that the Ring whose power he must wield to save our world will cause him such harm.”

“…Sorry,” Kate said quietly.

“I suppose there’s naught to be done about it at the moment,” Ignis said reluctantly. “And in any case, I believe you’re right about my eyes.” He gave in to the urge to press his hand against his left
eye, trying to quell the pain; after a moment it faded enough that he could think. “Unfortunately, it likely rules out any attempt to use the Ring to return myself to my world. If it extracts a similar cost for using its power a second time…” He didn’t finish. He didn’t want to think about how useless he already was, never mind how much more so he could become.

“Yeah,” Kate said. “But at least you have it now.”

“Indeed,” he agreed. “We’re heading to the convention tomorrow. You said you don’t think the game will move forward very far in the meantime, yes?”

“Probably no farther than the stop in Tenebrae,” Kate agreed. “Like I said, the timeline is fuzzy on the train.”

Ignis nodded. It meant he likely wouldn’t be able to prevent Ardyn Izunia from tricking Noctis into hurting Prompto, but he’d have to trust his prince to hold it together until Ignis could get there. In the meantime, he had to do everything he could to figure out what Kate wasn’t telling him. He was more and more convinced that it had something to do with Noctis’s destiny, with his status as the Chosen King and what was hiding behind the prophecy’s vague pronouncements. Regis’s spirit had said save my son.

But from what?

*Hold on, Noctis*, he thought, as if Noct could hear him. *I’ll be there soon. And whatever it is that your father was afraid of, I’ll find out. I swore an oath to stand by your side.*

*I won’t let you down.*
The game hadn't yet moved forward by the time they set out for the convention in Kate's car on Thursday morning. The drive occupied the majority of the day, and Ignis and Kate spent the time discussing strategies for gaining access to the developers who would be in attendance. Kate suspected, and Ignis agreed, that it wouldn't be nearly so simple as walking up to them. Access to such valuable employees would be tightly controlled, for one thing. Moreover, announcing in public that he was the real Ignis Scientia while at a convention full of people in costume would only draw bemused chuckles.

No, they would have to get one of the developers alone, in private, where Ignis could summon a weapon to prove his identity without causing an uproar. But this conference didn't offer any sort of private meet-and-greet, so Ignis would have to find some other excuse. “Or just like… corner one of them in a hallway,” Kate said, then sighed. “Easier said, of course. I don't even know what they look like, so it'll be hard to hunt them down.”

“You could always describe them to me,” Ignis said, straight-faced. “I could keep an eye out for them.”

It felt strange to joke about his blindness like that, but it was also an odd sort of relief. He’d spent too much time denying reality, those first few weeks after Altissia. If he was honest with himself, he even now still held a faint sliver of hope that his sight might recover. But he could accept his situation even while hoping it improved. Making bad jokes about it was a way to remind himself of that.

Kate snorted. “Sure,” she agreed. “You do that.”

“In all seriousness,” Ignis said, “we may be able to use my… situation to our advantage. Is it safe to assume your reality has accommodations for the disabled?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Well,” Ignis said, adopting a pained tone, “I did crack several ribs in that disastrous accident, and standing for any length of time is quite difficult. If I were to produce a doctor's note describing a need for accommodations, perhaps it wouldn't be too much trouble for my companion and me to be seated early in the panel?”

A long pause while Kate followed the logic. “And once we're in, we'll have a chance to catch one of the developers backstage, before the panel starts.”
“Precisely,” Ignis said. “Are you able to write such a note?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “I'd just need a printer so I can print it out with the official hospital headers and stuff. That might work!”

“At the very least, it gets us closer,” Ignis said. “You said there's two days of panels?”

“Saturday and Sunday,” she confirmed.

Ignis nodded. “Then we use tomorrow to gather as much information as possible. If we're lucky, we’ll happen across the developers then; if not, we attempt to enter the panels early and gain their attention that way.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

* * *

Several hours later, they’d dropped their luggage at a hotel and were headed to the convention center to pick up their badges. Ignis had decided, after his disastrous performance in San Francisco, to make the three-block walk a test of his independent navigation skills. He couldn’t afford to panic in Gralea the way he had yesterday, and he couldn’t depend on his friends to steer him as Kate had done. So he’d instructed Kate not to guide him or intervene in any way, except to provide basic directions, unless he was in immediate physical danger. Still, in an act of either minor cowardice or common sense, he didn't push her away when she walked close enough that their elbows bumped occasionally.

“The stair to the sidewalk should be… here, I believe?” Ignis asked, tapping his cane on the ground as they emerged from the hotel’s front door.

“Yep,” Kate said.

Ignis felt his way forward slowly, finding the stairs with the cane and easing down them to the sidewalk. At Kate's murmured direction he turned left, dodging the voices of a group of passers-by and setting out. Even after a month of practice, even after the venture to San Francisco yesterday, walking like this was terrifying: cars zipped past just a few feet away, and he couldn't shake the constant feeling that he was about to run face-first into a lamppost. But the sidewalk was relatively smooth, and he was learning to move his feet in a way that was less likely to catch on the small bumps and cracks a sighted person never noticed avoiding.

His cane thwacked against something metallic and he steered carefully around it, resisting the urge to stop and examine it until he knew what it was. If he started doing that, he’d never get anywhere. Voices chattered around him: other people making use of the sidewalk, flowing around Ignis and Kate in waves. He knew he walked too slowly now, timid with the cane, knew how much it would annoy his friends when he rejoined them. Despite the fear fluttering in his stomach, he sped up, trying to reach a more normal walking speed, enough to match Gladio's long-legged stride, Noct's impatient half-jog—

“Careful!”

Focused on speed, Ignis had forgotten to lift his feet. His foot snagged on something and he stumbled, flailing for balance. Caught himself before he went down, an instant before Kate grabbed his arm. He leaned on her anyway, heart pounding. “Damn,” he hissed through gritted teeth. His hands clenched around the cane and he had to fight the urge to throw it. Why was it so much harder to not trip just because he couldn't see? It wasn't as though he’d gone around staring at
“Hey,” Kate said gently. “You didn't fall. And we're almost to the convention center. You're doing great.”

“Please don't coddle me,” Ignis said, and sighed. His ribs ached from the sudden movement and he was so, so very tired of being unable to see.

“I’m not,” Kate said. She elbowed him in the arm. “There's nothing easy about this, Ignis. Celebrate the little victories.”

He bit back his first response, which was walking on one's own without tripping is not a victory, it's a baseline. Settled instead for, “I'll celebrate when I manage an entire trip without stumbling.”

“Promise?” Kate said. “We can get ice cream.”

Ignis snorted a laugh despite himself. She sounded like an overexcited child. Like Prompto begging to eat at Kenny Crow’s, and he suspected the resemblance was not unintentional.

“Agreed,” he said. “If I make the trip back without stumbling, we’ll have ice cream.”

“Woo!” Kate grabbed his hand and pumped it into the air.

He couldn't help but smile as he resumed walking, forcing himself to keep the pace and not slow down out of fear of a repeat of his earlier stumble. A minute or two later, his cane tapped against the edge of a curb, and he stopped again, listening to the traffic rushing by in front of him. Turned and felt around with the cane and his hand until he found the post that held the crosswalk button. Pressed it and waited, though if this crosswalk didn't have audio cues, he wouldn't have any way to know—

No. Pay attention.

Other people gathered around him, voices chattering easily in the cool evening air. Footsteps: the soft padding of sneakers, the slap of flip-flops, the sharp clicks of fancier shoes coming to a stop beside and behind him. A few people jostling their way up front. The rush of cars zipping past in the street beyond. Ignis waited, senses straining, and soon the hiss of tires slowed, stopped. A pause, then movement around him, footsteps picking back up as the people around him began to cross the street.

Ignis listened carefully for approaching cars before joining them. Kate didn't shout and there was no sudden squealing of brakes, so Ignis crossed, and even managed to step up onto the opposite curb without so much as breaking stride. He barely needed Kate’s murmured direction; nearly everyone in the crowd was also apparently going toward the convention center, and he only had to follow along with them as they turned ninety degrees and crossed the street again, then went off at an angle across a wide plaza of some sort.

It was perhaps a good thing, then, that he didn't need directions - the closer they got to the convention center, the more distracted Kate became. “Ooh, that's a good Dante,” she said, her voice turning away from him as she looked. “And that's a… yep, that's a Zarya, and…”

Ignis only half paid attention; even if he'd been able to see the costumed attendees, he wouldn't have recognized them. He did try to listen for anyone seeming to recognize him, but he’d slicked his hair back instead of spiking it, and the clothes he wore - jeans, a polo shirt, and a blazer Kate had told him was a rich burgundy - had been purchased in this reality. The whole ensemble was enough unlike his normal garb that no one called him out directly, and he only heard a handful of
curious whispers.

They followed the crowd across the plaza and another street, then up a set of wide shallow steps. At the top, a bored-sounding man directed people to follow the corded lines; Ignis found the little plastic stanchion supporting a thin rope, and followed the rope with his fingers until his cane bumped the heels of the last person in line.

Then it was simply a matter of shuffling forward in time with the rest of the queue, and a long enough wait that his little lie about the pain of his ribs grew unpleasantly close to truth. Finally they reached the front, picked up their badges and programs, and made their way through the milling crowd back to the sidewalk. Kate got him started in the right direction, but otherwise offered no assistance until they’d reached the front door of their hotel.

“You made it!” Kate said. “I didn't have to help you at all.”

“So I did,” Ignis said.

“Little victories, remember?” Kate said, and he heard the smile in her voice. “There’s a Pinkberry next door. C’mon, let’s get that ice cream.”

Ignis smiled back, only half faking, as he followed her voice toward the ice cream shop. Little victories, indeed. Tomorrow they would attend the conference proper, and the day after they would find a way to meet with one of the game's developers. Less than two days, and if everything went to plan, Ignis would be back at Noct's side. Every little victory between then and now was one more chance to stay there, to prove - both to his friends and to himself - that he still belonged there.

Two days. Little victories.

He could do this.
The Convention

Chapter Notes

Subtitle: "In which Ignis finds out some things, including why Kate thought it was so funny when he said *recipe*".

Also, since Ignis's accent is handwaved in canon, I'm declaring it to be the official Tenebrae accent, since Luna, Ravus, and Luna's... aide? guardian? whatever that lady is, also speak with British accents.

The next morning, Ignis dressed in his Crownsguard uniform for the first time since the hospital. It had been washed and pressed, and he substituted a spare pair of cufflinks from the armory for the one whose twin had been lost in Altissia. The Ring of the Lucii went into an inner breast pocket, its magic thrumming in time with his heartbeat. He spiked his hair, gel sticky on his fingers as he combed and prodded it, letting muscle memory take over to hopefully achieve his usual style. He shaved, careful and thorough, his fingers skimming over his chin until he was certain he hadn't missed any spots.

Then he paused, and ran a gentle fingertip over the scars that marred his face. The small ones on his nose and lip could barely be felt, already mostly healed. The bigger cut through his right eyebrow was still tender to the touch and much more noticeable, conjuring a mental image of a reddish line like the one down Gladio's face. And the biggest scar, the hideous stretch of taut rough tissue surrounding his left eye…

Ignis flinched away from his own hand. He couldn't even lie to himself that it was simply still sore; he had very little feeling at all on that side of his face. He'd worked, these last few weeks, to keep the eye from sealing shut, but still couldn't hold it open for more than a few seconds at a time. Even if he could... he was under no illusions about how gruesome it must look.

He dropped his hands to the bathroom counter, bracing himself. Took a deep breath, let it out slowly. The people who would see him today at the conference would believe the injuries no more than expert makeup. Noct wouldn't care. And since the entirety of Lucis's various council bodies had been dispersed when Insomnia fell, Ignis had no reason to concern himself about how they might have reacted. The scar was there; he could no more change that than he could change his height or the sound of his voice.

One more deep breath, in and out. He found his sunglasses where they sat beside his hand, and settled them on his nose. Summoned his dagger, the familiar weight comforting against his palm. Noct was still alive, still fine. Ignis would do far worse things than walk blind and scarred through a convention hall full of strangers if that was what it took to return to his prince. He let the dagger vanish back into the armory, and walked out of the bathroom.

"Whoa," Kate said. Surprise in her voice, and something else he couldn't quite place.

Self-conscious, Ignis resettled the glasses on his nose, ran a hand down the front of his jacket. "Is something wrong?"

"Uh," Kate said. "No, I mean, um." She paused, floundering, and Ignis realized that she sounded
the way people often did when meeting King Regis for the first time - almost awed. “It's just,” Kate continued, “it's… You've always looked like you, but now you're completely on-model and just… Wow.” She gave a self-deprecating chuckle. “Sorry. What I mean is, you look good.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, though he could feel the color rising in his cheeks. He was supposed to be invisible, the unnoticed aide to the crown prince. He wasn't quite sure how to feel about being admired.

“Everyone's going to want a picture of you,” she said. “Oh - and that reminds me. Anyone who hears you talk is going to ask you to say the thing.”

“What thing?”

“It's basically your in-game catchphrase,” Kate said, then, in an exaggerated Tenebrae accent with almost aggressive enthusiasm: “That's it! I've come up with a new recipe!”

Ignis raised his eyebrows.

“Don't look at me like that,” Kate protested. “I didn't write it. But in the game you say it every time you get a new ingredient or eat at a new restaurant. They only recorded it once though so you sound that excited every time.”

“I don't recall ever saying it once, much less at every new eatery,” Ignis said. “But if you insist…” He paused, remembering the cadence of her words, then tried, “That's it! I’ve come up with a new recipe!”

Kate laughed. “Perfect! So when people ask you to say the thing, just do exactly that.”

At least this explained why she’d giggled in the car a few days ago when he’d said recipe. “Any other, er, catchphrases I should be aware of?” Ignis asked.

“I can give you some on the walk over,” Kate said. A rustle of fabric and creak of leather told him she’d stood up from the bed she’d been sitting on. “Man,” she muttered. “I forgot how hard it is to walk in these damn heels. How the hell does Aranea fight in them?”

“Quite skillfully,” Ignis said dryly. “Though I believe hers are augmented with Imperial magitek.”

“That would certainly help,” Kate said. “Ready to go?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Ignis answered. He found his cane where it leaned on the wall by the door. Kate came up beside him, her spurred boots jangling almost exactly like Aranea's, and together they headed out to the con.

* * *

Kate was even more distracted today than she'd been last night, watching the various cosplayers with an excitement that made it easy to forget she was a levelheaded emergency physician by trade. Ignis didn't bother trying to keep track of the characters she called out as they entered the convention center's main hall, instead focusing on not bumping into anyone or tripping on anything.

They hadn't gone very far across the hall before a young woman's voice called over the background chatter, “Can I take a picture?”

“It begins,” Kate murmured, just loud enough for Ignis to hear, and nudged his arm to turn him
toward the camera. Ignis smiled obediently, trying to pretend it was just Prompto behind the lens, to ignore the irrational nerves that twisted his stomach. Then Kate said, “On your left,” and Ignis turned again, and after that, another nudge back to the right.

A different woman's voice called, “Thank you!”, and Kate touched Ignis's elbow to start him moving forward again. Yet another voice said, “Great costumes!”, and Ignis made himself smile and tip his head in acknowledgement.

“This is quite unsettling,” he admitted to Kate. “I've grown accustomed to Prompto's camera, but I prefer to stay away from the media nearly as much as Noct.”

“Sorry,” Kate said, then, “Stairs.”

“It's hardly your fault,” Ignis said. His cane bumped against the step and he followed her up. “I could have chosen to wear a costume.”

“Should I not tell you how many people are taking pictures of us, then?”

He shuddered. “Please.”

They reached the top of the steps, their shoes clicking on the tiled floors, then Kate pulled him to a stop. “Another picture,” she said.

Ignis turned in the direction her touch indicated, ears straining to pick out the photographer from the general background roar of a large number of people in a large open space. Kate nudged him again, and as he turned a man’s voice said, “Wait, are you actually—” Then an embarrassed pause.

“Blind?” Ignis supplied, unable to keep the dryness from his voice. “Indeed.”

“Whoa,” someone else said. “You can do the accent, too!”

*You asked for this,* he reminded himself. Out loud, he said only, “It's best to play to one’s strengths.”

Another voice demanded, “Can you say it? Please?”

Clearly Kate hadn't been kidding. Ignis said the ridiculous recipe line, to a chorus of laughs and excited cheers, then had to pose for more pictures. This went on for several minutes, until Kate managed to extricate them and escape down a hallway.

“I think we'll be mostly safe here,” she said. “This is the hall where most of the sessions are, so everyone's focused on getting to the right room. The entrance and the connecting hall are the main photo areas.”

Ignis nodded, and made his way to the wall so he could lean on it and try to relax. “Where is the Square Enix room?”

“Up this way a bit,” Kate said. “You okay?”

“Fine,” he said, and flashed what he hoped was a convincing smile. “This is simply rather stressful.”

“Understandable,” Kate said. “Wanna check out the room now, or wait? I think there's nothing going on right now, just the demos and stuff.”

“Let's,” Ignis said. The sooner they made contact with the game developers, the sooner he’d be
“Okay.” Kate’s boots jangled as she stepped closer to touch his elbow, steering him lightly along the hall.

They waited through a short line to get into the room, behind excited fans hoping for a chance to try out one of the game demos on offer, or ogle the replica props from various hit titles. Ignis only half-listened to Kate’s explanation of the remastered titles being demonstrated, most of his attention on listening for any hint that a developer might be near. There was none, of course; they weren’t scheduled to arrive until the following day. But Ignis still hoped, on the off-chance that he could go home a day sooner.

As they walked through the room, several people stopped them to compliment their costumes or request photographs. Ignis posed obligingly, though he was already well sick of the attention and regretting his choice not to wear a disguise. Kate, at least, seemed to enjoy it - but then, she’d made her costume, was being praised for her ability to impersonate someone else. Ignis was just himself - a scarred and damaged version perhaps, but to these people, who thought it all fake, all the more impressive for it.

Finally Kate said, “As much fun as this is, I don't think there's anyone here we can talk to today. Do you want to walk around the con some, see what else is here?”

Ignis shook his head. “You go ahead,” he said. “If it's all the same, I’d prefer to stay here, just in case.”

“You sure?” Kate asked. “I really don't think you're going to find anyone today.”

“Perhaps.” Ignis said, keeping his voice neutral. “But it's less hectic in here, and I can rest a bit while you look around the place without me slowing you down.”

Kate hesitated; he heard the creak of leather as she shifted uncertainly. “Are you sure?”

“Very,” Ignis said, and smiled. “Please, go on. I’ll be fine.”

“All right,” she said finally. “Crud, I should have gotten you a cell phone so we could keep in touch if we split up.”

“I still can't use it,” Ignis reminded her gently. “Really, I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Okay, it's eleven-thirty right now. How about I come back at one and we'll go find lunch?”

“It's a plan,” Ignis agreed.

“All right,” Kate said. “See you in a bit!”

Ignis waved as she walked away, boots jangling. Once she was out of hearing, he sank down onto a chair and leaned on his cane, forehead pressed against the back of his hands. His ribs ached more than he’d wanted to admit to Kate, but worse by far was the crawling feeling of guilt, of rage at being stuck here posing for photographs and saying stupid lines like a carnival attraction, while his friends fought and hurt and mourned. Even knowing that he was doing everything he could to get back - doing the only thing in his power - did nothing to assuage it. Noct needed him, and he wasn't there, and it was the worst feeling in the world.

A few people asked for pictures as he sat there; a few more asked him to say the lines. He played
along, mostly for lack of a reason not to; it at least distracted him from the guilt. When the last of them had gone, he sat back down and leaned his head against the wall behind him.

Someone across the room said, “Whoa! Do you think he's an actor?”

“I doubt it,” another voice answered. “The program didn't say anything about actors. I think he's just a really good cosplayer.”

They were talking about Ignis. He sat up straight and flashed a polite smile in the direction of the voices.

“Scuse me,” the first voice said tentatively, closer now. It sounded like a young man, perhaps still in his teens. “Are you…”

“Not an actor,” Ignis said.

“Wow,” he said. “Your costume's incredible!”

“Can we take a photo?” the boy's companion asked. Ignis nodded and stood, managing not to startle when a hand rested on his shoulder. “Over here,” the companion said. She sounded equally young, and more bold than her hesitant friend. Ignis turned in the direction her hand indicated and smiled until he heard the click of a shutter.

“You're actually blind, huh?” the girl asked. “Is that why you wanted to cosplay Ignis?”

“Among other reasons,” Ignis agreed, and didn't quite manage to keep the dryness from his voice.

Fortunately, neither teen seemed to notice. “How do you play the game, then?” the boy asked. “Do you watch let's plays, or, uh…” He trailed off awkwardly, apparently realizing what he'd said.

Ignis smiled to let him know it was fine. “A friend plays,” he said. “I follow along.”

It hit him then, with all the suddenness of an iron giant’s fist, that these teens were fans of the game - and that they didn’t know who he was. Didn’t know about Kate’s desire not to tell him how the game ended, what secret she was hiding from him. He’d have to be careful to not betray his own ignorance, to keep up the illusion that he was simply another fan, but here at last was someone who could tell him what he needed to know to keep Noctis safe - and Kate wasn’t there to prevent it.

“Oh, cool,” the girl was saying. “Are you a professional cosplayer? You’re really good.”

“Not at all,” Ignis said, “though I appreciate the compliment. The part simply fit.” He needed to keep the conversation going, to steer it where he needed it to go, so he asked, “Are you cosplaying?”

“Yeah,” the boy said. “I’m Sora, and she’s Kairi. The Kingdom Hearts 2 versions. We have a friend who’s doing Riku, but he doesn’t get here until later tonight.”

“Oh,” Ignis said. “Well, from what I can see, your costumes are excellent.”

“Oh my God,” the girl said, a laugh in her voice. “You even make the same terrible jokes Iggy does.”

“As I said, the part fit.” He smiled again, then, trying not to sound as self-conscious or fake as he felt, added, “I'll admit I feel somewhat of a... connection with him.”
“Is he your favorite character, then?” the girl jumped in. Before he could answer, she added, “Mine’s Prompto. He’s such a cinnamon roll, it’s adorable.”

What breakfast pastries had to do with Prompto, Ignis couldn’t fathom. Still, it was an opening. Prompto would absolutely kill him if he knew about this conversation, but needs must. Ignis said, “His storyline is quite tragic.”

“I mean,” the boy piped up, “the entire freaking game is tragic. The only one of the bros who comes out kind of okay is Gladio, but even he has to live the rest of his life knowing he failed as Noct’s Shield.”

Ignis fought to keep his expression neutral, his breathing steady. He’d guessed that Kate was hiding something terrible, but that was far more ominous even than he’d thought. It was probably too much to hope that the boy only referred to the fight between Noctis and Gladio in Cartanica, but Ignis said anyway, “How so?”

He realized it was a stupid question the moment he said it, that if he’d truly played the game then he ought to know the answer. But the girl said, “He didn’t fail. He got Noctis to the throne. It’s not his fault the gods are dicks. Noct’s destiny is bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit!” the boy protested. “Noct has to die because it takes a life to end the Starscourge. The King’s life for those of the people. It’s why the gods needed a Chosen King in the first place.”

They kept arguing, but Ignis didn’t hear any of it. His brain had caught on one phrase and stuck there.

_Noct has to die because it takes a life to end the Starscourge._

_Noct has to die._
Noct has to die.

The words rang in Ignis's head like a scream, drowning out whatever else the two teenagers were saying. In the back of his mind he knew he should be paying attention, knew that they might say more of import, but he couldn't get past that one simple phrase, so calmly stated. Of course, to these teens, it was nothing more than a discussion of characters in a video game. But to Ignis, it was the end of his world.

He squeezed the grip of his cane until his hand ached, gritted his teeth until he managed to wrench himself back under control. The way to help Noct is to find out as much as you can, he told himself firmly. If you want to save him, you must know what's coming.

When he was finally able to tune back in to their conversation, the boy was saying, “How else would it work? He has to be inside the Crystal to banish the Starscourge, and you can't just walk in there.”

“The Crystal sucked him in at the end of Chapter Thirteen,” the girl pointed out. “Why couldn't it just do that again once he takes the throne, then spit him back out when he’s done?”

“It's symbolic,” the boy insisted. “All those people died so he could ascend the throne. By giving his own life, he’s honoring their sacrifices and giving power to the Crystal.”

“All those people died because the gods are assholes who couldn't clean up after their own mistake,” the girl said. “If they’d just killed Ardyn way back when he first went Dark Side, instead of making him immortal and leaving him to get two thousand years’ worth of pissed, none of this would have been an issue!”

“They couldn't!” the boy said. “They were weak from the Astral War. And the Crystal needed enough time to gather the power to banish the Starscourge anyway.”

“It's just excuses,” the girl grouched. “He didn't have to die, is all I’m saying.”

“Whatever,” the boy retorted.

The girl’s voice shifted, giving the impression she'd turned back to Ignis. “Sorry,” she said. “Old argument. Anyway, thanks for the photo - you make an awesome Ignis!”

He managed to thank her in a voice that sounded mostly normal. Their footsteps padded away across the carpet and Ignis sank back down into his chair. Then bowed his head over his cane, resting his forehead on the back of his hands. Thinking furiously, trying to commit everything the teens had said to memory.

Noct has to die to banish the Starscourge.

If the gods had killed Ardyn instead of making him immortal, none of this would have been an issue.

Noct has to be inside the Crystal to banish the Starscourge.
The Crystal sucked Noct in.

Noct has to die.

Kate hadn't mentioned any of this. But then, Kate had been exceptionally cagey about what happened in the latter half of the game, had been very careful not to let anything slip. Ignis had known she was hiding something; he just hadn't thought it was something so… so…

Ignis shuddered. In all his plans, in all his imaginings of what Noct's future would look like, none of it had involved Noct dying. Not until he’d had a long and prosperous reign, at least. That was what the Chosen King was supposed to do: restore harmony to the world, destroy the daemons and protect humanity from the Starscourge. Not die when he ascended the throne.

But then, King Regis had always seemed mournful on those few occasions he’d acknowledged Noct's status as Chosen King. Had bent over backward to give Noct everything he wanted, to let him live life to the fullest. Had he known, even back then? He must have - he was the one to whom the Crystal had revealed its choice. It was no wonder, then, that he'd gone to such lengths to give Noctis what happiness he could have, in the short time the Crystal had given him.

Had Lunafreya known? She was the Oracle, after all, with the gods’ Messengers as attendants. If she had known, and not said anything to Noct… Noct would be heartbroken. More so than he already was, for he would see it as a betrayal of the trust he had in her, as the only other person in the world who understood what it meant to be Chosen by the gods. Ignis tried to remember what she'd said in the scenes he’d watched from the game, but couldn't pinpoint anything to suggest one possibility over the other.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, thoughts chasing in horrified circles around that one awful phrase, Noct has to die. Thankfully, he must have appeared tired enough or lost in thought enough that no one else tried to talk to him, and eventually he heard the jangle of Kate’s boots.

It occurred to him, as he listened to her approach, that he was furious at her. Furious for hiding this, furious for thinking he didn’t have the right to know that his king, his brother, was destined to be offered as a lamb for slaughter. It took a painful amount of willpower to keep that anger off his face when he lifted his head.

“Hey,” Kate said. She sounded so normal that he almost lost it right there, almost screamed at her. Only the knowledge that they were in public, in a place where his outburst wouldn’t be understood, stopped him. “How’re you doing?”

It took effort to speak, and his voice came out strained. “Well enough.”

A long pause. Kate said, carefully, “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Ignis said. He stood up, the motion more abrupt than he’d meant; he heard her boots click as she took a quick step backward. Part of him knew he should apologize for startling her; the rest of him didn’t care.

“Um,” Kate said. Then, even more carefully, “Do you still want to get lunch?”

He realized she sounded worried - almost afraid. With another massive effort of will, he reined in the anger, the fear for Noct, and managed to sound mostly normal when he said, “Lunch would be nice, yes.” It would get them out of the convention center, away from cosplayers and intrusive photographers and a building full of people who thought Ignis’s life was nothing more than a tragic game.
“Okay,” she said. “There’s a Smashburger up the street a bit - you up for walking that far?”

“I’ll manage,” Ignis said, and tried to smile. He wasn’t sure how effective it was, but Kate took his elbow anyway, and they headed out of the convention center.

They were stopped several times along the way for more photos, but Ignis’s heart wasn’t in it and Kate could clearly tell, because she steered them down a side path and walked at a clip that projected We have places to be. A few hours ago, Ignis would have found such a speed terrifying; now, distracted by the grim thoughts swirling in his mind, he barely noticed. They reached the restaurant, ordered, and took their seats, and Ignis knew Kate knew something was up, because she picked a corner booth far away from the chatter of the other patrons.

Still, it wasn’t until their food arrived and the waiter had bustled off again that she said, “Okay, what’s going on?” Her tone was carefully neutral, not quite her doctor’s voice yet but clearly cautious.

Ignis took a deep breath. Folded his hands on the table to avoid the temptation to summon his daggers. Said, “The thing you’ve been hiding from me is that Noctis is going to—” The word choked him; he swallowed and tried again. “Going to die when he ascends the throne.”

There was a very long pause. Ignis clenched his hands together so tightly his gloves creaked, breathed slow and steady to keep himself from exploding.

Finally Kate said, “You asked someone else.” A laugh that held no humor. “I should’ve expected that.”

“What?!” Ignis ground out through clenched teeth, a dozen questions in that one word. Why does Noctis have to die? Why didn’t you tell me? Why don’t you want me to fix this? Why didn’t anyone else tell us?

Why does my king, my brother, have to die?

Another silence, as Kate seemed to decide which question to answer. She went with, “It’s not really clear. Bahamut just says that’s how it has to be, that there’s no other option.”

Ignis ground his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He hadn’t realized until that moment how much he’d been hoping she’d tell him he was wrong, he’d misunderstood the teens, they’d been lying. More questions bubbled in him, and he fought to focus. “You hid this from me.”

Leather creaked as Kate winced. “I’m sorry, Ignis,” she said. “I told you, I didn’t—”

The apology wasn’t enough, wasn’t remotely enough. “You should have told me,” he snapped. Hot fury raced through his veins and it took everything he had to keep his voice down.

“What good would it have done?” Kate demanded. “If I had told you, you’d try to change it and probably doom your entire world, whether or not you succeeded in saving Noctis—”

Something snapped inside him, fear and pain and grief flooding past the barriers of his self-control. Four long weeks of being away from his prince, blind and helpless and lost, his eyes destroyed and pain tearing through him. Trapped in a reality where his life was a game for people to laugh at and gossip about, where they dressed up as people he loved and made a mockery of their suffering. Terrified that something would happen to Noct before he could get back, terrified that he couldn’t go home at all, that if he did he’d be useless without his sight. Knowing Noctis needed him and he wasn’t there, and the fury simmering in his blood boiled over.
“How dare you!” Ignis roared. “Noctis is my brother! I don’t care about the world - it’s my job to protect him!”

Sudden silence fell, and he realized abruptly that he was on his feet, daggers in his hands as he leaned over the table, over Kate. The whole restaurant had gone quiet, and his mind supplied an image of all the other patrons staring at him.

Kate said, in the calm, level voice of an emergency physician, “Sit down, Ignis.”

But there was a quaver to it, too, barely noticeable but ringing loud in his ears all the same. He’d frightened her.

Good, a furious little voice whispered in the back of his mind. She deserves it.

He was breathing too hard, too furious to care about their audience, wanting nothing more than to attack something, anything, anything he could fight to save Noctis from the fate that awaited him. But the only person here who was remotely involved was Kate, and he still needed her, if he was to have any hope of getting home to Noctis.

It took more willpower than he knew he possessed to pack away the anger, shove it deep within himself until he could sit down again. His hands twisted on the grips of his daggers, and he barely remembered in time to shift his body to hide them from the watchful eyes of their audience before dismissing them into the armory.

The silence stayed for several long minutes. Ignis forced himself to take deep breaths, his fists clenched on the table, until gradually the other patrons lost interest and resumed chatting amongst themselves. His jaw was clenched so tightly it sent spikes of pain through his skull, throbbing in time with the soft pulses of the magic of the Ring of the Lucii where it sat in his breast pocket. This is what King Regis meant, Ignis realized suddenly. Regis’s spirit had said save my son.

The scent of saltwater flickered through his memory, the feel of pouring rain and blood dripping down his face, into his right eye. Ravus Nox Fleuret in front of him, screaming. Ardyn Izunia’s voice, though the words were lost to the watery haze. Still nothing solid, just flickers and phantoms, but he didn’t need the memories when he had the rest of his prince’s life mapped out in a Stars-forsaken game.

Save my son.

Ignis reached into his breast pocket, pulled out the Ring. It thrummed against his palm, and he clenched his fist around it. I won’t let you down, Majesty.

“Ignis,” Kate said quietly from across the table. Her fingers brushed the back of his knuckles, then when he didn’t pull away, wrapped around his hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“You kept quiet because you feared what I would do to protect Noct,” Ignis said. The white-hot fury was finally draining from him. He’d known she was hiding something awful, and she’d been up front about why she was doing it.

“Was I wrong?” she asked, dryly.

“...no,” he admitted. Because the first thing Ignis would do when this conversation finished, when he returned home, would be to find a way to save Noctis from his fated destiny. “If saving Noct means daemons still roam the dark corners of the world and terrorize the nighttime hours, then so be it. We’ve lived with it this long.”

“But that’s not what it means. If he doesn’t banish the Starscourge…” Kate sighed. “Did whoever
you talked to tell you about the World of Ruin?”

“No,” Ignis said. Fresh worry curled in his gut. “They mentioned only that ‘it takes a life to end the Starscourge’, as well as something about this having to do with Ardyn Izunia apparently having been kept alive by the gods for two thousand years.”

She blew out another sigh. “Lunafreya’s dead. She’s the Oracle, and the only one who can heal the Starscourge. Without her, the Scourge envelopes the entire world, creating eternal night.”

Her words hit him like a hobgoblin’s fists, his breath coming short as he processed the implications. But she wasn’t done: “Daemons run free for ten years, multiplying exponentially as more and more people are infected with the Starscourge and turn into daemons themselves. By the time Noctis gets out of the Crystal, apparently the entire remaining human population can fit in Lestallum. Most of the gods have been killed by the Empire. Ardyn Izunia can summon Ifrit the way Noctis summons the others, only Ardyn has partially daemonified Ifrit. If Noctis doesn’t end the Starscourge, Eos and every non-daemon creature on it will literally be destroyed.”

Ignis felt sick. The scenario she described was far beyond what he’d thought. The world could continue as it was now without Noctis’s death, where daemons were outnumbered by humans and died at the first touch of light. But what Kate described... “There has to be another way,” Ignis whispered.

“If there is, even the gods don’t know it,” Kate said. “Believe me, the fans have spent hundreds of hours on this. But since it’s not really clear why Noctis has to die, other than ‘Bahamut says so’, it’s hard to say what else could be done.”

Ignis shook his head. “There has to be a way,” he repeated. “The Ring… I still don’t know why I put it on in the first place, but when I did, I heard King Regis’s voice. His spirit, residing within the Ring.”

“That’s why you were so interested in whether he was one of the Lucii,” Kate said, and he nodded. She continued, “So you remember something from Altissia?”

He nodded again. “He said save my son. I believe he was the one who allowed me to tap into the Ring’s power, who sent me here. He believes there’s something I can do to save Noctis.”

“But what?” Kate said. “I mean, the game’s already written and published. If he sent you here to, I don’t know, hold the devs at knifepoint or something, it wouldn’t work - the ending’s already set.”

“But it’s not,” Ignis said fiercely. “That Stars-damned game has been changing from the moment I arrived. My being here alone is the butterfly effect, just as you said - the wing flap causing a tornado. There must be a way I can use that to save Noctis.” He set his free hand on top of hers and squeezed it, suddenly energized. “When we speak with the developers tomorrow, I need to have a plan for them. I need to know what to ask them for.” She didn’t respond, and he leaned in closer, tightened his grip on her hand. “Kate, please,” he said, and didn’t care that he was begging. “I need your help.”

Kate sighed silently, her breath brushing against his knuckles. The wait while she debated with herself was agony, but at long last, through his grip on her hand, he felt her steel herself. “Okay,” she said. “I always thought Noct deserved to live, anyway. What do you need me to do?”

A thread of relief curled in his chest, that she would help him, that he wouldn’t have to fight her for this any more than he already had. “You can start,” he said, “by telling me everything that is supposed to happen in the game, everything you know about the prophecy and the Cosmogony and
Ardyn Izunia. Once I know that, I can put together a plan.”

“Okay,” Kate said. She worked a hand free and nudged his forgotten burger toward him. “Better start eating, this is gonna take a while.”

He wasn’t especially hungry, but he did as he was told anyway, settling back into his seat and unwrapping the burger. Kate’s cup of soda rattled as she took a sip, then leather creaked as she shifted her weight. “So you know everything that’s happened up until they leave Cartanica,” she said. “After that, while they’re on the train, Ardyn shows up…”

She kept talking, and Ignis kept listening, drinking in her words as though he was at a war council for the Kingsglaive. *Save my son*, Regis had said.

*I will, Your Majesty*, Ignis thought fiercely. *I swear it.*

Chapter End Notes

We real-life folk now know (at least a little bit) more about Noctis's destiny, but this fic takes place a couple months or so after Episode: Prompto came out, so the various characters are discussing the situation without any context beyond that.

Also, Ignis actually getting angry, like downright *pissed*, is weirdly fun to write.
Had to start working out some... not plot holes, but places where I've been telling myself "I'll figure that out when I get to it". Well, I got to it, and I figured it out. Hopefully. XD

Ignis and Kate ended up retreating to the hotel for the remainder of the day, where Kate pulled up a walkthrough video on her phone so that Ignis could listen to how the game - how Noctis’s life - was supposed to end. She’d explained everything back at the restaurant, but Ignis had asked for this anyway, partially to make sure she wasn’t hiding or forgetting anything, but partially because he couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t believe the Astrals would be so cruel, couldn’t believe that Noct’s life would be cut short so unjustly.

He made it through the majority of the video: the interlude in Tenebrae, the conversation with Gentiana - apparently Shiva in disguise - on the train, their arrival in Gralea and the death of the Regalia, their separation and dual paths through Zegnautus Keep before reuniting and finding Prompto, Noctis’s entry into the Crystal and his conversation there with Bahamut, his escape ten years later, the second reunion at Hammerhead, their return to Insomnia and confrontation with Ardyn. But as game-Noctis reached the throne at last…

Ignis pressed a hand over his mouth. Listening to Noct’s gasps of pain as the swords of his ancestors cut through him, to the grief and love in his voice as he spoke at their last camp, was too much for Ignis to bear. As the credits rolled and the music swelled, he wrapped his arms around his stomach and curled around himself. Breathing hurt, and his stomach roiled horribly, his lunch threatening to come back up.

Kate said nothing, just stopped the video and rested a hand on his back. He leaned into the touch, needing it to ground himself against the horror of what he’d just heard. Finally he managed to wrest control of himself, to push down the emotions threatening to choke him. He sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’m not going to let that happen,” he said. His voice wobbled, and he swallowed.

“How do you think you can change it?” Kate asked. “I mean, it’s pretty uncompromising. The King’s life for those of his people.”

“I don’t know yet,” Ignis admitted. “I need time to think on it.”

“More time than the rest of tonight plus tomorrow morning?” she said carefully.

She meant, before he spoke to the developers and, hopefully, returned to his own world. Ignis shook his head in frustration. “Most likely. You said once that the timeline is ‘fuzzy’ after Cartanica? How fuzzy?”

“Well, the whole game plays fast and loose with dates,” Kate said. “Part of the gameplay-story segregation thing, I guess, because you can camp as much as you want, and therefore trigger as many night-day cycles as you want, even though as best anyone can tell the game officially takes place over about three months plus the time skip. We know the invasion of Insomnia happened on
May sixteenth, and Episode: Prompto has some timestamped notes that put it around July ninth. But except for that there’s no firm dates, just things like the ‘several weeks later’ after Altissia.”

Ignis considered her words, though doing so was difficult. His head spun, still trying to process everything else he’d heard in the video; he firmly pushed aside the memory of Noct’s dying cries and made himself focus on the immediate plan. “Episode: Prompto is probably beginning right now, correct?” he asked. “And Noctis and Gladio ought to be arriving in Tenebrae.”

“Today or tomorrow,” Kate agreed.

He nodded. “And you don’t know how much time passes between Noctis leaving Tenebrae and getting sucked into the Crystal.”

“No,” Kate said, but there was a hesitation in her voice and Ignis waited, ear tilted toward her, until she said, “But… when you find Prompto in Zegnautus, he’s…” She blew out a breath. “Given how inaccurate they are with their portrayal of other injuries, I wouldn’t take it as gospel, but if you look closely at him, he’s been in chains long enough for some of the bruises to start to go yellow.”

Ignis winced. Prompto might be Noctis’s friend first, but Ignis had grown quite fond of him over the years, and especially since they’d left Insomnia as he’d proven himself as loyal and dependable as any Crownsguard. He hated that Prompto would suffer so badly, and that there was nothing Ignis could do to prevent it.

With that thought, the memory of Noctis’s death hit him again, and he remembered the words of the boy back at the conference: *The only one who comes out kind of okay is Gladio.* But even that wasn’t accurate; Gladio might not have suffered either the loss of his sight or torture at Ardyn’s hands, but Ignis knew just how badly it would destroy him if Noct’s destiny came to pass. Gladio would live because Noctis had asked it, would take care of the world Noctis had entrusted to them, but he would be no more than an empty shell going through the motions.

As Ignis himself would be.

No, he thought. *That will not happen. I won’t let it.*

He dragged his focus back again. “Then I will have roughly a week after returning, before we reach the Crystal?”

“It’s as good a guess as any,” Kate said. “But unless you just… leave Prompto in Zegnautus, don’t get the Sword of the Father and kill daemon-Ravus, just go back to Insomnia… what can you do?”

“I’ll think of something,” Ignis said, with far more conviction than he felt. When she phrased it like that, it did sound insurmountable. She’d been right that the game, via Bahamut, made clear that Noct’s death was the only option. And while there had been little enough shown of the decade Kate referred to as the World of Ruin, seventeen-year-old Talcott’s description of the state of Eos after ten years of darkness had been starkly clear itself. Noctis had to destroy Ardyn and purge the Starscourge, or there wouldn’t be a world for him to live in, much less a Lucis for him to rule.

“Maybe you could…” Kate said, then sighed and shook her head, her hair rustling against the hooded sweatshirt she’d changed into. “No, that won’t work.”

“What won’t work?”

“I was going to say, maybe you could get to Zegnautus in time to save Ravus, because then he’d be able to carry on the line of the Oracle and maybe that would be enough to hold back the Scourge,” Kate said, “but I don’t think that’s possible. Again, timeline fuzzy et cetera, but the emperor is still
mostly human when he kills Ravus, and he’s pretty thoroughly daemonified by the time you guys get there. Ravus probably died at least a day or two before Noctis finds him, and I don’t think you guys can get there that much sooner.”

Ignis shook his head. “It wouldn’t help regardless. The power of the Oracle can only be carried by women. Even if Ravus survived and fathered a daughter, the Oracle’s power died with Lunafreya.”

“Really?” Kate said incredulously. “You’re telling me that for, what, two thousand years, there’s never been a generation of Nox Fleurets that didn’t have a daughter?”

“According to the Cosmogony and the Nox Fleurets’ own records,” Ignis said, and shrugged. “As much as I wish the answer were that simple, I don’t think Ravus’s survival is the key here.”

“Damn,” Kate muttered. She sounded frustrated, not with him but with the situation, and he remembered what she’d said about the fans spending months trying to solve this exact problem. What could Ignis possibly hope to come up with, in one week, that an entire horde of people, each of which had access to an encyclopedia’s worth of information about the game, hadn’t been able to figure out in months?

But he didn’t have a choice. He wasn’t going to let Noctis die.

They spent the rest of the evening speculating, until Ignis’s head thundered with pain and he couldn’t bear to think further about Noctis’s violent death. Kate even pulled up some of the most popular discussion forums and read out the fans’ conversations, but while that helped outline the parameters of the problem, it brought them no closer to a solution.

One suggestion had been that it was a king who had to die to fulfill the prophecy, and as Ardyn was a Lucis Caelum - a fact around which Ignis still had trouble wrapping his head - Ardyn’s death could be used in place of Noctis’s. “But Ardyn dies no matter what,” Kate said with a sigh. “So if his death was all it took, then Noct wouldn’t have had to die in the first place.”

Other fan suggestions had been even wilder, ranging from killing the rest of the gods, to having Noctis father a child before entering the Crystal and sacrificing that child instead, to improbable miracle cures engineered by the biologist Sania, to simply using phoenix downs to bring Noctis back to life. Which had resulted in a twenty-minute sidetrack wherein Kate had to explain what phoenix downs were in the context of the Final Fantasy series, and Ignis had to explain that no such thing existed in their world, and they’d eventually decided it was another instance of segregation between gameplay and story, and moved on.

By the time they declared temporary defeat due to exhaustion and retired to bed, Ignis’s head throbbed and his ruined left eye burned with a constant dull ache. The Ring of the Lucii was in the pocket of his Crownguard jacket where it hung in the closet, but he still felt its magic, a soft thrumming in time with his heartbeat. He slept poorly, his dreams filled with gruesome montages of Noctis dying over and over again while Ignis stood by with a game controller in his hands, and finally he awoke to a room filled with the silence of the early-morning hours.

The rush of cars on the street outside, ever-present during the day and long into the night, had finally faded. The air conditioner, too, had fallen silent, no longer needed as the temperature dropped for lack of sunlight. The mini-fridge hummed quietly to itself on the far side of the room, and underneath it, he could just barely make out Kate’s soft, steady breathing.

Slowly Ignis sat up. His heart still hammered against his ribs, a leftover from the dream that had
woken him, in which towering walls of saltwater had risen from the depths of Altissia’s harbor only to slam down and trap Ignis against a stone wall while Noctis drowned just out of arm’s reach. He summoned his daggers to his hands, reassuring himself that Noctis still lived, that the dream had been nothing more than that. Keep it together, he thought. You can’t save Noct if you lose yourself to fear.

It was only his imagination that the magic surrounding his daggers, the power binding them to Noctis’s armory, hummed in time to the words.

Wasn’t it?

Taking a deep breath, Ignis turned his focus deep within himself, to the place where Noctis’s magic resided. But it wasn’t just Noctis’s magic - it was the magic of all the Lucis Caelums, and it wasn’t Noctis’s face which appeared for the briefest instant behind Ignis’s closed eyelids, but Regis’s.

Across the room, the Ring of the Lucii thrummed gently.

Ignis dismissed the daggers, then pushed the covers off his legs and stood. He hadn’t been using the cane around the hotel room; it was too small to really need it, and now he barely noticed its absence as he passed Kate’s bed and made his way to the closet by the door. His hand found his jacket as though drawn to it, and almost before he meant to he held the Ring in his palm.

Don’t put it on, he warned himself. His eyes burned, the pain sharp enough to momentarily override the call of the Ring’s magic, and he wrapped his fingers around the Ring instead, locking it inside his fist. The magic grew louder, becoming voices that whispered just at the edge of clarity. Ignis struggled to hear them, to make out individual words within the gentle susurrus. Your Majesty, he thought. Reaching. Pushing the words along the thread of magic that bound him to Noctis, to the Crystal, to the Ring.

Save him, Regis’s voice whispered. Save my son. Save Noctis.

I’m trying, Ignis thought back. I’ll do everything in my power. Noctis will not die while I draw breath.

Fools, a new voice interrupted. Deep, unfamiliar, derisive. That boy carries our bloodline’s purpose on his shoulders.

There is no other way, another voice, this one light and androgynous, added.

We are ready, the deep voice agreed. The Crystal is ready. Our Star must be saved.

No! Ignis said, and Regis’s voice joined him: No!

His voice was not firm as Ignis was used to hearing him, but pleading, desperate. Not my son. Not my little boy.

He is not your little boy, the deep voice said. He is our weapon.

It is his task to wield our glaives against the Usurper, a female voice said, cold but somehow sympathetic. I am sorry, young king, but his destiny was written long ago.

Please, Regis begged. He’s my son.

As you are your father’s son, and he was his father’s, the deep voice said dismissively. Being loved by his father does not mean your son cannot do his duty to the line of Lucis.
A feeling of weight, suddenly; the sensation of a powerful gaze being turned upon him. Ignis’s breath caught in his chest, the Ring’s power burning hot against his skin. *Your devotion to your king is admirable*, the deep voice said. *But he has a task to perform, as do you in aiding him to perform it.*

The voice grew distant, the magic fading. *Do not throw away the entirety of the world we love for the sake of one child*, the deep voice warned. *The survival of our Star depends on his death.*

Then the Kings of Old were gone and Ignis was alone again, barefoot and shivering in a hotel room unimaginably far from home.
Losing It

Chapter Notes

Once again, all characters in this fic are fictitious; any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental.

After his conversation with the Lucii, there was no possible way Ignis could sleep. He lay in bed, his thoughts spinning in useless circles until finally the alarm on Kate’s phone went off. As he washed and dressed, he replayed the conversation with the kings over and over again in his mind. In the sharp sounds and smells of day, he could almost convince himself it had been a dream, one more nightmare in which he wasn’t allowed to save Noct. Still, he clung to the knowledge that Regis wanted him to succeed, and moreover had had at least enough power to send Ignis to this reality.

Wearing his Crownsguard uniform once more, Ignis followed Kate out of the hotel room. They’d woken up early enough to eat breakfast from the hotel’s continental spread, and as they ate Kate pulled up the latest news of the game on her phone. “Looks like it moved forward again,” she said quietly, and Ignis leaned close to listen to the video.

It opened with a conversation between Noctis and Prompto on the train to Tenebrae, talking about the unseasonably longer nights which Prompto had overheard other passengers discussing. It was a disconcerting echo of the original version Kate had shown him yesterday, where Ignis and Noctis had had a very similar conversation, except now Gladio and Noct still hadn’t made up, and therefore Gladio was conspicuously absent from the scene. Then Ardyn’s magic engulfed the train, causing Prompto to take on the chancellor’s appearance, and after that everything was the same as the original.

Which didn’t make it any less painful to listen to, even a second time around, but Ignis allowed himself to be relieved regardless. If that much was the same, he could be reasonably confident that the part immediately following - where the train arrived in Tenebrae and Noctis had a chance to regroup and recover - would be likewise similar. All Ignis needed to do was get to Tenebrae himself, which would happen as soon as he spoke to the developers.

He hoped.

After breakfast and the video, they headed back to the convention center. The developers’ talk was scheduled for eleven o’clock, but Kate had warned that people would most likely start lining up the moment the con’s doors opened at nine, in the hopes of securing a seat. Sure enough, even though they arrived only a few minutes after the official start of the day, they found a line which Kate said stretched the entire length of the hallway, doubled back on itself, and was rapidly approaching a third turn.

They joined the line, posing for more photos as people spotted them. Someone requested a “group Ignis photo”, which apparently meant there were others there cosplaying Ignis, and for a moment he was almost grateful that he couldn’t see because he didn’t think he’d be able to handle that. Others came up asking him to “fill out their bros”, which after the second time Ignis worked out meant the others in the photo were cosplaying his friends. Kate got pulled in as well as people cited the “Aranea glitch”, and at one point the entire group began laughing the moment the shutter
clicked.

“A Gentiana photobombed us,” Kate explained between giggles. “Really well, too. She had a Carbuncle and everything.”

Ignis knew better than to ask, at this point; as the minutes passed it was getting harder and harder to participate in the laughter and jokes. They were joking about his life, about the destiny that ended in Noctis’s death, and he didn’t know how much longer he could stand it.

Finally, there came a break in the requests for photos and general goofing around, just enough time for Ignis to touch Kate’s arm. “I hate to break up your fun,” he said, keeping his voice low, “but if this keeps up I’m going to stab someone and I rather doubt that will get us closer to the developers.”

“Right.” He felt her take a deep breath through his hand on her arm, and when she spoke again her voice was more serious. “Think it’s been long enough for your ribs to hurt?”

Ignis winced, only slightly exaggerated. “Very.”

“Okay.” Her voice turned away from him as she scanned up and down the hallway; after a moment she moved slightly out of the line and called, “Excuse me!”

Footsteps, muffled by the thin hallway carpeting and barely audible over the roar of the crowd’s chattering. A young man’s voice, bored, said, “Yeah?”

“Sorry,” Kate said. “I just… There’s like an hour left in line, and my friend…” Ignis’s hand was still on her arm and he felt her gesture uncertainly. He couldn’t help but admire her acting skills; she sounded soft and unsure rather than her normal commanding doctor’s presence. But she’d done her part: presumably this bored young man was one of the convention staffers.

Ignis stepped forward, making sure to lean heavily on Kate. “I beg your pardon,” he said, “but I have a rather embarrassing request.” He gestured to himself, not quite able to hide the flinch as his hand came too near his ruined left eye. “Not all of this costume is makeup, I’m afraid. I was only recently released from the hospital, and I was told not to stand for long periods of time. I’d hoped to make it through the line, but…” He trailed off, trying to make himself sound nervous, tired. Weak.

“We have a doctor’s note, if that helps?” Kate said. Paper rustled as she pulled out the note she’d written. “I’m pretty sure we’re close enough to the front that we’re going to make it in, so if you guys have any disability seating inside…”

“I would greatly appreciate the chance to sit down,” Ignis said, and let the truth of the statement into his voice.

“You could sit on the floor,” the staffer said dismissively.

Kate made an offended sound and Ignis jumped in before she could begin to lecture the staffer on why that was a bad idea for someone with Ignis’s injuries. “My ribs are cracked,” he said. “If I attempt to sit on the floor, you’ll need to summon medical help to return me to my feet.”

“Oh,” the staffer said, still sounding bored. “Well, lemme ask someone then.” He wandered off, and Ignis waited, tapping his fingers on his cane and trying to look pained instead of eager. Finally the staffer’s voice emerged from the chaos of the background chatter: “Yeah, we’ve got someplace you can sit. You just gotta stay out of the way, they’re still setting up in there.”
“Of course,” Ignis said. “All I need is to sit down.”

The staffer grunted. Kate touched Ignis’s arm to start him moving, and they followed the young man along the crowded hallway, through a narrow checkpoint where Kate had to present the doctor’s note again, and finally, blessedly, out of the noise and into the relative quiet of the room where the developers’ talk was to be held. There was still some clattering and thumping and general noise of movement as more staffers worked frantically to prepare the room, but it was far less stressful than the excited chatter of the fans outside.

The bored staffer got them seated in what Ignis estimated was the middle aisle at the front of the audience, then vanished again. Kate kicked her feet out, boots jangling and spine popping as she stretched. “How’re you holding up?” she asked quietly.

“As well as can be expected,” Ignis said. He folded his cane and tucked it into his jacket pocket, then sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His ribs really did ache, and the Ring of the Lucii’s magic throbbed through his eyes. He ran his hands over his face, through his hair, reflexively patting it to check for any out-of-place wisps.

Kate rested a hand on his back, the touch comforting. “Any more thought about a plan?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I feel there’s still far too much I don’t know, or haven’t thought of.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Her voice was cautious, almost tentative, and he remembered with a flush of shame how he’d nearly attacked her yesterday.

“If I think of something, I’ll let you know,” he said, and tried to smile at her. She patted his shoulder in return, and when he dropped his head into his hands again, she didn’t remove her hand. He leaned into it, grounding himself against the darkness surrounding him, the background clatter of sounds he couldn’t begin to interpret. Reminding himself that he wasn’t alone, even here in this strange, impossible reality.

“I’ll need to speak with Gladio,” he said finally. Thinking aloud. “The Amicitias have been Shields to the Lucian kings for nearly as long as there have been kings. It’s possible his family has some information, about the prophecy or otherwise, which isn’t common knowledge.”

“Do you think that’ll work?” Kate asked.

He shrugged, frustrated. “I don’t know. I’d have expected Gladio to speak up by now if he knew anything about the prophecy which the rest of us didn’t, but…” He trailed off. Regis had known about Noctis’s fate, and Clarus Amicitia had been his closest confidant. Ignis couldn’t imagine Gladio had known all this time that Noct was meant to die, but it was entirely possible Clarus had let slip something Gladio might not realize was important.

“Not that,” Kate said, and Ignis turned his head toward her, startled. She continued, “I mean, do you think the game will let that work?”

“I don’t follow,” Ignis said, which wasn’t entirely true, but the implication of her words left him cold.

Kate said, “I was thinking about it this morning while we were walking here. The game - and by that I mean whatever meta mechanic is controlling it, since it’s pretty obviously not the devs’ code at this point - seems to be… I don’t know, flexing? I guess? to keep the plot as close as possible to the original, even without you there.”

He thought back to listening to her play through the changed sections, the comments she’d made
about things being not that much different than when he’d been there. How in the latest change, Noctis and Prompto had had the same conversation Noctis and Ignis had had, in the original version of the game. “You think the game itself won’t let me change it?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said. The hand that had been resting on his back lifted; he felt a brush of air as she gestured helplessly. “I mean, it’s not entirely unbelievable that things just kinda accidentally fell out almost exactly the way they had while you were there - the guys spent weeks in Altissia after Leviathan, then went to Cartanica where everything started falling apart, right down to the dialogue options being basically the same until the Malboro fight. But… why would Prompto have overheard the people on the train talking about longer nights? In the original version, he’s off… somewhere, and it was you who heard that and sent Gladio to investigate.”

Ignis gritted his teeth. “But why would the game itself fight me? What… what entity could even exist to enforce that?”

“I don’t know,” Kate said again, sounding frustrated. “We don’t know how any of this works. I mean, in this reality, you’re lines of code and character art, except you’re not, you’re an actual real solid human being.” She poked him in the arm to demonstrate. “None of this makes sense. But you should consider that the game may well try to stop you telling Gladio anything, much less changing the entire ending.”

“There must be a way I can speak with him,” Ignis said. “Someplace we can hide from… from the game itself, I suppose. Where it can’t, or won’t, enforce its will.”

Kate made a thoughtful noise, considering. “There’s the ten years of the World of Ruin, I guess - ten years where the game shows absolutely nothing.”

Ignis shook his head. “That’s too late - Noctis would already be inside the Crystal by then.”

“True.” Kate’s fingers drummed a rhythm on the leather of her pants. “There’s resting at havens and stuff. Well, this late in the game I think it’s only resting in the sleeper cars on the train and in the dorms in Zegnautus, but anyway. When you guys rest to level up - remember that let’s-player did it a couple times yesterday?” Ignis nodded, and she continued, “The game only shows a ten- or twenty-second loop of activity, and unless you’re triggering a tour at one of the Lucis havens, there’s never any dialogue or anything in them. Except the review of Prompto’s photos, I guess, but that’s…” She trailed off, armor creaking as she shrugged ruefully. “Anyway, that might be something you can use.”

He nodded again. It was better than nothing, albeit barely. The thought that, upon returning to his own reality, his entire life except brief rests in dormitories would be on display for millions of gamers to watch, turned his stomach. Not that it hadn’t already been the case, but somehow the realization that the only time he might be afforded a moment of privacy was during those brief rests made it worse. He ran his hands over his face again, grinding his teeth until his jaw hurt.

Around them, the frantic clatter of workers setting up chairs and other miscellaneous equipment had faded, and now only a distant hum of unintelligible voices reached them from the far side of the room. “What’s going on?” he asked Kate.

He felt her turn to scan the room. “Looks like they’re done setting up the chairs,” she said. “There’s… I think they’re A/V guys back there getting speakers and a video camera set up.”

“Do you see the developers anywhere?” This entire plan had hinged on being able to contact the devs in this room, before the talk started.
“No,” Kate said. “Everyone else has cleared out.” She touched his arm, her voice encouraging. “Be patient. There’s almost half an hour before the panel still.”

“But only fifteen minutes until they start letting the audience in,” Ignis said. “If the developers aren’t here yet…” He didn’t have to finish the sentence. There must be a back room somewhere away from this one, where the devs were preparing. They had no reason to come out here, not this close to their panel, if they hadn’t done so by now. His fists clenched, and for a moment he fought for breath. It’s not over, he reminded himself. You can still talk to them after the panel.

If he could get to them through hundreds of eager fans, if he could capture their attention without drawing anyone else’s, if he could convince them to listen to him for more than the amount of time it would take to autograph a poster, if he could survive sitting through an entire hour-long discussion of how these developers had built his life to be a game that ended with Noctis’s death.

Frustration welled up in him and he called his daggers to his hands, since there was no one nearby to notice. He’d hoped to take comfort from the familiar feel of them, from the knowledge that Noctis was still alive, still well - but now all he could think was that the magic which let him summon those daggers was the same magic that would end Noctis’s life. He sent them back to the armory, his chest aching, but the void in his hands was suddenly worse. Without the daggers, he wouldn’t know if Noctis died. He called them back to his hands and dismissed them again, then again, feeling his control slipping further with each gesture.

“Ignis,” Kate said quietly, and touched his arm. He shook her off, fighting the urge to throw the daggers. She’d said everyone else was gone, but it would be just his luck that someone would walk past at the wrong moment, someone he couldn’t see. Not that it would matter; blind as he was, he could hardly throw a blade and expect to hit anything anymore, and that ached too, the familiar grief for his eyesight welling up to compete with the other emotions threatening to choke him. His chest tightened around a memory of teaching himself to toss a blade into the air and kick it at his target, not because it was a particularly effective tactic but because he’d got tired of Gladio showing off and had wanted his own flashy move. He couldn’t even hit a literal wall in front of him now - his days of being skilled with a knife were over.

Kate said, “Ignis,” and grabbed his wrist.

“But… the man said. “Impossible.”

Ignis ignored him. Kate was perfectly capable of chasing off an overly-curious tech, and Ignis wasn’t up for a conversation with anyone just then.

“Ignis!” Kate said again.

He took a breath around the razors in his chest, blew it out again, focused on not exploding, not screaming at them, at this bizarre impossible reality—

“Specs!”
The nickname startled him enough that he froze, daggers vanishing back into the armory. Kate had never called him anything other than Ignis; he couldn’t imagine why she would do so now. “What?” he demanded.

At the same time, the male voice said, “His name—”

“—is Ignis Scientia,” Kate said, her voice going polite and formal. She stood up. “I’m Dr. Kate Matthias; I’m an EP at San Francisco General Hospital. You are…?”

“Ah…” A rustle of cloth, presumably the man shaking Kate’s hand. “I am Taku Kobayashi,” he said. “I am the lead developer for Final Fantasy XV.”
The Bargain

Chapter Notes

All characters fictitious, no resemblance intended, etc etc.

The nice thing about the actual Ep:I coming out before I got to this part in the fic is that I can draw on it for these conversations rather than making stuff up.

The lead developer for *Final Fantasy XV*.

Ignis’s brain locked up as a surge of sudden hope crashed against the frustration and fear and anger. Fortunately, his court training kicked in and he found himself standing, offering a hand to shake, his body operating on reflex. “Ignis Scientia,” he said, the words sounding as distant as though someone else spoke them. “Chamberlain to His Highness the Crown Prince, Noctis Lucis Caelum. It’s my pleasure to meet you.”

A hand clasped his and shook, though there was a noticeable hesitation to the gesture. “Hello,” Taku said. “Ah, may I ask… your name, and your appearance, how…?”

“It’s not a costume,” Ignis said. His thoughts were beginning to straighten themselves out, and he added, “I understand you’ve been having some difficulty with your game not behaving as you expect it to. I believe I can explain why.”

“But…” Taku said, then stopped; Ignis guessed he was making some gesture of confusion or bafflement.

“It took a while for me to believe it, too,” Kate said dryly. “But he’s the real thing. This is actually Ignis Scientia, video game character.”

Ignis held out a hand again, careful to make sure both Taku and Kate were clear, then summoned one of his daggers. Taku had seen him doing it a moment ago, but he still gasped out loud and said something in a language Ignis didn’t recognize, sounding shocked. Ignis dismissed the dagger again, and said, “Your game is changing because I came here. I must get back to Noctis, but I don’t know how. I need your help.”

“I…” Taku said. “I don’t understand.”

“Here, why don’t we sit down for a sec,” Kate said. “We’ve still got like fifteen minutes before people start coming in, and he can explain.”

“Heard you,” Taku said. He sounded dazed. Ignis heard movement as Kate got Taku seated; he waited until Kate had sat down as well, then followed suit, taking the seat on Taku’s other side.

Ignis gave Taku as simple a rundown of the situation as he could: waking up in the San Francisco hospital, staying with Kate, realizing the game was changing due to his absence and what it meant for his friends, his prince. Realizing also that the Ring had come to this reality with him, and retrieving it from the homeless man who’d found it. He didn’t say anything about Regis or the Kings of Old, not yet - he wanted to make sure Taku told him how to get home before he brought up changing Noctis’s destiny.
“We came here in the hope that you could help me return,” he said. “While the Ring brought me to this reality, I don’t dare attempt to use it again to go home. The price is far too high.”

A long silence, during which Ignis hated his inability to see Taku’s expression, his body language. Did the man believe him? Was he doubtful, horrified, amused? Finally Taku said, “This is very… unusual.”

“That’s an understatement,” Kate said, a smile in her voice.

Taku chuckled, but his voice was sober when he continued, “I am happy to help, of course, but I…I also do not know how to return you.”

Ignis gritted his teeth. He’d been afraid of this, even as he’d know it was a very real possibility. He forced his voice to come out level. “You know a great many things about my world which I do not. You know things about the magic of the Lucis Caelums and the Astrals which even they might not.”

“And couldn’t you just write something into the game? Into the code?” Kate added. “Like, if he has to use the Ring to get back, can’t you just write code that says he’s immune to the burning effects?”

“Ah, that isn’t really how game programming is done,” Taku said to Kate, his voice somewhere between amused and professionally offended by her lack of understanding. “And even if the game’s codebase was structured so that I could, it’s clear he is no longer affected by the codebase.”

“Then what can we do?” Ignis demanded. The frustration threatened to boil over again and he curled his fingers around the edge of his chair, gripping until his knuckles ached. “I cannot stay here. I must return to Noctis. But if I use the Ring again, then I—” His voice caught and he sucked in a deep breath. “I’m already all but useless to him. While under other circumstances I would willingly pay any price to return to him, right now I cannot do anything to further threaten my ability to remain by his side afterward. He’s going to Gralea with only Gladio beside him. He needs me.” He bit off the last word, aware his voice had begun to rise, emotion bleeding through despite his best efforts.

Taku made a thoughtful noise. “That is true. The Cosmogony and related records, including the painting in the Citadel, were always intended to illustrate that Noctis must be accompanied by three companions. It’s why Ardyn goes to such great lengths—” He broke off abruptly. “Ah… How much do you remember of what Pryna showed you in Altissia?”

“I—” Ignis said, and stopped, baffled. “Pryna? Isn’t that one of Lunafreya’s dogs, her Messenger companions?” He had no recollection of seeing either dog in Altissia, though that was hardly surprising given how few memories of that day he did have. But considering what Taku had probably been about to say about Ardyn’s plans, it was easy to guess that Ignis must have seen Pryna - and that, as a Messenger to the gods, she had told Ignis about Noctis’s destiny, which would in turn have been the catalyst for Ignis wearing the Ring and allowing Regis to send him to this reality.

There was a careful pause. “So you do not remember,” Taku said.

Time to lay his cards on the table. Ignis said levelly, “I remember nothing of Altissia, but I have watched the ending of the game.”

A soft breath, and again Ignis wished he could read Taku’s expression. Finally Taku said, “I suppose it’s about the same.”
“You’re saying Ignis met Pryna in Altissia,” Kate said. “And Pryna told him about Noctis’s destiny? In the original version?” A beat, presumably while Taku nodded, then Kate said, “But that doesn’t make sense! I mean, if he found out about it in Altissia, then why didn’t he do anything about it for the rest of the game? He just let Noctis walk straight to his death?!?”

“He did nothing because there was nothing he could do,” Taku said, and a rustle of cloth indicated his shrug. “Noctis’s destiny is what it is. Ardyn and the Lucii spent two thousand years arranging this in opposition to one another. The gods spent longer.”

It took everything Ignis had not to deck the man then and there, and he only succeeded in holding back by reminding himself that he still needed Taku’s help to get home. He’d been expecting resistance from the developers if they learned he planned to save Noct; he hadn’t expected such casual conviction that he couldn’t. Still, it didn’t matter what Taku said about destiny, as long as Ignis could just get home and fix it, and he firmly did not let himself think or at least be by Noct’s side when it happens.

Kate must have noticed how close to the edge he was, because she kept talking, keeping Taku’s attention on her. “I take it this is spelled out in Episode: Ignis.”

“Yes,” Taku agreed. “I suppose I must ask you to sign an NDA now.”

“What am I going to tell people?” Kate said dryly. “The real Ignis fell out of the game and showed up in my emergency room, and in the course of trying to get him home I found out some stuff about the episode? There’s some wacky speculation out there, but that takes the cake.”

“So it does,” Taku said, and chuckled. “Nevertheless.”

“We can work that out after we get him home,” Kate said. “But he’s been going progressively more stir-crazy the last few weeks, and I imagine you’d like to get the game fixed ASAP.”

“Yes,” Taku said again. The sound of his voice indicated he’d turned back to face Ignis. “You said you have not yet tried using the Ring to return?”

Ignis shook his head. “The Lucii have already taken my sight for daring to use it once,” he said, and had to swallow around a painful lump in his throat. “If I lose more, I wouldn’t—I can’t—I’d be useless to Noct. It would be little better than staying here and allowing him to believe me dead - at least I wouldn’t inflict upon him a cruel hope.”

Taku blew out a breath, and Ignis heard the patter of his fingers tapping against something soft - the seat of his chair, perhaps, or his thigh. “Maybe it’s worth a try,” he suggested. “The whole point of Luna in Kingsglaive was that the Ring must reach Noctis. Without it, he cannot channel the power of the Crystal or the Lucii. So the Ring must return for Noctis to save Eos from the Starscourge. The Lucii would know that.”

It took Ignis a second to realize Taku was talking about the movie Kate had mentioned weeks ago, which showed the events of Insomnia’s fall, rather than implying Lunafreya had somehow been a member of the Kingsglaive. Distracted by that, he said, “That may be, but the Lucii have made very clear——” Then stopped as Taku’s words caught up to him. The Ring must return for Noctis to save Eos.

The Lucii had insisted last night that Noctis must fulfill his duty.

If Ignis didn’t take the Ring back, Noctis wouldn’t have to - wouldn’t be able to - sacrifice himself.

“Ignis?” Kate said, but he barely heard her. Possibilities flickered through his mind, options
assessed and discarded with all the speed his years of education in strategy and tactics had given him. If Ignis stayed in this reality, then Noctis would live - but with Lunafreya dead, he would live in a world rapidly succumbing to the Starscourge. Moreover, he would live thinking Ignis had died - thinking he was responsible for Ignis’s death. And if Ignis didn’t return, Noctis would go to Gralea with only Gladio as backup, and while under normal circumstances Ignis would have been confident in the two of them, right now they were too angry at each other to work together. Which meant one or both of them might die in Gralea, which in turn meant Prompto would die in his cell in Zegnautus. And even if they all escaped Gralea alive, they would return to a Lucis doomed to a slow, agonizing death by daemonic overrun.

But the Kings of Old, locked in the Ring, didn’t know any of that - or more specifically, didn’t know Ignis knew all of it. The Lucii only knew that Noctis needed the Ring in order to harness the power of the Crystal to banish the Starscourge. They had made abundantly clear last night that they intended to make that happen. But if they could return the Ring to Noctis on their own, they’d have done so by now. Which meant they needed Ignis - needed his hands, his legs, to carry the Ring; and his willpower to direct its magic. If Ignis was careful, if he could successfully frame his case… then perhaps he had leverage with which to make a bargain with the Lucii.

“Ignis?” Kate said again, and touched his arm. He grabbed her hand and bounced to his feet, suddenly too excited to sit still, and she yelped in surprise. “Whoa!”

“I think that will work!” he said, and turned to Taku. “You’re right - the Ring must return to Eos, and I’m the only one who can carry it there. The Lucii must allow me to transport it, and do so unharmed. I need only remind them of this fact.”

“Ah…” Taku said, sounding rather taken aback by Ignis’s excitement. “That should work, yes.”

“Are you—” Kate said. “I mean, you’re going to try it? Right now?”

“There’s no point in waiting longer,” Ignis answered.

“True,” Kate said. “The A/V people are gone - this is about as private a spot as you’ll find around here.”

He squeezed her hand, pushing aside the rush of energy long enough to smile solemnly at her. “If this works…”

“You’ll be home,” she said, and he heard the answering smile in her voice, as well as a sort of fond sorrow. “And if we say goodbye and it doesn’t work, it’ll be awkward as hell, so make it work, okay?”

“I will.” He wished he could meet her eyes, could let her see in his own his gratitude for everything she’d done for him. “Thank you,” he said softly. “For everything. I’d not have gotten here if it weren’t for you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. Then, surprising him, she stood and wrapped him in a quick hug. In a voice too low for Taku to hear, she added, “I have faith in you. You’re smart and tough and if anyone can defy the Astrals, it’s you.”

Ignis nodded, his throat suddenly too tight to speak, and hugged her back. He’d known her for less than two months, but in that time she’d taken care of him at his lowest, helped him recover from the worst injury of his life. Even if she’d hidden Noct’s destiny from him at first, she’d never lied to him, and she’d ultimately chosen to help him regardless. Once Ignis returned to his own reality, he’d never see her again, and he was surprised to find that the thought hurt. “Kate…”
“You’d better get going,” she said, but he heard the emotion in her voice. “Take care of those boys, okay?”

Her words made him chuckle, gave him a moment to regain his composure. “Always.”

Kate let go of him, and he turned to Taku next. “Thank you, as well,” he said.

“Ah, I’m sure I didn’t do anything,” Taku said lightly. “It’s an honor meeting you in person.”

“Likewise.” He held out a hand for Taku to shake, then stepped back and reached into his breast pocket for the Ring. The voices at the far end of the room had vanished sometime during the conversation with Taku, leaving to make final preparations as Kate had said. If Ignis’s sense of time was correct, they only had a few minutes before the convention staffers began to allow the audience inside. He’d have to be quick.

Even so, he took a long moment to steel himself, the Ring’s magic thrumming hot against his palm. His eyes throbbed with remembered agony, and his hands tightened into fists. *Steady,* he told himself firmly. *Don’t lose your head now.* It was easier said than done, but he drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly. Focused his thoughts on what he needed to accomplish, what he needed to say to the Lucii.

Slid the Ring onto his finger.

Agony flared through him and he locked his teeth against a scream, fire burning up his arm to his shoulder and through his skull, ricocheting back and forth behind his eyes. It took everything he had to force words along the thread of magic binding him to Noctis, to the Ring’s power: *Stop this! I demand you stop this and listen to me!*

The deep voice from last night spoke, contempt ringing in its tone: *You are no Lucii. You knew what would happen if you tried to harness our power again.*

*Then you’re a fool,* Ignis thought back.

There was a pause which he felt was startled, somehow; he wondered how long it had been since anyone had spoken so to this ancient king. Gritting his teeth against the burning pain still flaring behind his eyes, Ignis thought, *If you kill me, the Ring never returns to Eos.*

*We do not need to kill you to punish you for using power which does not belong to you,* the voice spat.

Ignis shook his head. *If you try to harm me, I take off the Ring and it never returns to Eos. If you refuse to listen to me, I take off the Ring and it never returns to Eos.* He paused for effect despite the pain, then finished dramatically, *The Crystal is ready. Our Star must be saved. Mustn’t it?*

The silence was longer this time. Ignis held his breath, fighting to focus against the burning agony in his eyes—

—then fire roared through him, screaming along his limbs a thousand times hotter than before as the deep-voiced king snarled, *How dare you speak so to the Founder King of Lucis! Ungrateful child, you will suffer—*

*Enough,* another voice broke in, and the pain vanished, so suddenly that Ignis was left gasping. *A true king would not be so petty as to not acknowledge when he’s been bested.* It was the woman’s voice from last night, and Ignis’s memory supplied an image of a towering statue of the Rogue Queen of Lucis watching over Insomnia.
She’s right, a third voice added, amused. This child is a clever one. Like it or not, he’s played his hand well.

Has he? another voice asked. He must know what will happen to our Star if the Ring which bears our power does not return to the Chosen King.

I do know, Ignis said. Putting all his determination, all his fear for Noctis, all his grief into his words. But it’s not the world I care about. My only concern is Noct. I know what will happen to him if I return the Ring to him. You have yet to convince me that doing so is worth the price.

The Founder King growled and Ignis braced himself, but no fire erupted in his veins. The Rogue Queen said, You wish to bargain.

Yes, Ignis said. He’d lost track of his physical body somewhere along the line, no longer sure if he still stood in the speaker’s room in the convention center or if he floated in the realm of the Crystal somewhere between worlds, but he drew himself up straight regardless. Squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, and for the briefest moment he thought he glimpsed towering figures of hazy blue magic standing over him, seen not through his useless eyes but through Noctis’s magic. I am no Lucis Caelum, it’s true, he said. But the blood in my veins is that of House Scientia, which has served your line for generations. Noctis is my prince - my King. My life is sworn to his. I would do anything for him.

Including mouth off to his forebears, said the voice that had called Ignis “clever”. He still sounded amused as he added, I would hear what this child has to say.

As would I, the Queen said. Other voices murmured their agreement, as well, and Ignis held his breath. But though the Founder King growled again, he didn’t object.

A sudden, fierce joy rushed through Ignis, and he had to fight to keep it from showing in his expression. Instead he allowed himself only a small polite smile as he inclined his head in thanks. Excellent, he said. Then let us discuss terms.

* * *

He had no idea how much time passed while he negotiated with the Kings of Old. He came back to awareness gradually, a headache pounding echoes of remembered pain through his eyes, his body aching as though he’d been fighting daemons nonstop for hours. Still, he knew immediately that he was no longer in the convention center: wind whispered across his skin, through his hair, carrying with it the distant smell of smoke. Uneven gravel shifted beneath his feet, and a babble of voices rose and fell in the distance.

The wind shifted, bringing with it the acrid stench of iron, engine exhaust, and oil - a train, Ignis realized, and hope blossomed in his chest. Then, under the stink of smoke and the train’s engines, he caught the scent of flowers.

Sylleblossoms.

He was in Tenebrae.
Tenebrae.

He’d made it… not home, exactly - home had been lost in the destruction of Insomnia - but back to his own reality. Back to Noctis, once Ignis found him, back where he belonged at his prince’s side. For a moment all Ignis could do was stand there, so profound was his relief. For the first time since he’d awakened in the hospital in San Francisco, he felt like he could breathe.

But being somewhere in Tenebrae wasn’t the end of his journey, not yet. He still needed to reach Noctis - which meant moving, walking unaided through a foreign land. He half-expected a wave of despair to crush him as it had done so often when he was faced with the reality of his blindness, but while the thought of walking alone was still terrifying, he didn’t find himself wanting to curl into a ball and scream. Noctis was here, somewhere, and Ignis could walk to him. He just had to start moving.

Ignis pulled the Ring off his finger and tucked it back into his breast pocket. Drew his cane out of his jacket and unfolded it, using it to feel out the area around himself. Both Noctis’s descriptions and the photographs Ignis had seen in his studies made clear that Tenebrae was a land of high cliffs and rock formations so tenuously balanced they were often referred to as floating islands. It would be frankly embarrassing to have gone to such great lengths to get here in one piece, only to fall to his death because he wasn’t careful where he stepped.

The cane found a low iron rail atop the mound of gravel on which he stood; a moment’s examination told him it was one half of a pair of train tracks. He traced their path with the cane, following his nose toward where the stink of engine exhaust grew stronger. Noctis and Gladio had arrived in Tenebrae on the train, and - assuming events were happening much as they had in the game - would stay here for a night to speak with Aranea Highwind and win the aid of her men Biggs and Wedge. All Ignis needed to do was get to the train station.

He was immensely grateful for the rails - he could follow them with his cane and not have to worry (much) about stumbling over a cliff edge or getting turned hopelessly around. Even without the tracks, though, his ears would have served as guide enough; as he drew closer to the station the distant hum of voices resolved into more distinct sounds: children crying and parents reassuring them; adult voices speaking in quiet, despairing tones. The smell of smoke, of something burning that wasn’t the train’s engines, grew stronger as well, rising and falling with the wind. Ignis thought back to the video Kate had shown him, and remembered her quiet narration: The Nox Fleuret manor is burning down. The Empire did it to punish Ravus for his actions in Altissia.

The voices, then, were the refugees who’d been scattered around the train station, both those who’d been on the train with Noctis only to find their destination ablaze, and those who’d fled the destruction of the manor with nothing but the clothes they wore and what few trinkets they’d managed to grab during their escape. Worry did start to creep its way into Ignis’s gut then - worry that in the crowd of people he wouldn’t be able to find Noct, that Noct wouldn’t notice him or even
recognize him with the scars marring his face. Ignis knew that last one, at least, was ridiculous, but knowing it was so did little to keep the fear at bay.

His cane bumped against something which a moment’s examination with his hands told him was the back of a train car. Ignis moved around it, letting his fingers brush along its side in place of his cane tapping along the tracks, until the gravel under his feet leveled out to the smooth surface of the train station’s platform. His ears straining for any hint of Noct or Gladio, he couldn’t help but notice how the voices nearest him fell silent as he passed: startled refugees staring at him, most likely, wondering where on Eos the blind man with the cane had come from. He made himself ignore them as best he could, moving further along the train toward the middle of the station.

Forcing himself to leave the relative safety of the train cars and strike out along the platform was harder than he expected, the curling thread of worry in his gut rapidly swelling to despair the further he walked. How could he possibly hope to find Noctis in all this without his sight? He’d passed groups of people whose voices were lower, sitting on benches or the ground; if Noctis was sitting thus with his head down, Ignis could walk within inches of him and neither of them would know it—

“Ignis?”

It was barely a whisper, so soft that by rights Ignis shouldn’t have heard it over the crowd. But without his sight to focus on, all his awareness was centered on his hearing, and the sound of his name in that familiar voice was as loud as a cry in his ears.

“Noct,” he said, and turned his ear toward the voice.

“Noctis—!” Louder this time, and the scrape of boots against the platform’s tiles as Noctis started to run toward Ignis but stopped himself abruptly, still quite some ways away. “No,” Noctis whispered, and Ignis froze as he realized what Noctis thought. His voice ragged, Noct said, “No, Ignis is—He’s gone. I won’t let you trick me again.”

Ignis’s chest tightened, even as he knew he should have anticipated this. Less than twelve hours ago, Ardyn Izunia had swapped appearances with Prompto and tricked Noct into attacking his best friend. Noctis believed Ignis dead; it was no wonder he thought Ignis’s reappearance no more than another trick by the chancellor. Forcing his own voice to be steady, calm, despite the worry for Noct and anger at Ardyn surging through him, Ignis said, “Noct, it’s me. Truly.” Inadequate words, to say the least, but he needed to keep Noctis talking, needed to prevent him from either walking away or attacking outright.

Noctis made a sound too pained to be called a laugh. “Prove it.”

The other voices on the platform had faded; Ignis couldn’t have said if it was because they’d all moved away from a potential confrontation, or if he was simply that focused on Noctis. He said, “What do you want me to do?”

A pause, and for a moment Ignis feared Noctis had simply walked off and left him. But then Noct said, his voice still rough, “Tell me three things only you and I would know.”

Despite the roil of fear in his gut, Ignis felt a surge of pride for his prince. Physically and emotionally battered as he was, Noctis was still thinking clearly enough to make a smart demand, to skip over the obvious request to summon a weapon. Ardyn had access to a magic armory, too, and if Noctis didn’t know that for sure he must have at least realized Ardyn could produce the illusion of one, as he’d done when pretending to be Prompto. And asking for three things only Ignis knew would make it much harder for an imposter who’d managed to spy on a single private
conversation.

“All right,” Ignis said. His mind raced, sifting through all the years he’d been with Noct, looking for those fleeting moments where it had been just the two of them, no Gladio or Prompto, no nurses or aides or guards or other attendants. “First thing: we were staying at the caravan in Meldacio, after you earned the Archaeon’s favor. Gladio and Prompto had gone for a run, so it was just the two of us. I was making breakfast, and you were… attempting to wake up. You took a mug off the counter and drank it, expecting to get my morning coffee, but you got a mouthful of lemon juice instead.” The memory of Noct’s expression as the flavor caught up to his sleep-sluggish brain brought a smile to Ignis’s lips. “You made me swear never to tell a soul.”

Noctis groaned. “So you just say it here in the middle of all these people.”

“They’re not paying us any mind,” Ignis pointed out. He wasn’t actually sure if that was true - by the sound of his voice, Noctis was a good fifteen feet or so away from him, so they weren’t exactly speaking quietly - but at the very least, Ignis saying that would make anyone who was paying attention become suddenly very interested in their feet.

“Second thing,” Ignis continued, sobering. “It would have been a year ago… no, two. We fought over a report I’d asked you to read. I spoke out of turn. I apologized over a dinner of Cup Noodles after you nearly wrecked your frying pan trying to cook.”

Noctis made a soft hmph of agreement, and Ignis relaxed ever so slightly. That memory was a sensitive one, moreso now that Noctis’s father had died, which was what they’d been arguing about. But there were precious few memories Ignis could recall that he’d shared with Noctis alone. Certainly they’d spent a great deal of time in each other’s company, but much of that had been the daily grind of life: driving to and from the Citadel, Noct’s apartment, or his school; endless training sessions with Gladio or Noct’s other tutors; nights spent poring over official reports or whatever homework had stumped Noctis that week.

Still, within the blur of growing up together, there had been memorable moments, times that stood out even more than a decade later. Ignis said, “When we were very young - before the Marilith, not long after I’d come to the Citadel. Your father had told me you had several imaginary friends and that I needed to be sensitive to them.” Years later, Ignis had realized that Noctis probably had so many imaginary playmates as a young child because he hadn’t had any real ones. It was one reason Ignis had been so glad when Prompto elbowed his way into Noctis’s life. But that wasn’t the important part. He continued, “But you never mentioned any of those imaginary friends to me. I asked you why, and you said it was because you had a brother now, and didn’t need them.”

Ignis hadn’t been more than seven or eight at the time, but he still remembered the flush of warmth that had hit him at those words, spoken so innocently by this young prince he’d been given to. He’d been far too young himself to understand what Regis had intended for them, had known the definition of “chamberlain” but not the true meaning of being one. He’d learned, in the years since, that whatever the dictionary said a chamberlain was, it was far less important than what Noctis had said that day: that Ignis was his brother.

“Ignis,” Noctis whispered, then, “Ignis—!” and Ignis barely had time to brace himself before Noct crashed into him.

He wrapped his arms around his prince as Noctis buried his face in Ignis’s shoulder. Noct was shaking, clinging to Ignis so tightly that Ignis’s cracked ribs ached, and Ignis wasn’t too proud to admit he was clinging to Noctis right back. Noct smelled of sweat and blood and daemon miasma and engine exhaust, and Ignis could tell by the feel of Noctis’s jacket that it was filthy - but Noct was here, he was alive and whole. Ignis had found him, had made it back, had crossed realities
while blind and injured and still managed to return to Noctis’s side.

“I thought—” Noctis gasped. “We thought—we looked for you in Altissia, we couldn’t find you, you were dead—” His voice broke on the last word, and he buried his face more deeply into Ignis’s shoulder.

Ignis hugged him harder. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered. He didn’t trust his voice just then, didn’t think he could speak aloud without losing himself, and Noctis needed him to be strong. “I came to in a hospital far away from Altissia. By the time I’d healed enough to travel, you’d already left for Niflheim. I’ve been trying to catch up to you ever since.”

“Healed—?” Noctis said, and pulled away from Ignis just far enough to look up at his face, his breath brushing the skin of Ignis’s throat. It took everything Ignis had to stand there while Noctis really looked at him for the first time, and he couldn’t stop himself from flinching when Noctis’s breath caught.

“Ignis…” Noct whispered. He moved, one hand releasing Ignis’s jacket; Ignis couldn’t feel it but he thought Noct’s fingers were hovering just above the scars on the left side of his face, only partially hidden by his sunglasses. “Your eyes…”

“It’s nothing, really,” Ignis said, and hated how his voice wavered. “A small sacrifice in the greater battle.” The battle against the Lucii, against the gods themselves, though Noctis didn’t know it yet.

“But you’re…” Noctis said. “Are you…”

“Yes,” Ignis whispered. He couldn’t stop himself from turning his head away from Noctis, trying to pull away from him, as though that would hide what Noctis had already seen.

As if it would stop him being blind.

“Damn it,” Noctis said. His voice wavered and cracked, and he let go of Ignis, his footsteps backing away. “Damn it!”

Ignis opened his mouth to apologize, but Noctis cut him off: “This is my fault,” he said, and there were tears in his voice. “Iggy, I’m—”

“It’s not your fault,” Ignis interrupted. He reached out toward Noct; his fingers bumped leather and he grabbed the edge of Noct’s jacket and pulled him back into a hug. He might still remember nothing of that day in Altissia, but he knew it had been his own choice to put on the Ring, his own choice to stand by Noct’s side. “Noct, it’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

Noct pushed against him, trying to pull away again, his hair brushing Ignis’s chin as he shook his head desperately. “It is, Ignis, it’s my fault, I’m supposed to be the king but I’m not, I’m just a failure—”

“Noct—”

“Gladio’s right,” Noct continued, ignoring him; he was trembling in Ignis’s grip and Ignis knew him well enough to be certain that he was a hair’s-breadth from breaking down completely. “Luna died in Altissia because of me, you died, or almost, you got hurt, and Prompto—” His voice broke again and he made a sound like he was swallowing back a sob.

Ignis barely remembered in time that he wasn’t supposed to know what had happened on the train. “What about Prompto?”
“He’s—He fell—I pushed him—Ardyn tricked me, I didn’t mean to but I did, and we couldn’t go back for him because the train—”

“Ah,” Ignis said, then winced because he was pretty sure he should have reacted more strongly if he was truly hearing that for the first time.

Noctis, at least, didn’t seem to notice. “And I lost the Ring,” he added, his voice falling to a bare whisper, full of shame and grief and despair. “It’s gone, Luna had it but she vanished in Altissia just like you—”

“Noct—”

“— and I don’t know if the Imperials took it or if it’s in the ocean—”

“Noct,” Ignis said again, louder, and this time Noct fell silent except for ragged desperate breaths. “I have the Ring,” Ignis said. “I don’t remember what happened in Altissia or how it came to me, but I have it. It’s safe.”

“...what?” Noctis whispered. He’d gone rigid, as though if he moved at all the illusion would break and Ignis and the Ring would both vanish again.

Ignis touched a hand to his jacket over the inner pocket which held the Ring. “It’s right here,” he said. “You didn’t lose it. I had it when I was carried away.”

“Oh,” Noctis said. He swayed, suddenly, as though his knees had gone weak with relief, and Ignis held him until he’d steadied again. This desperation, this near-hysteria, was a far cry from the grieving but determined Noctis in the original version of the game, but Ignis could hardly blame him. Game-Noctis had only been dealing with the grief of losing his fiance - but this Noctis, the real one, had spent weeks blaming himself for not only Lunafreya’s death, but Ignis’s as well. On top of that he’d carried the guilt of losing the Ring - his birthright and his responsibility. It was no wonder he was breaking.

“You’re exhausted,” Ignis said. “And we shouldn’t talk about all this in public. Is there somewhere private to which we can retire?”

“Yeah,” Noctis said. He sounded hollow, almost shell-shocked. He turned, his shoulder moving under Ignis’s hand as he looked around, then he said, “Over here. They’re still letting people use the sleeper cars.”

“All right,” Ignis agreed. “Let’s go sit down, then you can tell me everything that’s happened.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’re wondering, the lemon juice was in the mug because Ignis ran out of measuring cups.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

Betas are wonderful, wonderful creatures. Mine caught a particularly subtle and thorny plot hole that was about to cause a lot of problems. It took a while to get it all untangled, but I think we're good to go now!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The cabin in the sleeper car which Noctis, Gladio, and Prompto had rented was small, with two stacked bunks on either side of an aisle barely wide enough for two people to stand in. Noctis dropped onto one of the bottom bunks and Ignis sat beside him, and there in the privacy of the locked cabin, Noctis gave in to the emotions that had clearly been wearing him down for weeks. He curled against Ignis’s side and just shuddered, gasping rough helpless breaths while Ignis hugged him close.

Ignis knew how much Noct hated being a public figure, always under scrutiny by paparazzi and courtiers and other hangers-on despite Regis’s attempts to keep them away. It was rare for Noctis to allow himself to break down like this, even in private; the public eye was always just a little too watchful (and Ignis firmly didn’t think about the millions of eyes Noctis wasn’t aware of, the gamers in another reality whose controllers moved a digital version of him like a puppet). But here in Tenebrae, no one recognized him; and even if they had they were all too busy with their own worries to pay much mind to the wayward Lucian prince.

Eventually Noctis’s breathing steadied, and he started talking: telling Ignis about the weeks after the Leviathan covenant when he and Gladio and Prompto had scoured Altissia for any sign of Ignis or Lunafreya or the Ring, the eventual agonizing concession that all three were lost to the waves. Prompto’s half-hearted attempts to keep Noctis’s spirits up, which did little to mask his own silent grief. Gladio’s mounting restlessness and anger, pushing Noctis to move, to do something, anything other than pace like a lost daemon through the ruins of Altissia. The decision to continue their mission, to head for Cartanica and the last known Royal Tomb. The confrontation in the mine and the return to the train. Ardyn’s trick with Prompto, and here Noctis curled into Ignis’s lap like he was a child of six again, burying his face in Ignis’s stomach so his voice was muffled as he described how he’d attacked his best friend.

He stayed there as he described the daemon ambush on the train and Leviathan’s timely interference, and finished with, “So we stopped here. The train can still run, but as long as I’m on it everyone else on it’s in danger. Ignis…”

Ignis rested a hand on Noct’s back, feeling the tense pounding of his heart, waiting for Noct to find the words to continue. Painful as it clearly was, Noctis needed to get it out, to confront the fears tearing him up inside. Finally Noct said, all in a rush, “I almost killed Prompto. Gladio hates me. Luna’s dead. My dad and everyone in Insomnia’s dead, too. You’re hurt. I don’t—” The muscles of his arm tightened under Ignis’s hand as he clenched his fists, his fingers tangled in Ignis’s jacket. “Why?!” he whispered. “What’s the point? How am I supposed to be the Chosen King who saves everyone if everyone around me gets hurt or worse?”

Ignis hesitated. He should tell Noctis the truth, he knew - about the other reality, the game, the
truth of being the Chosen King. But Noct was far too fragile right now. Learning the truth might push him beyond the brink of despair, and Ignis couldn’t do that to him. No, he would tell Noctis later, after they’d rescued Prompto, after Ignis had saved Noct from the Crystal.

Instead, he tightened his grip on Noct, and tried to focus on the parts he could address right now. “What happened to Prompto is not your fault,” he said. “I believe he knows that, too, and will likely tell you so when we find him again.”

“What if we don’t?” Noctis whispered. “What if I… what if I killed him? What if he’s lying in a ditch dying right now because I hurt him and we didn’t go back—”

“Noct,” Ignis interrupted, resting a hand on Noct’s hair to silence him. “Whatever the chancellor’s motives, he targeted Prompto for a reason. He wouldn’t have just left him there.”

“…that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Noctis said, a hint of dryness overcoming the pain in his voice. “Why would the Imperial chancellor want to kidnap him? He’s my best friend but he’s not…” Noct made a vague motion with one hand, still clutching Ignis’s jacket. “He’s just a guy. He wasn’t even Crownsguard until two days before we left Insomnia.”

A memory of Kate’s voice rose unbidden in Ignis’s mind: He was supposed to be an MT. Not that Ignis could say that to Noct, and anyway the game had implied that Ardyn’s main reason for kidnapping Prompto had less to do with his origins than with driving Noctis onward toward the Crystal and his destiny. Ignis said carefully, “Have you considered that your reactions right now are what Ardyn is after? He seems to want you off-balance, running blindly from confrontation to confrontation, not stopping to either breathe or think. Kidnapping your best friend is an excellent way to get you to charge ahead without a plan.”

Noctis was silent for a minute or two, considering this. “You think…” he said finally. “You really think Prompto’s going to be all right?”

“I think he’s far more resilient than any of us give him credit for,” Ignis said. “We’ll find him.”

“Do you think he’ll hate me?” Noctis asked, then before Ignis could answer, continued, “He should. You should. Gladio does.” He shook his head and buried his face against Ignis’s stomach again.

“I shouldn’t,” Ignis said firmly. “Prompto won’t, and Gladio doesn’t.”

Noct barked out a pained laugh. “He does. He thinks I’m useless, not worthy to be a king at all, much less any kind of Chosen One.”

“He’s grieving, too,” Ignis pointed out as gently as he could. “Gladio and I have known each other for a long time. If our positions had been reversed - if I thought he’d died on my watch - I’d be upset too. But he and I get upset very differently.”

Noct leaned back and Ignis pictured his expression - simultaneously skeptical and bemused - so clearly it ached. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you get really upset.”

Ignis couldn’t help but smile. “Why do you think I took up cooking? It’s a socially-acceptable reason to hack things into small pieces.”

That got a real, albeit shaky, laugh from Noctis, and he nudged Ignis with his shoulder. “You took up cooking because I told you about those pastries.”

Again Ignis pictured his face, pale and tear-streaked with spots of red high on his cheekbones, but
his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled. Still, for all it hurt that Ignis couldn’t see him - would never see his smile again - Ignis could take comfort in the knowledge that he was still here. Ignis was still able to, if not see, then at least touch Noctis and talk to him, to simply be there for him. “That, too,” he agreed mildly.

Noctis chuckled again and settled down onto the bed, his head pillowed on Ignis’s leg. The painful tension was fading from his body, and his movements had begun to slow as exhaustion took hold. Again Ignis felt the relief of knowing he’d returned to Noctis in time to keep him from breaking completely, of being able to be here for Noct as he’d wanted to do ever since seeing that first changed cutscene in Kate’s house. They could worry about the gods and the Lucii and Ardyn Izunia later - right now, what mattered was making sure Noctis was all right.

Ignis reached behind himself along the bunk, finding its thin, scratchy blanket scrunched up against the wall where Noctis must’ve left it. As he tugged it up around Noct, something occurred to him. “Where is Gladio?”

“Talking to Aranea,” Noct said, more asleep than not, and Ignis was glad the question hadn’t made him tense back up. “Trying to figure out how to get to Gralea.”

“That’s a problem for tomorrow, I think,” Ignis said. “We’ll none of us do any good in Gralea if we don’t rest.”

Noct grunted agreement, then his breathing evened out into the slow steady rhythm of sleep. Ignis bit back a sigh of relief even though he knew he’d cheated; he’d half-expected Noctis to immediately wake up and protest Ignis going to Gralea with them. But Noct was thoroughly asleep, and probably hadn’t even registered why the we in Ignis’s statement might have been the wrong word.

But that, too, was a problem for tomorrow, and Ignis much preferred his chances with a Noctis who was rested and no longer on the brink of despair. For that matter, Ignis himself would be better able to plead his case after some rest. Gladio would almost certainly be against Ignis accompanying them, and for very good reasons. If Ignis wanted to convince him - and Noctis - that Ignis was fit to travel with them, he needed to recover from both last night’s lack of sleep and the bargain with the Lucii.

And he could rest now. Noctis was safe, right here asleep against Ignis’s leg, his heartbeat steady under Ignis’s hand. Ignis would have to move eventually if he wanted to get any real sleep - even if his ribs hadn’t been cracked, he’d never been good at sleeping sitting up - but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so just yet. Moving meant letting go of Noctis, and now that Ignis could no longer assure himself of his prince’s well-being with a glance, the thought of being out of arm’s reach was unacceptable.

Still, he was tired enough that he’d mostly dozed off sitting up when the cabin’s locked door opened abruptly. Ignis jerked awake and was reaching into the armory for his daggers before he registered the familiar heavy bootsteps, the rough voice that whispered, “Iggy.”

“Hello, Gladio,” Ignis said.

Gladio made an odd, hoarse sound like a swallowed gasp, and Ignis pictured him shifting his weight, shaking his head as he did when emotion got the better of him. Gently Ignis disentangled himself from Noctis and stood, trying and failing to hide the wince as his ribs protested the movement. He’d folded his cane away when Noct had led him onto the train; in the cramped confines of the sleeper car he hadn’t needed it. He didn’t need it now, either, to follow Gladio out of the cabin and up the narrow aisle, guiding himself with his fingers on the wall and the sound of
Gladio’s footsteps in his ears.

Gladio led him into an unlocked, apparently abandoned cabin at the end of the car, far enough away that their voices wouldn’t disturb Noctis. Ignis stopped when Gladio did, and waited. When Gladio spoke, the angle of his voice indicated he was still facing away from Ignis. “Stars, Iggy,” he said, his voice rough. “Where the hell’ve you been?”

“Trying to catch up to you,” Ignis said. “I found myself in a remote hospital after Altissia, with the Ring.” The half-truth came out easier the second time. “I don’t know how it came to be in my possession, but I knew I needed to return it to Noct. I’ve been chasing the three of you ever since.”

Gladio grunted. “We lost you over the comm in Altissia when you tried to take a Stars-damned rowboat past the Stars-damned Archaeon to get to Noct. We thought—”

He broke off, then abruptly spun and pulled Ignis into a hug. He must have seen Ignis wincing when he’d stood because he wasn’t crushing Ignis in his arms like Noct had, or perhaps Gladio’s normal bone-cracking strength had simply failed him. Ignis let himself sink into the embrace, let his own relief and exhaustion wash over him in a rush. He didn’t have to be strong for Gladio the way he did for Noct, and for a while they simply stood there, leaning on each other.

Eventually Gladio took a deep breath and let go. In the quiet of the cabin Ignis heard him swallow, chasing back the emotion he’d never let himself show. He said quietly, “You said you had the Ring.”

Ignis nodded and touched his breast pocket. “I’ll give it to Noctis in the morning when he wakes.”

“Thank the gods,” Gladio said. Then his breath caught, and Ignis didn’t need to hear the startled curse to know Gladio had finally noticed the scars on Ignis’s face. The leather of Gladio’s jacket creaked, just enough warning that Ignis wasn’t surprised when Gladio’s fingers gripped Ignis’s jaw gently and tilted his head. His other hand lifted the sunglasses and Ignis forced himself to hold still, to let Gladio get a good look at the ruin of his face.

“Ignis—” he began.

But Gladio cut him off. “Aranea Highwind’s here with her dropship and her crew. She’s going to start transporting Tenebrian refugees back to Lucis. I’ll make sure you get on the first trip.”

“No,” Ignis said. “I didn’t spend the last two months making my way back to Noctis to leave him again.”
“You got the Ring to him, and hell, I’m impressed you managed it. But, Iggy,” Gladio said.
“You’re blind.” His voice cracked, but he continued, “I can’t—I’m Noct’s Shield. I can’t protect him and you both.”

“Then don’t,” Ignis snapped. “I’m blind, not helpless. Protect Noctis - I can take care of myself.”

“We’re going to Gralea,” Gladio shot back. “The Stars-damned Imperial capital. It’s gonna be crawling with Nif soldiers, rogue MTs, and all kinds of daemons if Aranea’s right about what’s going on. If you come along and I can’t protect you—” He broke off, tried again. “If you die again—”

“I won’t,” Ignis said firmly. “Besides, if you two go to Gralea without me and anything happens…” He shook his head. “You and Noct can barely talk to each other right now, much less work together. You need me.”

A long pause. Gladio said, quietly, “He told you about that, huh.”

Ignis nodded. Noctis hadn’t actually said much about his fight with Gladio, other than that it had happened, but Ignis still remembered all too clearly watching it from Kate’s living room.

“Did he tell you he tried to fire me?” There was agony in Gladio’s voice, a pain and guilt he’d never let Noctis see.

“He told me enough,” Ignis said gently. Waited a beat, then added, “He thinks you hate him.”

“He’s an idiot,” Gladio muttered.

“So are you,” Ignis said, and smiled.

“Ha,” Gladio said, but a soft rustle indicated he was shaking his head again. “I can deal with Noct long enough to get us in and out of Gralea. But if you’re there… You can’t die again, Iggy. Not just for my sake. For Noct’s.”

Ignis wanted, desperately, to tell him right then about the game. About the assurance it provided that Ignis would be just fine in Gralea, and the threat that Ignis needed to be there not only to mediate between Noct and Gladio, but to save Noctis from the Crystal and his destiny. But now wasn’t the right time, not when Gladio was still reeling from everything that had happened, Prompto’s kidnapping and Tenebrae’s destruction and Ignis’s return. Ignis would wait, would tell him tomorrow after he’d had a chance to rest and calm down. Besides, if Gladio knew about the game and Noct’s destiny before they departed, he might well refuse to allow them to go to Gralea at all - might insist on going by himself to rescue Prompto while Noct and Ignis returned to Lucis. Ignis wasn’t about to let him take that risk.

Instead, he pointed out, “Lucis won’t be much safer than Gralea, if the rumors of longer nights and more daemons are true. If I’m with you, at least you’ll know I’m all right.”


Damn. Ignis gritted his teeth. “Gladio—”

“No,” Gladio said again, sharper.

“Fine,” Ignis said. “We’ll ask Noct tomorrow.”

“That ain’t fair,” Gladio protested. “Noct won’t go anywhere without you.”
“Noctis is the King of Lucis,” Ignis said. “It’s our job to protect and support him, and if he believes the best way I can do so is by his side despite the risks, then that’s his decision to make.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Gladio asked quietly. “If he tells you to go home?”

Ignis swallowed hard. He’d been trying not to think about that. “It’s still his decision to make,” he whispered. Ignis hoped - would have prayed, if he had any faith in the gods anymore - that it wouldn’t come to that, but if it did, he wouldn’t let it stop him. There were other ways to get to Gralea - he hadn’t come this far to roll over and let Noctis die to a stupid ancient prophecy.

Gladio made a noncommittal noise; Ignis had the unpleasant suspicion he could see right through Ignis’s planning. But all Gladio said was, “Fine. We’ll talk to Noct tomorrow.”

Ignis nodded. “You should rest. From what Noct told me, you need it almost as much as he does.”

“It’s been a hell of a day,” Gladio agreed, and clapped Ignis on the shoulder as he walked past, out of the abandoned cabin and back toward the one where Noctis slept. “But I’m okay with how it ended.”

Chapter End Notes

Tough boys don't talk about things like feelings. XD I've been trying to show, in this fic, the reasons behind why Gladio acts the way he does (and that Noctis isn't just passively taking it - he's hurting Gladio back). Ignis doesn't believe it's his place to chew out Gladio for getting into a fight with Noctis; he knows both of them were only lashing out in pain. It's between the two of them, and all Ignis can do is smooth things over enough to give them a chance to approach each other calmly and resolve it themselves.
Ignis woke before either Gladio or Noctis, which wasn’t unusual; what was unusual was that Gladio didn’t even stir when Ignis fumbled his way into the cabin’s tiny bathroom. Clearly Gladio had been more tired than he’d been willing to admit. Ignis got cleaned up and dressed in fresh clothes, feeling his way around and managing not to knock over too many bottles. He could have woken Gladio for help, but doing so would be to admit he wasn’t capable of basic independence, much less a dangerous trip to the Imperial capital.

Only after he’d finished his morning routine did he return to the cabin and reach up to the top bunk to nudge Gladio. Gladio woke with a start and a curse, and Ignis heard the telltale crystalline sound of a weapon being summoned from the armory. He ducked under the bunk on reflex, and waited until Gladio muttered, “Stars, Iggy,” to straighten back up.

“I told you I can take care of myself,” Ignis said, and couldn’t quite keep a bit of pride out of his voice. Dodging a weapon summoned on reflex while still mostly asleep was hardly comparable to fighting daemons or MTs - but even mostly asleep, Gladio was a deadly fighter who probably would have tried to decapitate Ignis before waking up enough to remember what had happened yesterday.

Gladio just grunted in response. Ignis heard him dismiss the sword, then the rustle of blankets as Gladio kicked his legs free and swung down off the bunk. Ignis added, “I’m going to wake Noctis. Do we have any remaining food stores?”

“Don’t think so,” Gladio said. “Been eating out of the restaurant car.”

“Fine,” Ignis said. “I’ll see about getting us breakfast.”

As Gladio shuffled into the bathroom, grumbling vaguely and smelling of morning breath, Ignis crouched beside the lower bunk where Noct slept. His hand found a shoulder covered in the scratchy blanket, and he shook it gently. “Noct,” he called. “It’s time to wake up.” Noctis didn’t respond, so Ignis shook him again, harder, a comforting sense of normalcy in the familiar routine. “Noctis. Wake up.”

Noct grunted and rolled over, mumbling something that a lifetime of practice let Ignis translate as go away, I’m sleeping. Then suddenly Noct spasmed, flailing awake, his shoulder jerking under Ignis’s hand as he fought the blankets trapping his arms. “Ignis?”

“I’m right here,” Ignis said. It was all too easy to guess what was going through Noctis’s mind: terror that he’d dreamed Ignis’s return, that he’d been about to awaken to find Ignis was still gone. Ignis kept his hand on Noct’s shoulder until Noct steadied, then added, “It took me long enough to return to you once. You’ll not lose me so easily again.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Noctis groaned. He flopped back against the bed; Ignis pictured him draping his arm over his eyes. “Where’s Gladio?”

“In the shower,” Ignis answered. “I’m going to go see if I can find something for us to eat.”

“There’s a restaurant four or five cars that way,” Noctis said.
A little sting of pain, the familiar ache for the loss of his sight. “I can’t see where you’re pointing.”

“Oh.” Noctis sounded embarrassed. “Sorry. Um. Turn right when you leave the cabin.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, and smiled; it was probably more rueful than he’d meant but Noctis would understand. “Don’t go back to sleep,” he added as he felt his way to the door. “Gladio will be out of the shower soon.”

“I know, I know,” Noct grumbled, and Ignis heard the smile in his voice.

The train was silent and empty, the rail crew having long since fled - probably preparing to depart for the relative safety of Lucis with Aranea. Without their aid, finding the restaurant car, the freezer where the boxed meals were kept, and the oven where they were heated tested Ignis’s hard-won navigation skills to the limit. He was grateful the oven was meant to be operated by bored, untrained cashiers; he needed only press the single large button on its front to set it heating six of the meal trays. It wasn’t long before he was balancing the trays on one arm while trailing the fingers of the other along the wall to steer himself back.

He was almost to their cabin (counting in his head, fourth car back, second door) when his straining ears picked up the low rumble of voices within. Ignis stopped just outside the door, resisting the urge to bend close enough to listen in. Neither Noctis nor Gladio was shouting, and even without being able to hear the words, their conciliatory, almost apologetic tone was obvious. Ignis leaned against the wall beside the cabin door, a weight he hadn’t realized he was carrying falling from his shoulders, and waited until he heard Noctis laugh to enter.

Noctis had apparently not only stayed awake after Ignis went in search of food, but showered and changed; he smelled of cheap train soap and clean laundry where he sat next to Ignis on one of the bunks while they ate. He sounded far more composed than he had yesterday as he complained good-naturedly about the carrots and peas in the boxed meals, and the horrible tension between him and Gladio that had been clear even through the filter of the game’s cutscenes was gone.

Then Gladio tossed his empty second tray into the cabin’s little trash bin, the plastic rattling against the bin’s sides, and a new tension settled over Ignis’s shoulders.

Gladio said, “So. Gralea.”

“Yeah,” Noctis said soberly. “The Empire has both Prompto and the Crystal. Ignis thinks Ardyn kidnapped Prompto to lure me in,” he added, the words directed at Gladio.

“Probably,” Gladio agreed. The leather of his jacket creaked as he folded his arms. “But we have the Ring now.”

Ignis took the hint, and drew out the Ring from its place in his jacket pocket. With Noctis sitting right beside him, it was easy to find his hand and press the Ring into his palm. “The Ring of the Lucii. Your forefathers’ legacy,” Ignis said solemnly. “Bear it well.”

Under other circumstances, there would have been a crowning ceremony. The Crown City would be full of solemn celebration, reverence for the king who had passed combined with joy for the ascension of his son. There would be record-keepers, clerics of the Astrals, officiants of all flavors waiting to each perform one vitally important task, without which the entire ceremony would be considered null and void.

Now, there was just the three of them in a grubby sleeper cabin on a train half a world away from home.
Noctis’s fingers closed around the Ring, his shoulder brushing against Ignis’s arm as he hunched in on himself. Ignis imagined his eyes closing, in grief or pain or perhaps both, and rested a hand on his shoulder. Leather creaked softly from where Gladio sat, and Noctis twitched slightly - Gladio had probably gripped his other shoulder.

They sat in silence, absorbing the gravity of the moment, and Ignis firmly did not think about Noctis’s true ascension, the one ten years in the future which would end in his death. That wouldn’t happen - not if Ignis had anything to say about it.

Finally Noctis straightened, shaking himself as if to settle the new weight on his shoulders. Ignis released him, and a shifting from the opposite bunk said Gladio had done the same. Then Gladio said cautiously, “Aren’t you going to put it on?”

A hesitation. Noctis said quietly, “Not - not yet. I’m going to need all my strength for Gralea, and once I put it on…” He trailed off.

Gladio drew in a breath as if to object, and Ignis shot him what he hoped was a warning look. Gladio knew as well as Ignis did how badly Noctis reacted to being pushed - it was what had driven the fight between them after Altissia, the fight they’d only just resolved. And thank all the Astrals, Gladio seemed to realize it, because all he said was, “Right. So for Gralea, we’ll need a plan. It’ll be just you and me, so—”

“What about Ignis?” Noct said, and Ignis felt a brush of air as Noct gestured in his direction. “He’s back now.”

“And he’s blind,” Gladio said. “He can’t come to Gralea with us.”

“I am coming,” Ignis cut in. “I can take care of myself.”

There was a pause, during which Ignis suspected Gladio was glaring at him, and Noct was looking between them uncertainly. Then Gladio said flatly, “You’ll be a liability.”

Ignis’s fists clenched at his sides and he swallowed. He’d known what Gladio thought, but the words still hurt. His voice came out tighter than he’d meant when he said, “I won’t. I may no longer have my sight, but nevertheless I would see this through. To the very end.”

Gladio’s hair rustled against his collar as he shook his head. “There’s more to it than just what you want.”

“I know full well!” Ignis snapped, then stopped, pushing aside the memories of the game’s end, of Noct’s dying cries. Forced himself to take a deep breath. Now wasn’t the time to talk about that, not when Noctis was right here. “I won’t ask you to slow down,” he said. “If I can’t keep up, I’ll bow out.” Prayed neither of them would think to ask how he’d bow out in the middle of enemy territory.

A pause. Gladio said, “What says His Majesty?” There was the slightest bite to his voice, a pointed reminder that while Noctis had accepted the Ring, he hadn’t put it on.

“Noct,” Ignis said softly, before Noctis could respond. Hoping to head off any reaction to Gladio’s tone. “You are King. One cannot lead by standing still. A king pushes onward always, accepting the consequences and never looking back.” Remembering King Regis’s voice saying those very words to Ignis himself, years ago when he’d first introduced Ignis to a small, shy boy with a radiant smile. Willing Noctis to hear the truth in the words, in his father’s wisdom from beyond the grave.

More silence, and Ignis tried to convince himself that it was a good thing, that it meant Noctis was
considering the situation fully rather than bracing himself to say what Ignis didn’t want to hear.

Finally Noctis spoke, his voice careful and measured: the tone of a king. “Ignis, I trust you,” he said. “You’ve been there for me this long, and I don’t like the idea of going on without you. But—” he added, and the sigh of relief caught in Ignis’s chest. “I also trust you to actually bow out if you need to. Don’t push yourself too far for my sake. We’re going to get Prompto and the Crystal back, but not at your expense. All right?”

It was more than Ignis expected. He nodded, his throat tight, both from the relief of being able to stay at Noctis’s side, and from the wisdom Noct displayed. Not only the tone of a king, but the words of one: balanced and considered, navigating a path between what was best for his country and his mission, and his own needs and desires. He might not wear the Ring yet, but it was no more than a piece of magical jewelry - it had no bearing on his ability to rule.

Noctis deserved a chance to be the king he was growing into. If Ignis had to take on the gods, the Lucii, and Ardyn Izunia himself to make it happen, then by the stars he’d do it.

Chapter End Notes

We never see Noctis's reasoning for not putting on the Ring right away in Altissia, and by the time we pick up with the guys after, enough time has passed that they don't discuss it except for Gladio sniping at Noct on the train. But this seemed like the logical conclusion.

Also, after writing this chapter I realized that Ep: Ignis puts a whole heartbreaking new light on Gladio saying "There's more to it than what you want," and Ignis responding with, "I know full well!". :C
The final preparations for their departure from Tenebrae didn’t take long. Noctis bartered with Aranea’s crew for supplies, trading things the mercenaries could use in Lucis for things he and Gladio and Ignis would need in Gralea. As the game had predicted, Aranea had offered to loan her men Biggs and Wedge to drive the train, and Ignis tried not to remember Kate talking about how the men’s names were a double reference, both to past games and to an entirely separate movie series.

They departed two hours later, the train rumbling under Ignis’s feet and its horn booming across the canyons and cliffs of Tenebrae. The trip from Tenebrae Station to Gralea normally took nearly four days, but Biggs estimated that if they skipped all the scheduled stops and pushed the train’s speed as fast as it could go without risking derailment on the curving tracks, they could make it in just over two.

“Won’t we have problems with other trains?” Gladio asked. They sat around a table in the conductor’s map room, planning their route. “It won’t do us any good to speed up if we risk running headfirst into another train.”

“Doubt it,” Biggs said, his tone grim. “I’ve been trying to hail the station operators further up the line, and the only one who’s responding is the next stop, the one at the border. She said the next station past her stopped responding two days ago, and the last thing that station told her was that the Imperial army’s putting the citizens on lockdown.”

“You said yesterday there’s nothing but daemons left in the capital,” Noctis said. “That the daemons in the labs got out and the MTs went rogue.”

“Think it’s spreading?” Gladio asked. “Sun’s barely shown its face the last few days - they’d have plenty of time to move.”

“Probably,” Biggs said. “You’d best hurry up and get that Crystal back, or else the whole country’ll be the same.”

Ignis bit his tongue to keep from saying it was already too late for Niflheim. Now wasn’t the time to talk about what he’d learned, and it didn’t matter in any case: Biggs and Wedge knew enough to keep Gladio and Noctis informed of the situation. Gladio would ensure the train ride went as smoothly as possible, while Ignis prepared a plan for when they arrived in Gralea.

Or at least, he’d pretend to be doing that. In reality, since he already knew what had to happen to find Prompto and the Crystal, he’d turn his focus to figuring out how to interrupt two thousand years’ worth of destiny, to allow them to escape Gralea with Prompto, Noctis, and the Crystal all
But that was far easier said than done. Once they’d finished planning their route, Gladio directed Ignis to a mostly-empty boxcar at the back of the train, where he ran Ignis through combat drills while Noctis watched. Ignis couldn’t blame him - Gladio was only trying to make sure Ignis would be up to the task of fighting blind through a city of daemons, and if Ignis was honest with himself he needed the practice. In the original version of the game, he’d had a chance to practice fighting during the trip through Cartanica, but it wasn’t as though Kate’s house had been teeming with daemons.

He promised himself he would speak with Gladio that night, after they’d finished training and Noctis had gone to sleep. He’d tell Gladio everything, and recruit him in planning an escape from Noctis’s destiny. But “night” was a vague concept at best already, the miasma of Starscourge blotting out the sun for all but a few hours, and by the time Gladio gave in and allowed Ignis to return to their cabin, Ignis was so exhausted he passed out on the bunk without even showering off the workout sweat.

When he woke the next morning, his muscles ached with the comfortable familiarity of hard exercise - right up until he pushed off the scratchy woolen blanket and the freezing air made them lock up tight. Ignis hadn’t realized the Glacian’s unnatural winter had spread so far north - they were supposed to pass Ghorovas Rift later today, but that was hours out yet. Shivering, he crouched by the opposite bunk to shake Noctis and start the long process of cajoling him out of bed, then ducked into the bathroom to wash up.

The water of the shower was hot enough to ease Ignis’s muscles, and he permitted himself a few extra minutes under the flow, working out the last of the kinks as best he could in the cramped space. When he shut off the water, he was surprised to hear the rumble of voices in the cabin outside. Either Ignis had stayed in the shower longer than he’d thought, or Noctis was antsy enough to have awakened right away.

“—too quiet,” Gladio was saying. “Even if the citizens are on lockdown like Biggs said, there ought to have been some movement.”

“We can look again when we pass the next station,” Noctis said around a yawn. “But you’re right. Everything in this whole damn country feels… wrong.”

A beat, then Gladio said carefully, “I was gonna ask if that was the Ring talking, but you still ain’t wearing it.”

“Gladio…” Noctis said, and sighed. Ignis paused in the middle of toweling himself off, one hand half-reaching for the bathroom door in case he needed to intervene.

Noctis continued, “I know I have to put it on. It’s my birthright, it’s what I need to control the magic of the Crystal. But… you saw what it did to my dad. I don’t—I can’t afford to do that to myself until I have to.”

“Pretty risky, taking that on at the last minute.” Gladio’s tone was still cautious; he was clearly trying to gentle his words enough that Noct didn’t react badly.

He didn’t quite succeed. “I know,” Noct snapped, and again Ignis reached for the doorknob. But then Noctis sighed. When he next spoke, his voice was muffled, as if he’d dropped his head into his hands. “I know what I have to do, Gladio. I know I’m the Chosen King, I know I’m the only one who can stop the daemons and save everyone. I just… the sooner I put it on, the sooner it starts doing what it did to my dad. It starts—” His voice cracked. “It starts killing me.”
A long silence, in which Ignis tried not to remember Noctis’s dying cries echoing from the tinny speakers of Kate’s phone. Noctis didn’t know yet just how true his words were.

If Ignis had any say in the matter, he’d never find out.

Gladio said, very quietly, “Anything you need from me - from either of us - you let us know. We’re with you to the end - as far off as we can push it.”

Noctis didn’t say anything else, though Ignis imagined him nodding, his head still buried in his hands, his shoulders hunched with the weight of the throne, of a destiny whose full extent he didn’t yet know. Gladio fell silent as well; Ignis finished dressing as quickly as he could, and said nothing when Noctis slipped wordlessly into the bathroom the moment he opened the door.

He considered telling Gladio about the game, about the truth of Noctis’s destiny, right then. But Gladio started talking first, telling Ignis about the train station they’d sped through while Ignis was in the shower, how it was completely empty, no sign of Imperial citizens going about their day, nor of panicked refugees seeking escape. That conversation left no time for Ignis to bring up the game before the sound of water shut off in the bathroom, meaning Noct would be able to overhear his words just as Ignis had overheard theirs.

Ignis promised himself he would find a chance to talk to Gladio alone later, to tell him everything. But somehow the timing was never quite right: not during the next bout of combat practice, nor during the meals they shared with Biggs and Wedge in the conductor’s map room, nor when they sat tense around a window, Gladio and Noctis peering out at a train station as they passed, searching for any sign of life.

They reached Ghorovas Rift in the late afternoon, and just as the game had predicted, the train iced over, bringing their progress to a halt. Actually participating in the battle that followed, the first true test of Ignis’s ability to fight since losing his sight, was terrifying - but he couldn’t deny the thrill of satisfaction when the last of the daemons fell dead and Ignis had no worse injuries than some bruises from being slammed in the back.

He was less afraid than he otherwise would have been when they returned to the train and Ardyn’s magic rendered him and Gladio unconscious; he knew from the game that they would wake to find Noctis unharmed. Comforting it might be to have that foreknowledge, but at the same time Ignis couldn’t help but worry. As long as events proceeded as the game had shown, it meant Noctis was hurtling toward his own death - that Ignis hadn’t yet changed anything, hadn’t yet saved him. But then, he hadn’t even managed to discuss the situation with Gladio. He needed to do that first, enlist Gladio’s help so that he wasn’t working alone.

With the Glacian’s interference finished and Ardyn gone from the train, they got underway once more. From Ghorovas Rift to the outskirts of Gralea, to the daemon attack on the train and the discovery - though Ignis had already known - that Ardyn had sealed Noctis’s magic. The escape to the Regalia and the frantic drive to the city gates, clinging to the car while Noctis wrestled with the wheel and bombs dropped around them.

Finally, finally, the car skidded to a stop. Behind them the heavy city gates slammed closed with a boom that echoed strangely across what Ignis could only imagine was a barren, lifeless cityscape. Leaving the Regalia behind hurt more than Ignis had expected, but he knew whatever emotion he felt for the car, Noctis was feeling a thousand times worse. He used the sound of Noctis’s panting breaths to make his way to his prince’s side, and rested a hand on his shoulder. Noctis leaned into the touch, and they stayed that way for a long moment, until Noctis pulled away and nudged Ignis onward along the bridge. Ignis went, and pretended he didn’t hear when Noctis murmured, “Thanks for everything, Dad.”
When Ignis had watched this scene with Kate, she’d described the area as a wrecked train yard, with flipped and broken train cars scattered like toys across a wide bridge. It certainly explained the creaking and groaning of metal that surrounded them as they eased forward, and when Gladio said uneasily, “This thing could come down at any time,” Ignis didn’t bother to ask what he meant. He just hurried forward, trying to grab Noctis before Noct could get too far ahead of them, under the rail car that would separate them just long enough for Ardyn to interfere.

But Noct had already jogged under the suspended car, his boots slapping on the wet metal of the bridge, and Ignis’s hand closed on empty air. An instant later Gladio threw an arm across Ignis’s chest even as metal roared and crashed, the bridge rattling beneath their feet and the wind from the collapse blasting Ignis’s face. Gladio spat a curse, letting go of Ignis to rush forward and, judging by the scrabbling sounds, try to climb the train.

Ignis had commented to Kate how it seemed odd that so small a thing as a fallen rail car could separate Noctis from them so thoroughly; now, as the last rumbling of the collapse faded, he realized he could hear nothing at all. In the game, Noctis had called for them, just as Gladio was shouting for Noctis now - but Ignis couldn’t hear Noct, nor any of the distant city sounds that had been present only moments ago. “Gladio!” he called, then, when Gladio kept calling Noctis’s name, “Gladio!”

“Damn it, what,” Gladio snarled, then before Ignis could say anything, “Noct isn’t answering - he’s probably hurt! Why are you so calm?!”

Ignis shook his head and held up a finger. “Listen.” He gave Gladio a moment to hear what Ignis had - or rather, hadn’t, then continued, “I suspect enemy interference. We’re being deliberately separated.”

“You think so?” Gladio asked. He growled under his breath. “Dammit.”

“Indeed,” Ignis agreed. He almost told Gladio then about the game, to reassure him of Noctis’s safety - but even as he opened his mouth to speak, he remembered the interference was caused by Ardyn, who even now watched them with unseen eyes. Ignis couldn’t tell Gladio now, not when it meant Ardyn might hear. He didn’t know what Ardyn might do with the knowledge of the game or the possibility of changing it, and he very much did not want to find out. Except that meant Ignis had run out of time - they wouldn’t have any time alone, away from Ardyn’s watchful eye, until after Noctis had been drawn into the Crystal.

It was then Ignis realized his folly. Do you think the game will let that work? Kate had asked, back in the convention hall. They hadn’t been able to figure out what meta mechanic controlled the game to prevent Ignis from revealing its secrets, but that didn’t mean one didn’t exist - nor that it wasn’t acting in full force. Clearly the game had no intention of allowing Ignis to discuss its true nature with Gladio.

The realization was worrisome, not least because of the implication that the game would act to prevent Ignis from changing anything, just as thoroughly as it had prevented him from talking about it. Still, Ignis wasn’t about to give up. I’ve come this far, he thought. If I must act entirely alone to change Noct’s destiny, so be it.

“We still gotta try to catch up to him,” Gladio was saying. “Whatever the enemy’s game is, I have no intention of playing.”

Ignis shook himself, putting aside thoughts of the game - the actual one - for the moment. Right now they needed to deal with the immediate problem, which was getting past Ardyn and into Zegnautus. “I fear we’ve little choice,” he answered Gladio. “But you’re right - we should still
make every effort to find Noct.”

Gladio grunted agreement. “Then let’s get going.”
Changes

Chapter Summary

In which something changes.

Chapter Notes

Updates will be somewhat irregular for the next month or so as I have a big project launching in August, but I will do my best to stay on track.

“Going up,” Gladio said, and hauled Ignis the last few feet onto the top of the collapsed rail car. Straining his ears for any sign of Noctis - or Ardyn, for that matter - Ignis barely noticed when Gladio caught his hand and pressed his cane into it.

“Is there a way forward?” Ignis asked. The words echoed strangely in his memory; he suspected he was speaking lines directly from the original game.

“There’s a way,” Gladio said grimly, “but I don’t see us going forward without facing off with the daemons.”

“But now Noct is facing them alone,” Ignis said. Talking mostly to himself, trying to remember what the game had shown. “There must be some way we can help him.”

“Perhaps I could be of service.”

It was Ardyn Izunia’s voice, and even though he’d known Ardyn would be there, Ignis couldn’t stop himself from twitching.

Beside him, Gladio snarled, “What are you doing here?”

“Why, I come bearing gifts,” Ardyn purred. “And I wished to speak to you, dear chamberlain.”

Ignis frowned. That hadn’t been in the original game. “About what?”

“I only wanted to congratulate you,” Ardyn said. His shoes clanked against the metal of the bridge as he walked closer. “I’d have done it when we met on the train, but the Glacian’s interference left me no time.”

“Congratulations me?” Ignis repeated dubiously.

“On your miraculous return from the dead,” Ardyn said. His voice was as smarmy and cheerful as ever, but there was a dangerous edge to it that had Ignis reaching futilely into the sealed armory for his daggers. Ardyn continued, “That stunt you pulled in Altissia was... impressive. I’d love to know how you survived.”

Ignis’s blood ran cold. Did Ardyn know Ignis had used the Ring? He reached desperately into his
memory, but just as before there was nothing save for vague images of saltwater and pain.

Ardyn was still talking, and Ignis forced himself to pay attention: “Ah, but then, you didn’t survive unscathed, did you? Quite unfortunate. Perhaps I shouldn’t waste my gifts on you after all.”

“You keep talking about gifts,” Gladio growled. “What the hell’s that about?”

There was a snap of fingers, and the armory’s magic pulsed against Ignis’s senses. One of his daggers materialized in his free hand, the sensation of Ardyn’s manipulation alien and unsettling.

“The hell?” Gladio demanded.

“See?” Ardyn said. “Gifts! Now, I believe a ‘thank you’ is in order.”

“For what?” Gladio snapped. “Another one of your stupid tricks?”

Ardyn tsked. “Here I am, helping for a change, but I can see I’m not wanted,” he said. A rustle of cloth and the clank of footsteps, then abruptly the unnatural silence of the trainyard lifted. The creaking and groaning returned, as did the distant sounds of the city, and Ignis didn’t have to ask to know Ardyn had vanished.

He eased forward, his cane searching for the edge of the train car on which they stood, trying to pretend he didn’t feel Gladio’s contemplative gaze on him. “I’m loath to trust him,” Ignis said. Maybe he could distract Gladio, keep him from asking what Ardyn had been talking about regarding Altissia.

“Same,” Gladio admitted. “But at this point, we need all the help we can get. Watch it,” he added, and caught Ignis by the back of the jacket.

Ignis eased one foot forward, finding a raised ridge of some sort which might have tripped him if not for the warning. He stepped over it, then waited at the edge of the train while Gladio clambered down.

It wasn’t until after Gladio had helped Ignis off the side of the fallen car and cleared out the pack of imps which leaped out of the rubble to attack them that Gladio said, “So what was that about a stunt in Altissia?”

Damn. “I’ve no idea,” Ignis said, and tried to sound baffled. “I told you, I’ve no memory of that day.”

Gladio grunted. For a moment Ignis thought he was going to drop the subject, but then Gladio said, “Whatever it was, you must’ve impressed the hell out of him. He sounded almost… jealous.”

That brought Ignis up short, and he was almost grateful that another group of imps chose that moment to attack as it gave him a minute to think through the implications as he fought. If Ardyn had seen Ignis use the Ring of the Lucii… Ardyn knew what had happened to Ravus Nox Fleuret for attempting to use the Ring. For that matter, Ardyn’s entire grudge against the Astrals and the Lucii involved his belief that he was the Chosen King, and the Crystal’s subsequent rejection. Perhaps he’d thought Ignis had died in his own attempt to use the Ring, and seeing him alive raised questions about Ignis’s worthiness compared to Ardyn’s own.

If that was the case, Ignis would have to be very careful to lie low and avoid further attracting Ardyn’s attention. The last thing he needed was Ardyn investigating too closely and uncovering the holes in Ignis’s story before he was ready to reveal them - or worse, uncovering the truth of the alternate reality and the game which controlled all their lives.
As the last of the imps squealed and died, Gladio picked up the conversation as though the interruption hadn’t happened: “Anyway, if you did something to impress him, might be worth trying to figure out what it was. He’s holding a lot more cards than we are - any advantage we can dig up will help.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Ignis hedged. “But for now, let’s focus on reuniting with Noctis.”

“Yeah,” Gladio agreed.

That determination carried them onward through the city and into the keep, even as Ignis’s legs began to ache from running along endless hallways and climbing hundreds of stairs. As his arms and shoulders and back screamed with pain, both from the exhaustion of non-stop fighting and the wounds he hadn’t been fast enough to avoid. Through their encounters with the daemonified Iedolas Aldercapt, the discovery of the security tape of Ravus Nox Fleuret’s last moments, and finally to the trapped hallway where Noctis was locked.

Even though he’d known they would find Noctis safe, Ignis couldn’t help the rush of relief at hearing his prince’s voice once more. “I’m just glad you guys are okay,” Noctis said as they left the trap room, Ardyn’s mocking words still echoing through the metal halls. “I thought—” He broke off, but it was all too easy to guess what he’d been about to say: *I thought I’d lost you again.*

“I told you it wouldn’t be so easy a second time,” Ignis said, keeping his tone light. The last thing any of them needed was to lose themselves to morbid fear.

“We should rest for a bit,” Gladio said. “No offense, Highness, but you look like six kinds of shit.”

“You guys don’t look much better,” Noctis retorted, but Ignis heard the exhaustion in his voice. “It’s just the Ring. I’m not used to wearing it yet.”

“That ain’t reassuring,” Gladio said.

“I’m fine,” Noctis insisted. “We’re not resting until we find Prompto.”

“We’ve been all over this damn keep,” Gladio complained. “If he’s here, he’s well hidden. We’ve been awake for I don’t even know how long at this point. We ain’t gonna do him much good if we’re too tired to walk straight, much less find someone Ardyn doesn’t want us to find.”

“Iggy?” Noctis asked. His voice was soft, and Ignis heard the real question underneath: *do you need to bow out?*

Ignis hesitated, trying to remember how this part of the game had gone. As best he could recall, in the game they’d found Prompto almost immediately after reuniting - but the game had only spent a few hours in Zegnautus, when the real thing was taking them days. It was impossible to know whether finding Prompto was one of the things which had been sped up for the sake of gameplay, or if they’d truly find him within the hour.

Still, Ignis remembered what Kate had said: *when you find Prompto, he’s been in chains long enough for some of the bruises to start to go yellow.* Prompto was in chains right now, helpless, injured, unable to do anything save wait for a rescue he wasn’t sure would ever come. “I’m fine,” Ignis said, and made himself sound confident. “If we’ve been all over the keep already, there can’t be many more places to look. We’ll rest after we find him.”

Gladio snorted, but didn’t argue, and Ignis heard Noct’s quiet sigh of relief.
It occurred to Ignis then that this was an opportunity. Noct was obviously exhausted, barely staying upright if his shuffling footsteps were any indication. He’d put on the Ring, as the game had predicted; and just as with Regis, and King Mors before him, it was draining Noct’s life force, wearing him down. Even if it hadn’t been, he hadn’t rested any more than Ignis or Gladio had - and from the sound of it, he’d been run far more ragged by Ardyn’s sadistic machinations. Noctis had to know he couldn’t continue much longer, no matter their determination to find Prompto. Gladio knew it, too - knew just how dangerous it was to stay in an enemy keep full of daemons when they were all running on fumes.

Getting the words out was difficult. Ignis kept wanting to be distracted, to turn his ear to a sound that might be a daemon’s claws scuffling around the corner, or to test the stale dry air for the scent of death. He pushed those thoughts to the side, held onto the memory of Noctis’s dying screams, and forced out the words: “Or perhaps instead of resting, we should retreat.”

“Retreat?” Gladio demanded.

“Are you kidding?” Noctis added. “The Crystal’s here somewhere - we can’t just leave it!”

“You get hit on the head when I wasn’t looking?” Gladio said. Ignis felt the brush of air as Gladio’s hand came near his face, and dodged before Gladio could pin him down and check him for injuries.

“No,” he said irritably. Now that he’d managed the suggestion, speaking came more easily, and he continued, “Think about it. We’re all exhausted and injured, and Prompto is unlikely to be any better off. We haven’t found the Crystal yet, either, and I strongly doubt it’s being kept near Prompto, which means yet more wandering around searching when we can barely even walk.”

He heard Noctis draw breath to interrupt, and kept talking, overriding him: “The keep is empty except for daemons - the entire Imperial hierarchy is dead, its citizens in hiding or fleeing the country. Daemons can’t touch the Crystal. It’s not going anywhere. If we retreat after rescuing Prompto, we can return when the four of us are at full strength.” Or not return at all, if Ignis could help it. Noctis needed to be near the Crystal for it to absorb him - the longer Ignis kept them apart, the more time he had to think of a permanent solution.

Leather rustled as Noctis shook his head. “Much as I like the idea, I can’t stop the daemons without the Crystal. If I wait, more people will die because I was weak.”

“It’s not weakness to strategically retreat,” Ignis said. “If you continue, as exhausted as you are, you’re unlikely to make it to the Crystal at all, much less be able to use its power.” Guilt twisted like a knife in his gut for using Noctis’s own fears like this, but he added, “What happens to all those people if you die because you were too tired to fight off an iron giant, and we were too tired to protect you?”

Noctis was silent. Gladio said, “Iggy has a point. You’re barely standing as it is.” Hope surged in Ignis’s chest - if Gladio bought into his idea, it would be far easier to convince Noctis.

“You were the one bitching at me about not going fast enough,” Noctis retorted, but there was no heat to it - just exhaustion he wasn’t quite able to hide.

“The train still works,” Gladio said, his tone thoughtful. “We can go back to Tenebrae. Just for a few days.”

Noctis made the frustrated noise which meant he was wrestling with a difficult decision. Ignis waited, holding his breath - and finally Noctis blew out a sigh. “Fine,” Noct said. “Just for a few
days, until we’re recovered enough to come back.”

“Agreed.” Ignis said, and Gladio grunted his own agreement.

A swish of leather and a brush of air indicated Noctis’s sharp turn toward the hall. “Good. Now let’s go find Prompto.”

For once, the game’s depiction of time wasn’t far off: they’d only been searching for perhaps ten minutes when they found the locked door to the cell block. Noct opened it with his stolen keycard, and they hurried through. Ignis barely heard Noct’s strangled whisper of “Prompto…” when he spotted his best friend at the end of the hall; Ignis was more focused on planning. Once they freed Prompto from the cell, they’d take a few minutes to rest in one of the dormitories scattered around the keep. Not long, only enough to make sure Prompto was well enough to leave with them. Then back to the train, to Tenebrae, where Ignis would have a least a few more days to—

Gladio stopped walking so abruptly Ignis ran into him. A few steps ahead, Noctis hissed, venom in his voice, “You.”

Ardyn Izunia’s voice said cheerfully, “Yes, me indeed.”

Ignis froze. This wasn’t right. Ardyn hadn’t been there when they’d rescued Prompto in the game; what on Eos was he doing here now?!

As if reading Ignis’s thoughts, Ardyn said, “I couldn’t help but overhear the three of you planning.”

Gladio had an arm out, blocking Ignis from moving forward, and Ignis felt him tense. Noctis snarled, “Get away from him.”

Ignis’s blood ran cold. From the distance of Ardyn’s voice, he was some ways up the hall - most likely at the very end of it, inside the cell where Prompto hung chained and helpless.

“I’ve been doing my best to instill in you the appropriate sense of urgency,” Ardyn said, “but it seems my lessons have gone unheeded. I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but…” His voice shifted from cheerful to threatening. “You’ve no time to waste, Highness.”

Even as he said the last word, Noctis shouted, “No!”, and Ignis heard the crack-snap of a warp as Noctis threw himself forward, down the hall toward the cell. But worse than that was the other sound, softer and far more vicious: the wet slick sound of a blade plunging into flesh.

Prompto screamed.

Ardyn laughed.
Desperation

Chapter Summary

In which Ignis makes a desperate move.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chaos.

Running up the hall, his cane bumping Gladio’s heels.

Noctis’s voice, panicky even as he tried to sound reassuring: C’mon, let’s get you down, just hold on, I’ve got potions, c’mon, Prompto, I’m right here, hold on, please…

Gladio fumbling at the cell door, cursing Ardyn, the Niffs, and Noctis’s ability to warp straight through barred walls all in the same breath.

Prompto’s gasping pained breaths, interrupted by the ugly choking coughs of a punctured lung.

The rattle of the door finally, finally swinging open even as a gentle thumping indicated Noctis had freed Prompto from his restraints and mostly eased his fall to the floor.

Ignis processed it all with only half his brain, the other half racing to reassess his plans, to compensate for this new malfeasance by Ardyn. He followed Gladio into the cell, but hung back by the door as Gladio lunged forward and joined Noctis on the floor beside Prompto. A tiny part of his mind not occupied with planning raged in fury at his own uselessness, his inability to do anything to help Prompto without his sight. But then, Ardyn was too competent, too cunning, to have stabbed Prompto if there was anything any of them could do to easily help him.

Damn it. He should have anticipated this, should have known Ardyn wouldn’t allow anything to disrupt Noctis’s arrival at the Crystal. Ignis should have waited until after they’d rescued Prompto to speak up - but who could have said he’d have been able to? If the game would have let him? No, he’d had to seize the opportunity when it arose. He just should have expected Ardyn to counter his move.

Even as he thought it, Ardyn’s voice echoed through the halls, tinny from whatever intercom system he’d been using this whole time - he must have vanished immediately after stabbing Prompto, putting himself out of harm’s way even as he continued to taunt them. “Your poor little friend,” Ardyn purred. “Such a shame.”

“Shut up!” Noctis screamed. “Gladio, we need—”

“A potion ain’t gonna cut it,” Gladio interrupted, his voice grim. “Not even a hunter’s salve. Not even close.”

“He’s right, you know,” Ardyn said cheerfully from the intercom. “But dear little Prompto still has a chance. If you hurry, you might be able to get him to the Crystal in time to save him.”
“What the hell are you talking about?” Noctis growled.

“Come now,” Ardyn said, condescension dripping from his voice. “Aren’t you supposed to be the Crystal’s Chosen? You of all people should know what it’s capable of.”

Ignis frowned. “The Crystal can’t heal, not truly. Healing is the domain of the Oracle.”

“What do you know of the Crystal’s power, boy?” Ardyn was clearly trying to keep his voice light, but there was an ugly edge to it, the same jealous note Gladio had commented on earlier. “I think it’s up to His Majesty to decide whether he’s willing to use its powers to save dearest Prompto. But then, maybe it’s not worth it. Maybe Noct won’t spare a bit of the Crystal’s power for such an empty little thing—”

“SHUT UP!” Noctis roared. “Gladio, carry him, we’ve got to find the Crystal—”

“No!” Ignis shouted, before he could catch himself.

There was a pause, in which he guessed both Noctis and Gladio had swung around to stare at him incredulously. Noctis said, “Ignis—” and Gladio said, “We don’t have a choice. He’s dying, Iggy.”

Ignis bit his tongue to keep from saying If Noctis reaches the Crystal then he’s the one who’ll die. Even now, he had to keep Ardyn from learning about the game. But he needed to keep Noctis away from the Crystal, too - and Ardyn had just given Noct every reason to run straight for it. Marshalling his thoughts with an effort of will, Ignis said, “The Crystal can’t heal, not like this. You know that.”

“I don’t know that,” Noctis snapped. “I can make those potions, can’t I? It’s something.” His voice cracked and Ignis heard him swallow. “I can’t let Prompto die, Iggy. I have to try.”

Prompto’s gasps were growing weaker. Gladio swore under his breath.

Ardyn said, “Sounds like he has, oh, five minutes. Ten at the most.”

“Let’s go,” Gladio said. Rustling and a grunt of effort indicated he’d stood, probably with Prompto cradled in his arms.

Ignis was out of time, but he didn’t have any better ideas. He was almost positive the Crystal couldn’t heal the way Ardyn was insinuating it could; there was no record in history of the Crystal’s magic being used for anything other than defense and destruction. Despite his protests, Noctis knew full well the potions he made didn’t have any truly curative properties, just as Ignis had told Kate days ago in her car in the alternate reality—

Kate.

Doctor Kate Matthias, the emergency physician.

Ignis’s breath caught and he lunged forward, guided by the sound of boots slapping the metal floor and leather rustling as Noctis moved. “Noct, wait—”

“Ignis, what the hell!” Noctis yelped, but Ignis managed to grab him by the shoulder. Followed his arm down to where he was pressing both hands against Prompto’s chest even as Gladio half-jogged along the hall. Blood slicked Noct’s hands, too much blood. Ardyn was right, Prompto had minutes at most. Not enough time to search for the Crystal even if it did have heretofore unknown healing powers. But Prompto’s wound wasn’t what Ignis was interested in. He found the Ring of the Lucii on Noctis’s finger, and he closed his hand around it and pushed.
Power. Magic rushing through him. The sensation of the Kings of Old towering over him, once again seen not with his useless eyes but with the magic that bound him to the Crystal.

Ignis said rapidly, “I ask that you honor our agreement. Take us to Dr. Matthias right now. Please.”

“Our agreement,” said the Founder King in a low, angry voice, “was to allow you to use our power without further penalty only in service to the Chosen King’s journey to the throne. This has nothing to do with that.”

“In fact, it takes him away from the throne,” a different voice pointed out.

“Wrong.” Ignis said. He didn’t have time for niceties, was too anxious to think of them even if he did. “Taku Kobayashi - your creator and mine - said all three of Noctis’s companions must accompany him to the throne.” He pushed the memory of the conference center at the kings, Taku saying The Cosmogony and related records, including the painting in the Citadel, were always intended to illustrate that Noctis must be accompanied by three companions. “Saving Prompto is absolutely necessary for Noctis to ascend, and getting him to Kate right now is the only way to do that.”

“The boy has a point,” a third voice said, and Ignis’s heart leapt when he recognized King Regis. “You yourselves showed me quite clearly what will happen if my son’s companions are not at his side.”

“His journey is nearly over,” the Founder King said dismissively. “There’s little more his companions can do for him.”

“Not true,” another king interjected; Ignis thought this was the one who’d once called him clever. “The Chosen King’s work is not ended simply by reaching the Crystal. He will need companions to aid him upon his return to the world outside.”

“It’s just a little detour,” the Rogue Queen added. “The Chosen One knows his purpose. He won’t leave his people for long.”

The Founder King grumbled under his breath, a surprisingly human sound from such an ancient being. “What’s the point of being your patriarch if you all overrule me at every turn?”

“We all want the Chosen King to succeed, Grandfather,” said the one who’d called Ignis clever. “I see no harm in making use of whatever tools are at our disposal, unconventional though they may be.”

Ignis held his breath. He had no idea how much time, if any, was passing in the outside world while he spoke to the Kings - but every second counted as Prompto’s life bled away.

Then the Founder King said, “Fine. We will take you to the doctor. But remember your part of the bargain.”

“I do,” Ignis said, his throat tight with relief.

“You swore to aid the Chosen King in his destiny,” the Founder King said pointedly.

“I swore to aid Noctis in saving our Star,” Ignis corrected. The wording had been intentional, and very deliberately chosen. “I intend to fulfill it.”

“Good,” the Founder King said. “See that you do.”
There was a pulse of magic, tingling from Ignis’s hair to his toes. The sensation of powerful beings looming over him vanished, as did the cold metallic scent and eerie hum of Zegnautus Keep. It was replaced by the sharp tang of antiseptic and the sickly sweet scent of illness, and a babble of voices which turned loud and surprised at the sudden appearance of four disheveled and bloody young men.

They’d reached the hospital.

“Kate!” Ignis yelled, ignoring Noctis and Gladio’s surprised exclamations. His hands were still on Prompto’s chest and he could feel only the barest flutter of a heartbeat. “Doctor Matthias!”

“Ignis?” Kate’s voice was the most welcome sound Ignis had heard in days. Her shoes clicked on the tiled floor as she hurried closer. “What are you—Oh my God.”

Faster footsteps, then Kate elbowed Ignis aside to get a look at Prompto where he lay silent and still in Gladio’s arms. “What the hell happened?” she demanded.

“Ardyn stabbed him,” Ignis said.

“How many times?” Kate asked. “Do you know how big the knife was?”

“Once,” Gladio said, and Ignis silently thanked the Stars for the man’s composure, his ability to respond calmly and sensibly despite everything. “I didn’t get a good look, but maybe four to six inches.”

“Lung’s collapsed,” Kate said, talking mostly to herself. “Likely has damage to the thoracic artery, or even the descending aorta...” Her voice rose in volume, a commanding shout. “I need a crash cart now. Get a transfusion ready, he’s way too low—”

She kept barking commands amidst a sudden flurry of motion. A rattle of wheels heralded the arrival of a gurney, and Ignis stepped back out of the way. Rustling sounds and chatter from the nurses told him Gladio was settling Prompto on the cart, and Ignis reached out and found the sleeve of Noctis’s jacket where Noct still clung to Prompto.

“Noct,” Ignis said. “We need to get out of their way.”

“No!” Noctis yelled wildly. He rounded on Ignis, trying to shake him off; Ignis redoubled his grip on Noct’s arm and pulled harder.

“No!” he said. “Listen to me. Prompto is in the best hands he could possibly be in right now, but we have to let them do their job.”

“Iggy’s right,” Gladio said, and abruptly Noctis stumbled closer to Ignis - Gladio must have joined the effort to get him away from the gurney. “C’mon.”

“No!” Noctis yelled again, but though he tugged against their hands, he seemed to realize the sense in their words because he didn’t try to warp free.

Ignis pulled Noctis closer, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “He’ll be all right,” Ignis said. The babble of voices faded, the wheels of the gurney rattling against the tile floor as Kate and her crew whisked Prompto away. “He’ll be fine,” Ignis whispered.

And prayed to whatever gods might listen that he was right.
Ep: I implies the Crystal has some unspecified ability to heal Ignis's Ring-burns, but since that path is non-canon and frustratingly handwave-y, and at no point in canon is the Crystal shown to have actual, direct curative powers, I'm ignoring it.

Also, check out this [amazing perfect fanart](#) by the fantastic [dustkeeper](#), who absolutely made my week, month, and year <3
Revelation

Chapter Summary

In which Noctis plays a video game.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I came down with the world's worst con crud and was too sick to do much of anything for a while.

Relatedly, updates will be slower for the next few months due to various real-life happenings, though I'll do my best to continue updating as much as possible.

A hospital aide showed Ignis, Noctis, and Gladio to a bathroom where they could clean up, and Ignis tried not to think about how much of Prompto’s blood he was washing off his hands. Noctis took even longer at the sink, though he didn’t say anything. His breath came in unsteady hitching bursts, as though he was swallowing back sobs. Still, by the time Gladio judged them all presentable enough to leave the bathroom, Noctis had composed himself into silence.

Ignis stayed close to Noctis as they walked out into the hospital’s waiting room, using the excuse of guiding himself with a hand on Noct’s elbow, though in reality he was only following Crownguard protocol for escorting the Crown Prince in a public space. He knew without asking that Gladio was on Noct’s other side; knew too that when Gladio steered them to a small cluster of chairs, it was in a corner as far from any windows or doors as possible. It was habit and training, meant to keep curious onlookers from seeing, or getting close to, the Crown Prince. And if it didn’t matter in this universe that Noctis was royalty, the protocol worked just as well to keep people from noticing the protagonist of a popular video game.

The chairs’ cloth padding might have once been comfortable, but had been worn down from years of anxious fidgeting. Still, it was better than perching restlessly on the thin regulation mattresses in Zegnatus Keep’s dormitories. Despite everything, Ignis couldn’t help a sigh of relief at simply being able to sit down. Noctis sat beside him, slumped in the faux-casual slouch he adopted in public, though the muscles of his arm were tense beneath Ignis’s fingers. Gladio stood in front of them, close enough that Ignis felt his body heat, and heard the soft rustling of his jacket as he shifted restlessly.

For a few precious seconds, Ignis thought he might get away with it - that Noct and Gladio were too occupied worrying about Prompto to question their circumstances. Then Noctis said in a tight, unwavering voice, “Ignis.”

He sounded like his father, and Ignis barely hid a flinch. In the same tight voice, Noctis added, “Care to explain?”

Before Ignis could say anything, Gladio said thoughtfully, “You said you woke up in a hospital far away from Altissia. This is that hospital, isn’t it.”
Sometimes it was incredibly frustrating having friends who were so quick on the uptake. Ignis said, “Yes, it is. And I swear I will explain - but not here. Not now.” He indicated the rest of the waiting room with a tilt of his head: the soft worried murmurs, the louder voices arguing about the intake process, someone whimpering quietly in pain.

“You used the Ring,” Noctis said. He didn’t put any emphasis on the words, a trick of which Regis had been fond when he was especially upset, and again Ignis had the disconcerting feeling of being scolded by the King.

It took effort to keep his voice calm, but he said, “I did. And I will explain, but I ask you, please wait until we’re somewhere private.”

A long pause, and for the millionth time Ignis wished he could see his prince’s face. At last Noctis said flatly, “Fine.” He shrugged Ignis’s hand off his elbow, and though the creaking of his jacket suggested it was so he could fold his arms across his chest and slouch further in his chair, the rejection still sent a spike of pain through Ignis.

Gladio huffed but didn’t argue, the scuff of his boots on the hard floor indicating he’d half-turned to look out at the rest of the room. Ignis folded his hands in his lap, clenching his fingers together hard enough to hurt. He supposed this solved the problem of the game not allowing him to tell his friends the truth - but this was not at all how he’d hoped to reveal it to them.

Worse, Prompto was dying because Ignis had tried to change things.

Guilt knotted in his gut and he had to swallow against a sudden urge to vomit. If he hadn’t suggested they leave after rescuing Prompto, Ardyn wouldn’t have stabbed him. If Prompto died - if Kate couldn’t save him - it would be Ignis’s fault.

No, he told himself firmly. Kate will save him. This is her job. She’s highly competent. Prompto will be fine. But even as he thought it, he remembered Kate saying he was supposed to be an MT. Kate’s reality had nothing like magitek or cloned children; what if something about Prompto’s origins made him too different to be effectively treated by people who had no idea what he was?

No, he told himself again, and clenched his hands more tightly in his lap. Kate knew what Prompto was, even if she had no practical knowledge of the technology behind the Empire’s magitek infantry creation. She could handle anything that came up. Ignis had to believe that.

Still, with nothing to do but sit there and wait, it was nearly impossible not to worry. Noctis didn’t move at all, and under any other circumstances probably would have dozed off, but his breathing was tense and methodical in Ignis’s ear. Gladio stood over them both, unwavering; Ignis wanted to tell him to sit down while he had the chance but he knew Gladio took his duty as Noctis’s Shield far too seriously for that. Just as Ignis took comfort from the familiar routines of caring for their prince, so Gladio took comfort in standing guard over him.

Time crawled past. Unable to look at a watch, Ignis had no idea how much, but it seemed to be hours, made all the worse by his inability to see. He could do nothing but sit there, listening with half an ear to the steady flow of arrivals, the complaints of people still waiting their turn, the occasional crying of a child. Sit there and think, worry - about Prompto, about Noctis, about what they would do next. About Ardyn’s reaction, if and when they returned to Zegnautus. He clearly hadn’t liked whatever he’d seen of Ignis and the Ring in Altissia; Ignis couldn’t imagine how furious he’d be now that Ignis had used the Ring a second time to steal Noctis out from beneath Ardyn’s nose.

Maybe Ignis should keep them from returning to Zegnautus. The Kings of Old seemed to be able to
carry them to whatever location they wished; perhaps Ignis could request they be returned to Tenebrae, or even Lucis. It wouldn’t solve the problem of Ardyn for long - the man would likely catch up to them quickly - but it would give them a chance to prepare. But convincing the Kings to take Noctis further from the Crystal would be difficult. Perhaps he could—

Noctis abruptly sat up straight, his elbow brushing Ignis’s, and sucked in a sharp breath. Gladio’s boots squeaked as he turned, and he, too, hissed quietly through his teeth. Ignis snapped his attention back to the ambient sounds of the waiting room - and heard the familiar click of Kate’s shoes approaching from the other side of the room.

Ignis pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the ache in legs that had gone stiff and cramped from sitting for so long, and held out his hands to greet her. “Kate,” he said softly.

“Hey,” she answered, and though she sounded tired, he thought he heard a faint smile in her voice as she took his hands, then pulled him into a quick hug.

Noctis had stood as well, his voice coming from behind Ignis’s shoulder as he demanded, “Is Prompto okay?”

Kate let go of Ignis, her voice shifting as she turned to address Noct. “He’s doing as well as can be expected,” she said in her doctor’s neutral tone. “Pulled through surgery like a champ. But he’s not out of the woods yet. We’re keeping him in the ICU at least overnight to make sure he stabilizes.”

Noctis made a distressed noise in the back of his throat. “Can I see him?”

Kate’s collar rustled as she shook her head. “I’m sorry, but not yet. He’s still pretty fragile. Assuming he does well the rest of today and tonight, you’ll be able to see him tomorrow morning.”

“Are you sure?” Noct asked. “I mean, that we can’t see him now?”

“He needs to rest, and anyway there’s not much to see. He’s still heavily sedated,” Kate explained. “But I promise you, he’s in very good hands. We’ll take care of him today, and tomorrow you can visit. Okay?”

Noct huffed something that might have been a reluctant okay, his jacket rustling as he shifted unhappily. Gladio, on his other side, said, “Thank you, Doctor…?”

Ignis stepped in, years of court etiquette taking over. “Kate, please allow me to introduce you to His Royal Majesty—” remembering just in time that with the Ring of the Lucii on his finger, Noct was no longer the Crown Prince— “Noctis Lucis Caelum, King of Lucis; and his sworn Shield, Gladiolus Amicitia.” Both of them had a great many more titles which should have been given in a formal introduction, but Ignis was too tired to go through the whole list, and it wasn’t as though any of them mattered here. “Noctis, Gladio, this is Doctor Kate Matthias.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Kate said. “Ignis talked about you both quite a lot.” She hesitated. “Um—do I—am I supposed to bow, or curtsey, or something…?”

“It’s fine,” Noctis said, a hint of amusement breaking through the worry in his voice. “Nice to meet you. And, uh, thanks for saving Prompto.”

“Oh course,” Kate said. “He’s—” A soft buzzing interrupted her. “Sorry, I’m being paged.” Her voice turned back toward Ignis, and she caught his hand and pressed a key into it. “You’re welcome to stay at the house again. I already called a ride; it should be here in just a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said, and let his relief show in his voice. He hadn’t wanted to impose on Kate
yet again, but he hadn’t wanted to spend the night in the waiting room, either. “We owe you a great deal.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said lightly. “You can wait for the car out there - it’s, uh…” A pause while she presumably checked her phone. “A red Prius, license plate 7SF—”

“We got it,” Gladio assured her. “Thanks.”

“Of course,” she said again. “I probably won’t be home until late, but Ignis knows where everything is - make yourselves at home.” Her pager buzzed again. “All right, gotta run.”

Ignis lifted a hand in a wave as she hurried off, shoes clicking on the tile. When she was out of earshot, Gladio said thoughtfully, “So that’s the doctor you mentioned.”

Ignis pointedly ignored him, instead taking Noctis’s elbow and drawing him toward where Ignis thought the exit was. Gladio snorted and followed, taking over to lead them outside. A car was waiting for them, as Kate had said, and an exhausted silence settled over them as they rode to Kate’s house. It was odd being back here so soon, the car’s strange electric engine buzzing in his ears, the sidewalk under his feet familiar from weeks of walking along it with Kate, the narrow steps up to the front door no longer a hazard.

Inside was familiar too, the rich scent of Kate’s favorite dark roast, the warmth of the late-afternoon sun through the curtains, the creak of the floorboards beneath his feet. Comforting, after the harsh cold impartiality of Zegnautus and Gralea’s eternal night. Ignis slipped off his shoes and nudged them under the rack beside the door, then, as he listened to Noctis and Gladio follow suit, said, “There’s a shower upstairs. I suggest we make use of it while we have it.”

“Ignis,” Noct said sharply. “You said you’d explain.”

“And I will,” Ignis said. “After we clean up. I’ll not repay Kate’s generosity by getting grime all over her furniture.”

Gladio snorted. “You’re stalling.”

Ignis sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose under his sunglasses. “Yes,” he admitted. “I am. This is not going to be an easy explanation by any measure, and I’d quite rather have a hot shower and clean clothes before I attempt it. I expect the two of you will feel the same, once you’ve heard it.”

“That’s ominous,” Gladio said.

Ignis didn’t answer, just turned to Noct, waiting. Noctis wasn’t any more a fan of being filthy than Ignis was, and the idea of getting clean - in a real shower with hot water and enough space to move in - would be a heavy counterweight against the desire for an explanation. After a long moment, Noctis grunted in annoyance. “Fine. Showers first. After that, no more stalling.”

“Understood,” Ignis said, and headed upstairs before Noct could change his mind. Ignis still hadn’t worked out how to address the subject, and the reprieve, however brief, was welcome. In many ways, it would have been easier to explain in their own reality, where he could dodge the trickier questions about alternate realities and uncomfortably prescient video games, and focus on what mattered, which was that the gods’ plan for Noctis ended in his death. But Ardyn had thrown a wrench in his plans, and now Ignis had to adapt, for better or worse.

An hour later they were all showered and dressed in fresh clothes, mostly pilfered from those Kate had bought for Ignis during his stay, as their own supply of clean clothing had run rather thin. Ignis
followed Noctis and Gladio’s voices downstairs to the living room, where from the sound of it they had taken up residence on Kate’s big couch. They fell silent as Ignis approached, though, and a sudden unreasonable bout of nerves twisted Ignis’s stomach.

Noctis said, “Well?”

Ignis sighed and sat down on the couch beside him. This wouldn’t be easy no matter what he did, so he might as well get the worst of it over with. “There’s a game console near the television. Noct, would you mind turning it on?”

“I said no more stalling,” Noctis said sharply.

“I’m not stalling,” Ignis said. “Please, humor me. This is the simplest way to explain the situation.”

A pause, probably Noct and Gladio trading a significant look. Finally Noctis stood up off the couch, a series of quiet shuffling and clattering noises marking his search for the controller. The television clicked on, and the by-now-familiar chime of the console awakening rang through the room. Noctis said, “Okay, it’s on. Uh, what profile do I use?”

Kate had mentioned something at one point about alternate profiles, but Ignis wanted to play it safe. “Whichever appears to be Kate’s primary, if you please. Look for a game called ‘Final Fantasy XV’.”

“Y’know,” Gladio said as menus beeped cheerfully, “I think this is the first time I’ve ever heard Iggy trying to get you to start playing a video game. Usually he’s yelling at you to shut it off already.”

Noctis snorted. “I know, r—Whoa!”

“What the—” Gladio yelped at the same time.

“Is that…” Noctis said incredulously. “That’s… us?! Iggy, what the hell?!"

“Is this some kinda joke?!” Gladio demanded, his voice dropping to a growl.

“Not a joke,” Ignis said. “I had much the same reaction, when Kate first showed me. That game—” with a nod toward the television— “describes the adventures of one Noctis Lucis Caelum, Crown Prince of Lucis, and his entourage as they leave Insomnia to travel to Altissia for Noctis’s wedding.”

Noctis had apparently started the game; the console whirred and clicked, then background music faded in. Noctis said, “That’s… that’s us. In… is that Meldacio?”

“It’s a tiny Meldacio,” Gladio said. “Most of the houses and storage sheds are missing.”

“It’s ‘cause it’s a video game,” Noctis said, though he still sounded shocked. “Cities in games are never as big as actual cities. It’s not practical. Stars, do I really look like that?”

“No,” Gladio teased. “Usually when we’re in Meldacio you’re covered in swamp muck.”

“Har har,” Noctis retorted. “At least it got your hatred of shirts right.”

“If you got, flaunt it,” Gladio said easily, but then sobered. “Iggy, what in Shiva’s frozen hell is this?”

“This is an alternate reality,” Ignis said. “One where our lives - our entire world - is a video
game, the latest entry in a wildly popular series.”

“But that’s…” Noctis said, then floundered. “That’s…”

“Impossible,” Ignis agreed dryly. “So I thought, but Kate showed me enough to convince me this isn’t merely a clever bit of propaganda.”

“… How?!” Gladio demanded. The couch creaked as he moved, and Ignis pictured him throwing up his hands in bafflement.

“I have no idea,” Ignis admitted, and shook his head. “We weren’t able to determine what… meta-mechanic, I believe Kate called it, controlled the game or its connection to our world. And it is connected. When I fell out of our reality into this one during the events in Altissia, my absence was reflected in the game despite not having been part of the original version.”

“Wow,” Noctis said. “I… Wow. This is… this is… Stars, this is so cool!”

Ignis frowned. He’d been expecting Noctis to react with the same horror Ignis had upon learning about the game, but evidently he’d underestimated Noctis’s love for video games. “Noct—” he said, but Noctis interrupted him.

“No, Iggy, this is great, don’t you get it?” he demanded. He gripped Ignis’s wrist hard enough that the bones creaked. “This is—” He took the deep breath that meant he was searching for the right words. “This is good. This is—It means we win, Ignis, it means it’s not hopeless.”

“Noct—”

But Noctis kept talking, and perhaps Ignis hadn’t underestimated his love of games so much as his need for reassurance that he was doing the right thing. “If it’s a video game, we win, because that’s how games work, you win. It doesn’t matter what happens or how badly you fuck up along the way because the game’s not over until you’ve won—”

“Noct!”

“It means there’s a way—Prompto’s going to be okay, we’re going to get the Crystal back and save Lucis and this entire hellish trip will have been worth it, Iggy—”

—and Ignis couldn’t take it anymore, couldn’t bear to hear Noctis of all people say that, because it wouldn’t be worth it, no matter how the game itself might try to frame such a sacrifice as a success.

“No!” Ignis shouted, and Noctis fell into startled silence. “No,” Ignis said again, his voice dropping to a pained whisper. “Because the way you win this game - the way you defeat the daemons and the Empire and restore light to the world - is by killing yourself, Noct.”
“Because the way you win this game - the way you defeat the daemons and the Empire and restore light to the world - is by *killing* yourself, Noct.”

Ignis’s words hung in the air, in the sudden silence of Noctis and Gladio’s shock, the only sound in the room the soft game music playing in the background. He was dimly aware his fists were clenched, his shoulders tense, and he hated that he couldn’t be sure he was even looking at Noctis.

Noctis whispered, “...what?”

“The ending of the game,” Ignis said, the words like broken glass in his throat, “the player’s ‘victory’, is for you to ascend the throne, allow the Lucii to murder you in cold blood, and destroy Ardyn’s spirit. *That* is what the Chosen King is meant to do: carry the Crystal’s power and the Lucii’s glaives to the spirit realm, and purge it of both Ardyn and the Starscourge.”

“But…” Noct said, then stopped, his breathing going rapid and harsh. “But…”

“Iggy—” Gladio said. Leather creaked; Ignis pictured him clenching his fists hard enough to strain the sleeves of his jacket.

“You *knew*?” Noct demanded. “Ignis, you *knew* about this?”

Ignis nodded miserably. “Since shortly before I arrived in Tenebrae. I’ve been trying to tell you—” tilting his head up to include at Gladio as well—“both of you, but the game itself was doing everything it could to prevent me. I’m sorry, Noct.”

“That’s why you were so keen on leaving after we found Prompto,” Gladio said slowly. Working through the realization with the words. “Before we got the Crystal. Noct has the Ring, but he needs the Crystal’s power still.”

“That’s why you were so keen on leaving after we found Prompto,” Gladio said slowly. Working through the realization with the words. “Before we got the Crystal. Noct has the Ring, but he needs the Crystal’s power still.”

“Indeed. As the game currently stands,” here Ignis tilted his head toward the television, “when Noctis reaches the Crystal in Zegnautus, it will absorb him bodily within itself. He’ll stay trapped there for ten years while he, in turn, absorbs the Crystal’s power.”

“*Ten years*?!” Noctis cut in, horrified.

“During which the Starscourge’s miasma envelops the world,” Ignis confirmed. “By the time you
escape, daemons will have overrun the world.” He told them the rest of it: Ardyn’s true identity as a Lucis Caelum, and his ultimate plan. Noctis’s imprisonment in the Crystal, the brief reunion they would be allowed at Hammerhead. The return to Insomnia and the Citadel, the final battle with Ardyn in both the physical and the spirit realms. Noct’s death at the hands of his own ancestors, by which the Starscourge would be purged and light restored to their world.

The words were acid on his tongue, poison in the air, so that when he finally fell silent, none of them spoke for several long, aching minutes. Noct’s breathing was still too fast, too harsh, his body vibrating with tension where he sat against Ignis’s side. Then he said, his voice broken, “My dad knew about this?”

Ignis nodded.

“If the Lucii—If they’re the ones—if they—” Noctis stopped, tried again. “My dad…”

Ignis nodded again, his heart aching for his prince. A memory rang through his mind: game-Noctis’s voice, ragged with pain as he said, Dad, trust in me. The horrible finality of the sound of Regis’s killing blow. “I’m so sorry,” Ignis whispered.

Gladio grunted. “Ain’t happening.”

Noctis twitched, and Ignis frowned across him at Gladio. Leather creaked as Gladio hooked an arm around Noctis’s shoulders, bumping his knuckles lightly against Ignis’s arm. “I’m your Shield, Noct, remember? Anybody wants to kill you, they gotta go through me. Including your dead ancestors. And I ain’t letting ’em.”

Noctis made a weird little hiccuping sound that might have been a startled laugh. “Gladio…”

“I mean it,” Gladio said. “I swore an oath. You’re my king, Noct. I’m not letting you die just because the gods and a bunch of dead guys say so.”

“But what about the Starscourge?” Noctis said. “I don’t… I don’t want to… to die, but if the Starscourge is going to destroy the world…” He sucked in a ragged breath, but there was steel under the pain in his voice when he continued. “I can’t let that happen, not if there’s a way for me to fix it.”

Again Ignis’s heart ached. Even now, even knowing that destroying the Starscourge meant his death, Noct thought about others first. Put the safety of the world before his own life, as a king ought. Determination hardened in Ignis’s chest: Noctis would be king, not only long enough to sacrifice himself for the world, but for many, many years after. Long enough to live the full and happy life he deserved, that he’d earned after everything he’d already done and would still do to save his people.

Ignis wrapped his own arm around Noctis, hugging him close. “We’ll find another way,” he promised. “I, too, swore an oath to serve you, Noct, and if that means defying the Stars themselves to find a way to end the Scourge without your death, I’ll do it.”

“We’ll do it,” Gladio agreed.

“Guys…” Noctis whispered. His voice cracked and he fell silent, but wriggled as though he was trying to lean into both of them at the same time. Ignis tightened his grip, felt Gladio do the same, and they sat in silence, holding onto each other, the game’s music still playing quietly in the background.

Ignis hadn’t meant to doze off, but exhaustion must have gotten the better of him because the next
thing he knew, he was startling awake to the sound of soft footfalls on the wooden floor. Noctis
was curled up against his side, his faint snoring muffled from his face being pressed against Ignis’s
ribs, while Gladio’s hand, lax with sleep, brushed Ignis’s arm in time with the rise and fall of
Noct’s breathing. Which meant…

“Kate?” Ignis whispered.

“Hey,” Kate whispered back. “Sorry, I was trying not to wake you guys.”

“It’s all right,” Ignis said, then yawned. “What time is it?”

“After midnight,” Kate said around a yawn of her own. “I was supposed to be home four hours
ago, but a nasty car wreck turned up near the end of my shift.” She chuckled. “If my grandmother
was still here she’d say this is why I don’t have a boyfriend.”

Ignis smiled in sympathy; similar things had happened often during the weeks he’d stayed with her.
And his own parents, back in Insomnia, had said much the same thing about Ignis’s dedication to
Noctis. “How is Prompto?”

“Pretty good for someone who got stabbed,” Kate said. “And… everything else Ardyn did to him.”

Ignis wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but he asked anyway: “How bad was it?”

Kate blew out an angry breath. “Let’s just say that if Ardyn was here I’d sock him in his sadistic
daemonic throat. I mean, I knew he was an asshole, but…” Her ponytail rustled as she shook her
head. “The game toned it way the hell down. In person… it was really obvious he was going for
minimal permanent damage and maximum pain and suffering.”

Guilt stabbed through Ignis, though logically he knew there was nothing he could have done about
it even if he’d been in his own reality when Ardyn first kidnapped Prompto. Ardyn had had
centuries - millennia - to plan this. All Ignis could do now was keep looking for ways to thwart
him, to defeat him without any further cost than what they’d already paid. Taking a deep breath, he
said, “You said minimal permanent damage. He’ll recover, then?”

“Yeah,” Kate said. “I didn’t want to say he was stable while we were at the hospital because of
EMTALA - if the finance guys were around they’d jump all over that - but he pretty much is. He
lost a lot of blood, and his right lung was punctured and collapsed, but he got away with minimal
damage to his liver. Most of the rest was surface stuff, painful as hell but not much more than skin-
deep. Once we got his lung sorted and some blood back into him, he was in a pretty good place.
The knife went in at a weird angle - he got really lucky.”

“It was Ardyn who stabbed him,” Ignis said grimly. “I doubt luck had anything to do with it.”

“True. What the hell happened, anyway?”

Ignis couldn’t help but tilt an ear in the direction of the television. It had gone silent, probably
having shut down automatically after they’d all fallen asleep on the couch. “The game hasn’t
updated yet?”

“It goes as far as you guys getting split up at the entrance to Gralea,” Kate said. “It chokes when
the path select comes up, between following you and Gladio, or following Noctis.”

Ignis told her the rest of it, ending with, “I convinced the Lucii to bring us to you, and you know
everything beyond that.”
“Damn,” Kate muttered. “I mean, I guess we should have anticipated that Ardyn would react to you mucking up his two-thousand-year-old plan, but stabbing Prompto…” Her ponytail rustled against her collar as she shook her head.

“Indeed,” Ignis agreed. “I’m concerned about how he’ll react when we return, as well. If he’s as jealous of my ability to use the Ring’s power as Gladio suggested, and furthermore upset about his attempts to force Noctis into the Crystal being repeatedly thwarted…” He blew out a frustrated sigh. “I hate to admit it, but I’m at a loss for what to do next.”

“Well, you guys are welcome to stay here as long as you need,” Kate said. “I mean, I know keeping Noctis out of your reality isn’t a long-term solution, but maybe having a little time where Ardyn isn’t trying to kill you will help you figure something out.”

“I hope so,” Ignis said. “Perhaps now that Gladio knows the truth, he’ll have some ideas I’ve not thought of.”

Kate made a thoughtful sound. “You told them about the game, then?”

He nodded.

“How’d they take it?”

“As well as one would expect,” Ignis said ruefully. “Gladio doesn’t agree with the Astrals’ plan any more than I do, but Noctis…” He shook his head, remembering the iron determination under the pain in Noct’s voice when he’d said Not if there’s a way for me to fix it. “I’m concerned Noctis will choose to follow the path set before him, if he sees no other way to stop the Starscourge.”

“Well,” Kate said, her voice gentle, “that seems to be part of why he was chosen by the Crystal. Not everyone would be willing to do that.”

“I know,” Ignis admitted. “And that’s what worries me.”

“It’s still not happening,” Gladio interrupted, his voice hoarse from sleep. Ignis twitched - he hadn’t realized Gladio was awake. From her startled gasp, Kate hadn’t, either. Gladio added, yawning, “So will you two shut it and go to sleep? We’re gonna need the rest if we wanna figure out how to fight the gods.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Ignis admitted. “My apologies for waking you.”

“Go to sleep, Iggy.” He nudged Ignis’s arm with the hand he still had draped across Noct’s shoulders.

“Guess that’s my cue,” Kate said. “I have to be back on the floor at noon, so I can take you guys in with me then and you can see Prompto. Also…” Her socks scuffed the wooden floor as she came closer; after a few faint sounds Ignis couldn’t identify, a soft blanket suddenly settled across his legs. He helped Kate arrange it to cover Noctis as well, and the couch creaked as Gladio adjusted his end.

“There,” Kate said, satisfied. “Although you could use the spare bed, you know.”

“We’re fine,” Gladio said. “His Royal Sleepiness wouldn’t even notice the difference.”

Kate chuckled. Noctis was still snoring softly; his only response to all the voices and movement had been to shift so his face was buried more firmly against Ignis’s chest, his legs presumably drawn up and draped over Gladio’s lap. “I guess so,” Kate said wryly. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to
it. See you in the morning.”

“Night,” Gladio grunted.

“Goodnight,” Ignis said, then added quietly, “And Kate… thank you.”

“Anytime,” Kate said gently. Her soft footsteps faded away, and Ignis settled against the couch, letting the exhaustion of the past week wash over him.

He was asleep almost instantly.

Chapter End Notes

Also, check out this incredible fanart by the amazing mer-een! It's so soft and captures this chapter perfectly. <3
The Hospital

Chapter Summary

In which everyone visits the hospital.

Chapter Notes

Now that these poor boys have had one entire night of break, it's time to start the plot back up!

They were on the way to the hospital the next morning in Kate’s car when Noctis said suddenly, “Y’know, Ignis, you never did say how you got to this reality, with the Ring of the Lucii, in the first place.”

Ignis shook his head. “Because I’m not entirely certain myself,” he admitted. He sat in the front next to Kate, with Noctis and Gladio in their accustomed spots in the back seat, and he twisted in his seat toward Noct. “I remember nothing of that day - no more than vague flashes. The last clear memory I have is of making plans with you the night before.”

“I can answer that one, actually,” Kate said. Ignis frowned at her, and she continued, “Since I had to sign an NDA with Square Enix anyway after talking with Taku when we sent you home, he told me what’s in Episode: Ignis.”

“Wait, Episode: Ignis?!” Noctis repeated, his tone caught between horror and glee.

“It’s a long story,” Ignis said quickly. He didn’t want to get into the Episodes just then, especially not with Prompto and his barcode tattoo waiting for them at the hospital.

“It’s DLC for the game,” Kate explained, her voice pitched toward Noctis. “The main game cuts out when you went unconscious after the Leviathan battle and comes back when you wake up a few days later, so Episode: Ignis covers the in-between stuff.”

“Stars,” Noctis muttered. “This is too weird.”

“Do tell,” Ignis said dryly, and Noct snorted.

“Anyway,” Kate continued, “apparently what happened was that you, Ignis, teamed up with Ravus to get out to the altar where Noctis and Lunafreya were. Or at least, that was how it originally was, but then the game started changing so they’re kind of frantically trying to figure out what to do about that. But the main thing was that Ardyn showed up at the altar and threatened Noctis, which led you to put on the Ring to defend him.”

“Wait, what?” Gladio interrupted. “Why the hell would Ardyn threaten Noctis enough to provoke Iggy into putting on the Ring? Ignis knows as well as I do that only Lucis Caelums can wear the damn thing without getting toasted. Ardyn would’ve had to push it pretty damn far, but Ignis said
last night that Ardyn needs Noct alive.”

Kate shrugged. “He’s a giant jerkwaffle who likes tormenting people? I don’t know, I asked the same thing and that was basically what they said. Also something something ‘pre-ordained by the gods’ - that painting in the Citadel of the Chosen King shows one of the companions as blind.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Noctis complained. “A painting said Ignis would go blind, so Ardyn made it happen?”

“Look,” Kate said in her exasperated-fan voice, “this is probably not what you want to hear as one of the people inhabiting this game world, but Square Enix is not really known for having internally consistent lore. Or for being good at filling in plot holes.”

“Iggy going blind isn’t a plot hole,” Gladio grumbled.

Ignis shook his head. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I’ve had some weeks now to come to terms with the nature of our situation. As it stands, I believe the relevant point is that Ardyn Izunia is aware that I was able to use the Ring and survive - which explains his animosity toward me.”

“It also means he’ll have been watching real damn close back in Zegnautus,” Gladio said thoughtfully. “He was pushing Noct toward the Crystal, but he’d been egging you on the whole time too, Iggy.”

“True,” Ignis said. “But there’s little to be done about it now. Ardyn is a worry best saved for when we return to our own reality.”

The rest of the drive passed in silence. Kate got them parked and inside, leaving them briefly in a lobby while she checked in for her shift. Noctis bounced impatiently on his toes, his elbow brushing Ignis’s sleeve and the rubber of his boot soles squeaking against the tile flooring. Finally Kate returned, with a second set of footsteps close behind. “This is Abigail,” she said. “She’ll take you up to see Prompto. They moved him out of the ICU this morning. I’ll be up in a few minutes; I need to take care of some things first.”

“Thank you,” Ignis said to Kate. She squeezed his wrist in distracted acknowledgement and hurried off again, her pager already buzzing at her hip.

“This way, please,” Abigail said. She sounded older, matronly somehow, though she led them at a brisk clip through the halls. Ignis had a hand on Noct’s arm again, and knew from the footsteps that Gladio was close at Noct’s other shoulder. This might be a hospital in an alternate reality where no one knew the King of Insomnia, but that was no reason to be lax. Abigail continued, “Dr. Matthias said you’re here to see that sweet blonde boy who came in yesterday, right?”

“His name is Prompto,” Noctis said, a possessive edge to his voice that betrayed his worry.

Abigail didn’t seem to notice. “Right,” she said easily. “He’s a sweetheart, that one. Very polite. He’s only been awake for a few hours and he’s charmed every nurse who’s seen him.”

Gladio chuckled. “Sounds about right.”

“So he’s doing okay?” Noctis asked.

“Really well, all things considered,” Abigail said. “You wouldn’t happen to be called Noct, would you?” she added.

“Uh,” Noctis said. “Yeah?”
She hummed knowingly to herself. “He’s been asking about you.”

“He has?” This time it was fear that edged Noct’s voice.

“Wanted to know where you were, if you were all right,” Abigail said. “He’ll be thrilled to see you.”

Noctis made a strangled sound that was probably meant to be agreement. Ignis remembered the pain in Noct’s voice days ago in Tenebrae, when he’d admitted to hurting Prompto, and he tightened his grip on Noct’s elbow reassuringly.

“I don’t suppose you know what happened to him, do you?” Abigail asked. There was the slightest shift in her tone, and Ignis had spent enough time around Kate to recognize the switch from friendly to professional.

“He didn’t tell you?” Noct asked.

“He says he doesn’t remember, but, well.” Abigail’s tone suggested what she thought of that. “I’ve seen injuries like that before. It’s not the kind of thing the person causing them means you to forget.”

Noctis flinched hard enough that Ignis felt it through his hand on Noct’s arm. There was a long moment of silence, then Abigail said in a gentle tell-me-more voice, “You know what happened, don’t you, hon?”

Noct’s hair rustled against his collar as he shook his head. “Not… not really.”

Abigail’s voice grew gentler. “Someone hurt your friend, Noct. And… these kinds of injuries, and refusing to talk about them, well…” She hesitated, then said carefully, “It’s usually because someone close to him did it.”

“What are you saying?” Noctis asked.

Ignis got it abruptly: Abigail suspected they knew who had done this to Prompto, and moreover was worried that it was someone close to him - possibly even one of the three of them. He sighed. “She’s suggesting Prompto suffered from intimate partner violence,” he said to Noctis, then added to Abigail, “While we don’t know the specifics of what happened to him, we know who did it - a man who has sought to do us harm for a long time. Fortunately for all of us, he’s not able to reach us here.”

“Ah,” Abigail said, still careful. “If you’re sure.”

“We’re sure,” Noctis said. There was a tension in his voice that suggested he’d gone tight-lipped and stone-faced, and Abigail didn’t press the issue.

Finally they came to a stop. Ignis heard Abigail knock lightly on a door or wall, then she called softly, “Hey, hon. You have visitors.”

Prompto’s voice was weak and thready, but clearly audible: “I do?”

Then Noctis was moving, pulling away from Ignis so fast that if not for the lack of the distinct cracking sound, Ignis would have thought he’d warped. “Prompto—!”

“Noct—Oof!”
“Careful, Noct,” Ignis said automatically as he followed his prince into the room, Gladio behind him with one hand on his back for guidance. Not that Noctis was listening; Ignis could hear the low murmur of his voice, muffled from where he was probably hugging Prompto tightly, as he apologized over and over again. Prompto responded, equally soft, the words lost under the background hum of hospital equipment.

Ignis hung back by the door, granting them as much privacy as the little room afforded. Gladio chuckled, a sound of relief, and Ignis barely noticed when Abigail walked away with a murmured, “I’ll leave you to it.”

Eventually, the creaking and shifting sounds from the hospital bed indicated that Noct had let go of Prompto and sat back some. Gladio touched Ignis’ s elbow to nudge him forward, and said, “Hey, kid. How ya feeling?”

“Better,” Prompto said fervently. Then, “Iggy, hi—wait, you’re alive!”

Ignis smiled. “Indeed. The Scientias have served the Lucis Caelums for hundreds of years; I’m not about to break such a record just because a sea goddess threw a fit.”

Prompto laughed, then cut himself off with a grunt. “Ow. Okay, maybe no laughing yet.”

Ignis found the edge of the hospital bed with his hand; ran his fingers along the covers until he found Prompto’s leg. Hearing his voice was one thing, but without sight, Ignis found he needed the reassurance of touch. Prompto reached around Noctis where he sat on the edge of the bed and caught Ignis’s wrist; his grip was worryingly weak but at least it was steady. “Iggy, your eyes…”

“A story for another time,” Ignis said.

Prompto was perceptive in a way that Gladio and Noct often weren’t. He hesitated for just an instant, then said only, “It’s good to have you back.”

“Likewise,” Ignis answered, and smiled.

Prompto’s fingers tightened around his wrist for a moment, then let go, blankets rustling softly as he sat back against the raised end of the bed. “So, uh, where are we, anyway?” Prompto asked. “I asked the nurses but I’ve never heard of this place. There’s not enough daemons for it to be in the Empire, and everyone has Lucian accents…” He trailed off uncertainly.

“Hoo boy,” Noct said. “Right. You really aren’t going to believe this.”

“Uh,” Prompto said. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Noct snorted. “So, you know how you always joke about our lives being like a real-life RPG…?”

Ignis smiled to himself as he listened to Noct’s explanation of the situation and Prompto’s disbelieving protests. Gladio, leaning against the foot of the bed beside him, nudged his elbow; Ignis could picture his fond *Stars, those nerds* expression with painful clarity. He was saved from having to figure out how to respond without rolling his eyes - a gesture he could no longer perform slyly enough to keep Noctis from noticing - by the familiar click of Kate’s shoes on the tiled hall floor.

She knocked to announce her presence. “Hey, Prompto. I’m Doctor Matthias,” she started in her doctor’s voice, but Noctis interrupted.

“This is Kate,” he said to Prompto. “She’s the one who helped Ignis, and saved you yesterday. And
she’s played the game.”

“Oh,” Prompto said. “Uh, hi?” He sounded a little dazed, or possibly just tired. He was still badly injured and heavily medicated, after all, and Ignis suspected he was remaining conscious solely on strength of will after learning his life was, in fact, part of a video game. At least Noctis hadn’t yet gotten to Ardyn’s true heritage or the game’s ending; those were likely more than Prompto would be able to handle just now.

“That’s a hell of an introduction,” Kate said, amused. Her shoes clicked as she came closer. “How are you feeling, Prompto?”

“Okay,” Prompto answered, and Ignis pictured him attempting to smile despite the exhaustion in his voice.

“I need to check your stitches,” Kate said. “Excuse me, Your Majesty.”

Noctis shifted all of six inches further down the bed, his hand bumping Ignis’s hip as he moved. Ignis caught his arm and pulled him further away despite his grumbled hey!, giving Kate room enough to work. Kate began the familiar doctor’s chatter Ignis remembered from the times she’d tended him, fabric rustling as she adjusted Prompto’s hospital gown.

Then a voice drawled from the doorway, “Ah, it’s good to see you all doing so well after such an unfortunate adventure.”

Ignis froze, only peripherally aware of Noctis and Gladio going rigid on either side of him, of the crystalline sound of their weapons being summoned. Of Kate’s startled gasp, and the soft, terrified noise Prompto made.

Ignis knew that voice.

“Hello, Noct,” Ardyn Izunia purred. “You didn’t think I’d let you get away that easily, now, did you?”
Usurper

Chapter Summary

In which a blow is landed.

Chapter Notes

I'm not dead!

Hope y'all had a lovely winter holiday. I spent rather a lot of mine working through a series of plot holes - turns out, when your fic involves multiple realities, a magic ring, and Ardyn Izunia, it's really easy to write yourself into a corner. But I think I have it all sorted now! I'm still insanely busy with real-life stuff, so updates will still be on the slow side, but hopefully there won't be any more multi-month intervals.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Noctis demanded, his voice a tight growl.

“Why, I merely followed where you led, O King of Kings,” Ardyn said easily.

“How?” Gladio demanded. “You were gone before we left.”

“Was I?” There was a lazy smirk in Ardyn’s voice as he added, “You know what they say about making assumptions.”

Gladio growled. “So what, you tagged along somehow?”

Ardyn chuckled, rich and languid. “So it seems.”

Noctis made an angry sound in the back of his throat. “Why?” he demanded. “You had no idea what was going to happen.”

“Your chamberlain has demonstrated a remarkable ability to use powers which do not belong to him,” Ardyn said, and Ignis didn’t need his sight to know the chancellor’s gaze had settled on him. “I was... curious.”

“If you came with us, where have you been?” Ignis asked. The thought of Ardyn running loose in this reality for the last twenty-four hours - of him being around the hospital, around Kate, around an unconscious and wounded Prompto - chilled him to the bone.

“Oh, here and there,” Ardyn said airily. “Quite a remarkable place, isn’t it?” Fabric rustled as he made what was probably a melodramatic gesture. “So many people, and not a single daemon. Not even a hint of Starscourge.”

“No thanks to you,” Noct snapped.

Noctis scoffed. “Shut it. We know what you’ve done. You’re the one controlling the daemons.”

Ardyn tsked. “Control is such a strong word.” Booted feet thudded against the floor, the heavy fabric of Ardyn’s long coat swishing softly as he stepped forward into the room. “But like many things, such creatures have their uses.”

Behind Ignis, Prompto made a faint sound like a swallowed gasp. Noctis tensed, his grip creaking on his sword, his jacket rustling as he prepared to move. On Ignis’s other side, the air shifted as Gladio did the same. Ignis tensed as well, not sure if he should try to help them fight or stop them, worried of the risk to Prompto, to any other patients in the area—

Kate said, “Get out of my hospital.”

Ignis startled, felt Noctis twitch beside him as well - they’d almost forgotten she was there. But she stood on Noctis’s other side, where she’d been checking over Prompto, and Ignis’s gut twisted in sudden worry for her. If Ardyn was here for Prompto, and Kate was the one standing between them...

“I was under the impression,” Ardyn said lightly, “that visiting hours are open.”

“Not for you they aren’t,” Kate shot back.

But her voice wavered, and Ardyn chuckled, low and ominous, his boots taking another thudding step forward. The room wasn’t that big; he was probably already well within the reach of Noctis’s sword. But Noctis didn't swing, probably hampered - like all of them - by the close quarters and the likelihood of Ardyn pulling more tricks.

“Such hostility,” Ardyn said. The angle of his voice changed; he must have turned his head. “Come now, Noct. Why try to turn the people here against me? Hasn’t everything worked out well for you? Good health, fine company—”

“I said get out,” Kate snapped.

The bootsteps stopped. “I suggest you stay out of this, Doctor,” Ardyn said calmly. “It doesn’t concern you.”

“Like hell it doesn’t,” Kate shot back. Her voice grew stronger as she spoke, a doctor’s command in her tone, and her shoes clicked as she stepped forward to face Ardyn. “I’m the authority here. You’re disrupting my care ward and you need to leave. Now.”

Ignis started to reach for her, but Gladio shifted in front of him, forcing him back to all but sit on the edge of the bed. Ignis swallowed a snarl of frustration; he didn’t know if Gladio had moved to put himself between Ardyn and Noct, or if Gladio was deliberately holding Ignis back to protect him.

“Ah,” Ardyn said, “but I’ve come so very far to visit my dear friend. He and I have been through so much together.” Prompto sucked in a breath through what had to be clenched teeth, twitching hard enough that the bed shook against the back of Ignis’s legs. Ignis set his jaw, hating Gladio’s protectiveness - he wanted nothing more than to step forward and sock Ardyn right in the smarmy smile he undoubtedly wore, but Gladio was still in front of him. In front of all of them, Prompto included, and that thought was all that kept Ignis from pushing out from behind Gladio.

“You’re not our dear anything,” Noctis hissed.

“One more step forward and you’ll be dearly departed,” Gladio added, his voice little more than a
“Clever wordplay, for a bodyguard,” Ardyn sneered. “I’d have thought name-calling was more your level.”

“If you want name-calling,” Kate shot back, “how about ‘trash grandpa’? Or ‘garbage Jesus’?”

Prompto made a choking sound, shocked or horrified or both, and Gladio snorted. Ignis remembered the conference, the jokes made by the fans and the nicknames thrown around with familiar ease. He didn’t know what Kate was going for, bringing up the names, but then her shoes clicked again, and Ardyn’s heavier bootsteps did a quick shuffle backward.

“‘Chancellor bad touch’,” Kate continued as she moved. “‘One-winged asshole’.” Ignis had the sudden and bizarre mental image of a small woman in doctor’s scrubs marching toward Ardyn as he backed away, and realized she was trying to drive him out of the room. “‘Hobo lord supreme’.”

“My,” Ardyn interjected. From the sound of his voice Kate had already backed him nearly out the door. “Quite… the creative one, aren’t you.”

“I can keep going,” Kate said. “‘Demon piñata’. ‘Purple-haired weasel’. ‘Dickweed trenchcoat full of daemons’. Or how about ‘Usurper”—”

Sudden movement, the sound of a fist striking flesh. Kate cried out and Gladio moved, fast, then staggered back against Ignis and Noctis. Kate was gasping somewhere close, and abruptly Ignis realized what had happened: Ardyn had struck her hard enough to send her flying, and Gladio had caught her. Which meant Noctis’s Shield was encumbered now, his arms full supporting Kate, and Ignis stepped forward on reflex, his daggers in his hands as he put himself between Ardyn and Noctis.

Ardyn drew in a harsh breath, the sound rising as though he was drawing himself up to his full height with it. Ignis rewound the last few seconds in his mind; he hadn’t been paying much attention to what Kate had been calling Ardyn - only to her progress at chasing him out of the room. But he hadn’t lashed out until she’d called him usurper...

“You’re presumptuous,” Ardyn said. He was clearly trying to sound as casual and unaffected as he normally did, but there was an odd edge to his tone. “You know nothing of what you speak.”

“I know enough,” Kate said, her voice rough with pain.

She drew breath to say more, but Ardyn cut her off: “You know nothing,” he repeated. “History is written by those who survived it.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” Ignis said. Trying to get his attention off Kate. “You survived.”

“Oh, yes,” Ardyn said, the edge in his voice sharpening into something sinister. “I did survive, and soon it will be my turn to write history.”

“I won’t give you that chance,” Noctis said. “I don’t care what it costs me in the end - I’m going to stop you and save our world.”

“Such a brave proclamation,” Ardyn said. “Do you have what it takes, I wonder?”

Noctis snarled audibly and Ignis reached out, put a hand on his back in warning. Noct was practically vibrating with fury, but he subsided ever so slightly under Ignis’s touch. Making his own voice calm, Ignis said, “It’s bold of you to challenge the Chosen King, Usurper.” A careful
emphasis on the last word, testing his theory.

Ardyn didn’t make a sound, but the way Noctis tensed against Ignis’s hand told Ignis there had been a reaction anyway - a dangerous one. Ardyn said flatly, “Stay out of this, boy. This is a matter for kings.”

“There’s only one king here,” Noctis said, and despite the tension in his muscles his voice was calm, regal. “And it’s not you.”

Noise in the hallway, multiple sets of feet approaching at a rapid pace, interrupted whatever Ardyn’s response might have been. The heavy fabric of Ardyn’s coat rustled as he moved, probably looking out the door. Then he said, “It’s getting awfully crowded in here. I’ll take my leave, but don’t worry - I’ll see you again soon, Noct.”

Noct snarled again and lunged forward, but his boots skidded to a stop after only a step or two, and Ignis didn’t need to hear his muttered curse to know Ardyn had vanished.
Chapter Summary

In which Prompto is released from the hospital, and Kate is a fangirl.

Chapter Notes

There’s probably someone at the hospital getting annoyed by all the shenanigans surrounding Dr. Matthias lately...

“What the hell’s going on in here?” a man’s voice demanded. “Doc, you all right?”

“Fine,” Kate said, though her voice was still hoarse and from the height of it, she was still near the floor, probably sitting down with Gladio supporting her.

A second man’s voice said toward Prompto, “Are you the one who pushed the silent alarm?”

“I—Yeah,” Prompto said. “Yeah, it was me, sorry, I mean, they gave me the thing in case he came after me again and I didn’t think he would - or could I guess - but then he was there and I didn’t know what to—I mean, I didn’t, I wasn’t—”

Ignis reached out, found Prompto’s knee under the blankets on the bed, and squeezed gently. Prompto’s teeth clicked audibly as he snapped his mouth shut, and he sucked in a deep breath. His hand found Ignis’s and wrapped tight around his fingers; he was shaking.

A moment later Noctis came up beside Ignis and climbed up to sit on the bed. “Hey,” he murmured to Prompto. “It’s okay, he’s gone.”

But Noct’s voice was shaking too, just slightly, and Ignis knew his prince well enough to recognize how rattled Noctis had been by the encounter. He drew breath to offer reassurance, but to his surprise Prompto beat him to it.

“Yeah, I know,” Prompto said, and forced out a little laugh. “Man, look at me, rescued by a prince.”

Noctis giggled, perhaps a bit hysterical. “Hey, I’m a king now. I have the Ring and everything.”

“Wait, really?” Prompto exclaimed. “You found it?!”

“Iggy had it,” Noctis said. “So yeah - you were rescued by a king.”

“Well, excuse me, Your Majesty,” Prompto teased. “Please forgive this peasant!”

“You’re not a peasant, you’re my Crownsguard,” Noctis said, then added with exaggerated thoughtfulness, “Wait, if you were rescued by a king, doesn’t that make you a princess?”
Prompto pulled his hand free of Ignis’s, probably to swat at Noctis judging by Noct’s mock-offended yelp. Confident they would calm each other down, Ignis turned his attention back to the newcomers. Gladio was telling the first man - presumably a hospital security guard - an abbreviated version of what had just happened, finishing with, “He ran off when he heard you guys coming.”

“Damn,” the second voice muttered. Rustling and a click was followed by a burst of radio static. “This is Hanson - we’ve got an attacker running around the hospital, male, tall, wearing a long jacket and fedora.”

As Hanson kept talking into the radio, the first man said, “He really did a number on you, Doc.” He sounded concerned. “You should get that looked at.”

“I’m fine,” Kate insisted.

“All right, then,” Gladio said, not ungently. “Prove it. Stand up.”

Fabric rustled as Kate moved, then she yelped, there was a sudden whump, and Gladio said, “Whoa, I gotcha.”

Ignis winced internally - if Kate was having that much trouble standing, Ardyn must have hit her quite hard indeed. He said toward the first guard, “Can we have her looked over by a nurse? She took quite the blow, and I’d like to ensure she’s all right.”

“Ignis!” Kate protested, sounding betrayed.

He raised an eyebrow at her and said nothing; no doubt she remembered the many times over the last six weeks or so when their positions had been reversed. Finally she let out a little huff of exasperation. The guard said, “Someone’s coming now.”

The next several minutes were a disorganized jumble of sounds and jostling as nurses hurried into the room. One of them checked on Prompto, while the other two fuss ed over Kate. Gladio turned her over to their care and went, as best Ignis could tell, to loom protectively near Noctis. The guards navigated the crowded room long enough to get statements from the rest of them about what had happened, then left, presumably to try to find Ardyn.

Ignis didn't bother telling them it was a lost cause; they wouldn't believe him about Ardyn's magic, and anyway they wouldn't be able to do much against him if he did decide to return. Instead, Ignis went to the far side of the room where the nurses had helped Kate into a chair against the wall, and listened to her increasingly annoyed protests that she was fine. Finally one of the nurses - Ignis thought it was Abigail, who'd escorted them here - said, “Look, Doctor, you might not have a concussion, but you're pretty obviously shaken up. Go home, rest up. I’ll call Doctor Graham to cover for you.”

“I'm fine,” Kate grumbled, but then she sighed. “But yeah, maybe I should go home. Tell Doctor Graham sorry for me, okay?”

Abigail snorted. “Hon, you got knocked across a room by an abusive creep. I think he'll understand.”

The nurses left then, and Ignis took their place beside Kate. “I'm sorry,” he said. “You're hurt because of us.”

“It's fine,” Kate insisted. “I'm fine, really. And anyway, it’s not your fault. I’m the one who got in his face.” She sighed. “I had no idea he’d… go off like that. He’s called ‘Usurper’ a few times in
the game, but I guess nobody ever says it to his face.”

“It does seem to be a sore spot for him,” Ignis said. “It might be useful for us, if only we can figure out how.”

“Possibly. Ow,” she added.

He leaned closer, finding her cheek with his hand and tracing his fingertips over the skin until he found the hot swollen bruise around her cheekbone and eye. “We’ll have to put ice on this when we return to the house,” he said.

With his fingers resting on her cheekbone, he felt her roll her eyes. “I did, in fact, go to medical school,” she pointed out mildly.

Ignis winced. “Apologies. Habit. And…” He sighed, letting his hand fall away. “I don’t like that you were hurt because of us.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “Really.” He felt the brush of air as she waved a hand dismissively. “Besides—” She cut herself off.

“Besides?” Ignis prompted. That was her fangirl tone.

A long pause. Then very quietly, in a voice little more than a squeak, Kate said, “Gladiolus Amicitia carried me!”

Ignis had to turn away to hide an entirely undignified snort. He remembered Kate telling him weeks ago that most fans had a favorite among Noctis and his retinue, but she'd always been incredibly careful to never so much as hint at her own preference. He had a feeling now that he knew who her favorite was.

Kate thumped him on the arm. “Stop laughing.”

Years of experience as Noctis’s chamberlain let him respond with a straight face. “I'm not.”

“Shut up,” she said, but he heard the amusement in her voice.

Keeping his expression professionally blank, he offered her his arm. “Let’s get Prompto discharged and return to the house,” he suggested.

“Right.” She took his arm, leaning on him heavily enough as she stood that he was glad the nurses had talked her into going home. Even if she wasn’t concussed, shock was a tricky thing. He steered her across the room to the bed. Noctis was still sitting on the edge, his heels kicking a little tattoo against the lowered safety rail, and Gladio stood at his side.

“So how do we get him out of here?” Noctis asked as they approached.

“Well,” Kate said, “before Trash Jesus showed up, I was going to give Prompto the okay to be discharged.”

“Great!” Prompto said, then audibly winced. “Oof. Ow. Right, no sudden movements.”

“Yeah,” Kate said dryly. “Honestly, if not for the EMTALA and, y’know, the whole ‘being from another reality’ thing, I’d want you to stay here for at least a week for observation, to make sure that lung is okay.”

“We don’t have a week,” Noctis pointed out. “Not with Ardyn here, and daemons overrunning our
“Hence why he’s not staying here for another week,” Kate said. “If one of you can walk with me down to the nurses’ station, I’ll get the paperwork started. My replacement will probably get here right around when it’s done.”

Three months ago, Ignis would have traded a quick look with Gladio to decide which of them went. As it was, he tilted his head in Gladio’s direction, and when Gladio said nothing, Ignis told Kate, “I’ll take you.”

“And make it quick,” Prompto said. “I want to see this video game we’re supposed to be from!”

* * *

They’d done laundry before going to the hospital that morning, taking advantage of Kate’s appliances while they were there, so Prompto was able to dress in a set of clean pajamas instead of the blood-matted Crownguard uniform he’d been wearing when they found him. Ignis was careful to make sure all Prompto’s bracelets were safely stowed in the little hospital bag a nurse gave them; bandages wrapped his wrists at the moment but Ignis was all too aware of the barcode tattoo hiding beneath them. Prompto hadn’t said anything about it or what he’d learned at the Magitek production facility, and Ignis didn’t want to force him into revealing anything before he was ready.

Prompto dozed the entire ride back to Kate’s house, exhaustion and the last of his hospital-strength painkillers catching up to him, but the rest of them spent the trip discussing what Ardyn’s intentions had been in revealing himself to them. “He wouldn’t have shown up just to taunt us,” Gladio pointed out. “In his situation, us not knowing he’s here is an advantage for him.”

“He may have been seeking information,” Ignis suggested. “He had most of a day to roam this reality unhindered. And while the four of us—” He waved a hand to encompass himself, Noct, Gladio, and Prompto— “could be written off by curious onlookers as strong but coincidental resemblances, Ardyn is rather more… conspicuous.”

“You think someone recognized him and said something?” Kate asked.

“Very likely,” Ignis said. “Even if it was no more than ‘great cosplay’ or some such, it would have been more than enough to pique his curiosity and lead him to find out about the game.”

“Maybe he was trying to find out how much we know, then,” Noctis said. “He could probably guess you’ve been here before, Iggy, so if he found out about the game he’d have to assume you know.”

Ignis considered it, running the conversation with Ardyn through his mind again. “That’s… quite possible,” he admitted finally. “If that’s the case, he didn’t learn much thanks to Kate’s timely intervention.”

“I’m glad I did more than look like an idiot in front of all of you,” Kate said dryly.

“Takes guts to stand up to someone like him,” Gladio said. “Nothing idiotic there.”

Kate made a tiny teakettle squeak, too quiet to be heard by Gladio in the back seat, but Ignis had to quickly pretend to be looking out the side window so she wouldn’t see his smile. “Thanks,” she managed.

“It does, however,” Ignis interjected before Kate’s control over her inner fangirl could slip further, “mean Ardyn is likely to continue to seek information - either from outside sources, depending on
how easily he’s able to navigate this reality, or by stalking us further. We’ll need to be careful, not only to prevent him from threatening any of us again, but to keep him from learning how much we know.”

“Information’s been his biggest advantage over us so far,” Gladio agreed. “If we can turn the tables on him, we’ll have a fighting chance.”
“So,” Prompto said. “Do I get to see this game now?”

Noctis laughed. “Impatient much?”

They were piled together on Kate’s big couch, Prompto wrapped in a blanket and settled securely between Noctis and Ignis, Gladio on Noctis’s other side. Kate had retreated to the kitchen to get ice for the bruising on her face and make coffee, despite Ignis’s offer to do both for her. He hadn’t pushed; he suspected she needed the time to have a private reaction to everything that had happened in the hospital. He’d thought Prompto would need the same, but apparently the excitement of seeing himself in a video game was enough to override whatever other emotions he might be feeling.

Or perhaps, after however many days chained alone in a cell with nothing to do but think and fear and hurt, Prompto needed a distraction and the presence of his friends.

“Look, bud,” Prompto said mock-sternly, though his voice was still rather breathy from the damage to his lung, ruining the effect. “I have wanted to be in a video game my entire life. How cool is it that we actually are?! Of course I want to see!”

Of course, Ignis thought ruefully, when Prompto learned the truth, he wouldn’t be nearly so enthusiastic. But that could wait until he’d recovered a little. Ignis hadn’t missed that Prompto had not yet brought up his barcode tattoo, nor otherwise directly addressed the fears which had plagued the game version of him. If recovery time was what he needed, they could at least give him that. Ignis said, “Go ahead and open the game, Noct.”

“Kate won’t mind?” Noct asked, though Ignis heard the controller clatter against the coffee table as Noctis picked it up.

“I’m sure she won’t,” Ignis said.

“Okay,” Noctis agreed. The console was already beeping cheerfully as he loaded the game. “Her save is in Meldacio,” he added to Prompto. “It looks really weird, though - half the city’s missing.”

“They probably didn’t want to have to render it all,” Prompto said. “Meldacio’s bigger than it looks—Whoa!”

The game had finished loading and soft music played from the screen. Ignis listened as Noctis steered his virtual avatar around the digital city, and Prompto exclaimed in alternating delight and appallment at the sights. A veteran gamer, Noctis had no trouble figuring out how to pick up a quest in-game to hunt a pair of royalisks in the Vesperpool - but then was stymied.

“How do we get there?” he asked, the angle of his voice suggesting the question was directed at Ignis. “Do we have to walk?”
“The Regalia ought to be nearby, if memory serves,” Ignis said. “Don’t you see it?” He thought he remembered the car being at hand the last time Kate played this save.

“No, it’s not—” Noct started, then broke off at the same time Prompto breathed *whoa*. Noctis said in a tone of horror, “What in Shiva’s frozen hell did this game do to my dad’s car?!”

Gladio snickered, then stopped himself, a rustle of cloth indicating Noctis had turned to glare at him. Gladio said, “I dunno, I kind of like it.”

“It’s…” Prompto said, then stopped and tried again. “It’s…”

Ignis frowned at all of them, frustrated once more by his inability to see. “It’s what?”

“It’s a *monster truck*,” Noctis said, and that was so unexpected Ignis could do nothing but sit there with his ear tilted like that would change what he’d heard.

Kate chose that moment to return to the living room. “Coffee’s ready—What?”

“Why is the Regalia a monster truck?” Noctis demanded.

“Why is—Oh,” Kate said, and her voice took on that tone she got when she was embarrassed about the game’s portrayal of their world. “It’s, uh, it’s the Type-D. So, um, one of the things with Final Fantasy games is that they all have airships that the protagonists get to fly around the map with, only for whatever reason they didn’t give you guys one in the main story. But in the post-game content, you can do a quest to get parts for Cindy to turn the Regalia into a flying car, the Type-F. But people wanted to do more, so they added the Type-D for offroading in a recent update stop looking at me like that, oh my god!” She sat down in the creaky rocking chair next to the couch with a huff. “I didn’t program the thing.”

“Stars,” Noctis muttered, with the rustle of a headshake. “How do I put it back?” A pause, then an appalled, “*Can* I put it back?”

“Yes,” Kate said. “You just have to go back to Hammerhead and ask Cindy.”

“Hammerhead’s a day and a half drive from Meldacio,” Gladio complained. “Just use the damn monster car, Noct.”

“Ugh,” Noct said, but on screen, familiar doors slammed, that weirdly rough engine revved, and their digital avatars exchanged a brief conversation about their upcoming adventure. Noctis managed to get them to the Vesperpool without any further fuss, and he and Prompto quickly got distracted discussing the game mechanics with Kate.

She’d just explained how to activate the Armiger in the game, complete with mock-complaining commentary from Noct about how much easier it was to use the power of kings when all you had to do was push a couple of buttons, and Noctis was testing it out on the royalisks, when Prompto said, “Wait, hold up. Why does game-you get thirteen Arms? Don’t you have eleven right now? Did we miss some tombs in Lucis?”

“No, I have thirteen,” Noctis said. “Gentiana - Shiva, I guess - gave me the Trident of the Oracle on the way to Gralea. And I found…” The slightest crack in his voice. “I found my dad’s sword in Zegnautus. Ravus had it.”

“But that’s in Lucis,” Prompto said, the blanket rustling and air stirring as he gestured toward the television. “We haven’t been back to Lucis yet.”
“That’s a good point,” Gladio said, a thoughtful frown in his voice. “You said this was post-game, right?” he asked, presumably toward Kate. “But if the game ends with—you know. How is this…?” He trailed off.

“If the game ends with what?” Prompto asked. He sat up straighter against Ignis’s side, and though Ignis felt him wince with the movement, the only thing in his voice was sudden concern. “Noct?”

“Long story,” Noctis said tightly. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Noct—”

A brush of fabric, then Noctis said, “Later. Please, Prompto.” His voice was soft, and Ignis imagined him gripping Prompto’s arm, his expression plaintive in the way Ignis had never known Prompto to be able to refuse.

Sure enough, Prompto sighed. “Later. Okay.” He leaned away from Ignis to presumably bump shoulders with Noctis.

The angle of Noct’s voice shifted toward Kate. “Gladio’s right. How am I in Lucis with all the Arms?”

“It’s…” Kate hesitated, seeming to choose her words carefully. “Since the plot gets kinda railroad-y after Altissia, the devs built in a way for players to go back to Lucis to do content they missed. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, in-world, and they know it - Talcott even calls you out on it if you bring back the cactuar statuette—”

“Kate,” Ignis interrupted gently. “The point?”

“Right.” A pause, presumably while she gathered her thoughts. “So whenever you rest, you can call Umbra.”

“Luna’s dog?” Noctis asked, startled. “The Messenger?”

“Yes. He basically gives you the ability to travel back in time - in-game, it’s referred to as ‘reliving your memories’, but that doesn’t really make sense since you can pick up Royal Arms you missed, take items back and forth from Altissia to Lucis, that kind of thing.”

“Time travel, really?” Gladio said.

“I didn’t know Messengers could do that,” Prompto added. “Can they?”

“I... don’t know, actually,” Noctis said. “Never tried asking.”

“Doubt it,” Gladio said. “Actual time travel would cause all kinds of causality issues. The University of Insomnia’s been doing research around the subject for years, and the best they could ever demonstrate was that the Crystal’s magic can bend time in specific, localized situations.” There was a beat, then he said, sounding irritated, “What? Just ‘cause I’m the muscle means I can’t stay on top of the latest developments in quantum physics?”

Kate snorted. Noctis, sounding embarrassed, said, “No! I just... didn’t know you were interested in... in all that.”

“‘Strength of body is only half of what is needed to be a Shield’,” Gladio said. “‘Strength of mind is equally important.’” His voice turned melancholic. “My dad drilled that into me.”
A longer silence this time. Ignis thought it might have been the first time Gladio had mentioned his father since Insomnia fell - perhaps this reprieve from Ardyn’s machinations, this chance to breathe despite this reality’s strangeness, was doing him some good as well.

Finally Gladio said, his voice rougher than usual, “So, yeah. I keep on top of what research is being done on the Crystal’s magic and the power of the Lucis Caelums.”

“It’s an interesting point,” Kate said thoughtfully. “Ardyn’s magic is described by the game once as a ‘stitch in time’. It’s not a logical name for what he’s doing with it, but it does suggest he has time magic of some kind.”

“And by extension, so does the rest of the Lucis Caelum line,” Ignis said, following her train of thought. “Do you think this might be something we could use?”


“He is,” Noctis said tightly. “It’s… complicated.”

Prompto’s elbow bumped Ignis’s like he was folding his arms, and Ignis was close enough to hear the hiss of pain he couldn’t quite stifle at the motion. “Complicated,” Prompto repeated, frustrating bleeding into his voice. “What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me, Noct?”

“Prompto…”

“Noct,” Ignis interrupted gently. “We should tell him. He needs to know, and hiding it won’t make it less true.”

“Ignis is right,” Kate added, “but before anything else, Prompto, you need to lie down. Your breathing and color are starting to worry me.”

“I’m fine,” Prompto protested.

“And I’m your doctor,” Kate said, not ungently. “Well, not technically, since you’ve been discharged, but still. Let’s get you set up in the bed upstairs, then Noctis can tell you everything. And while he’s doing that, I’m going to make a store run. I definitely don’t have enough food in this house to feed four adult men.”

Prompto made a frustrated noise, but didn’t argue, and the way he sagged into the couch told Ignis he probably had been pushing himself too hard. They began disentangling themselves from the couch, Gladio scooping Prompto into his arms to carry him upstairs while Kate instructed him on how to arrange the pillows on the bed so Prompto wasn’t lying flat. A slight shift in the air told Ignis that Noctis had come to stand beside him.

“Ignis,” Noctis said quietly. “Go with Kate. We don’t know where Ardyn is or what he’s up to, and she made him pretty angry back at the hospital.”

“Understood,” Ignis said. Years of practice let him keep his expression under control, but warmth blossomed in his chest. Noctis still trusted him with this - trusted him to keep Kate safe, despite his lack of sight. “You be safe, too. You’re the one Ardyn is ultimately after.”

“I’ll be fine,” Noctis said, and Ignis heard the slight smile in his voice. “Gladio’s here. And Prompto can still fire a gun if he needs to.”
“Indeed.” That, too, was another relief: not only was Noctis once more comfortable trusting Gladio to have his back, but he had Prompto by his side again. They were nowhere near safe yet, not until they’d come up with a solution to the prophecy’s deadly conclusion, but they were together. They had each other, and he had no doubt that they would find a way to save Noctis and the world both.

He might still be blind, for the first time in weeks, Ignis felt whole.
Making Plans

Chapter Summary

In which Ignis makes some suggestions.

Chapter Notes

I'm fully expecting Episode: Ardyn to do to this fic what Episode: Ignis did; namely, simultaneously joss and canonize a bunch of my ideas and make my life way harder. XD We'll see how much I can write before the episode comes out...

“How’s your eye?” Ignis asked. He and Kate were walking to the store, Ignis’s cane tapping a by-now-familiar rhythm along the sidewalk. He hadn’t meant to say anything, but she was walking more slowly than usual, and despite the nurse’s assessment that she didn’t have a concussion, he was worried she might still be in shock.

“I look like I got punched in the face by a professional boxer,” Kate said dryly. “It’s gonna hurt for a while, but nothing’s broken at least.” She gave a shaky little laugh. “That was probably the scariest thing I’ve ever done in my life, but holy hell was it satisfying. I might not be able to throat-punch Ardyn, but the look on his face…”

Ignis couldn’t help but smile, imagining it. “I expect very little shocks him quite so greatly, after all this time.”

“Yeah. So worth it.”

“Of course,” Ignis said, sobering, “the issue remains that he’s here, in this reality.”

Kate made an unhappy sound of agreement. “That complicates things. If he knows about the game…”

“Well, I recall you saying the developers are separated from this city by an ocean,” Ignis said. “So even if he decided to take matters into his own hands, he’ll have to find a way around that first.”

“You think he’ll go after the devs?” Kate demanded, sounding appalled. “Should I call Taku and let him know? He gave me his number and told me to call him if anything weird happened again —”

“Not yet,” Ignis said. “While I certainly don’t wish Ardyn Izunia upon them, we must remember the developers aren’t necessarily our allies here.”

Kate’s footsteps faltered. “...Huh?”

“Their interest is their game, and its behaving as they programmed it. Taku seemed quite confident that events in my world would progress as the game dictated. For that matter, I found it quite difficult to make even the smallest change myself, so his confidence is hardly misplaced.”
“You think the devs were, what, somehow blocking you from doing things?” Kate asked. “Didn’t he say they couldn’t do that? Couldn’t make changes to the game like that, I mean.”

“He did say that,” Ignis said. “If Taku’s team has a vested interest in ensuring Noctis’s death, he would have every reason to lie about his capabilities, and to take action to prevent me from changing anything. If Ardyn does find a way to reach the developers, he may well solve that problem for us.”

There was a long pause, during which he suspected Kate was staring at him. He said mildly, “Surely you haven’t forgotten that my duties to Noctis include advising him on matters of tactics and strategy.”

Kate gave a rueful laugh. “Nah. It’s just, you’re so nice all the time I forget you can be pretty damn scary when you want to be.”

He smiled, deliberately using the polite court smile which Noctis had once described as “creepy” and which Ignis reserved for those aides and minor nobility who were being particularly annoying during council meetings. Kate made a shuddering noise. “Oh jeez, don’t do that, you look like you’re debating whether to dice or julienne me.”

Ignis laughed, and Kate chuckled too. She added, “Look, I really don’t think Taku or his team are trying to thwart you. They care less about things proceeding exactly as they planned than about things proceeding at all. Right now their game is crashing, the fans are upset, probably the voice actors and other creatives are upset, no one knows what’s going on, and they can’t even put out an official statement to calm everyone down. They’re probably fine with you changing things when you go back, as long as you, y’know, go back.”

“Perhaps,” Ignis conceded.

“Just... promise me you aren’t planning to sic Ardyn on the devs?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Ignis!”

He grinned to let her know he was joking. They’d reached the grocery store, and for a time the conversation lapsed in favor of discussing what they needed to buy. Ignis wanted to make one of Prompto’s favorite foods, a green curry soup which had the added benefit of being highly nutritious and therefore Dr. Matthias-approved, but figuring out what substitutions were required ended up being a surprisingly challenging puzzle.

It wasn’t until they’d paid and were walking back home that Kate said thoughtfully, “Actually, there’s a flaw in your brilliant plan to sic Ardyn on the devs.”

“Oh?”

“Ardyn doesn’t have any reason to change the game. In fact, he’s probably more invested in making sure the game stays the same than the devs are.”

Ignis frowned. “Why’s that?”

“Well, he gets what he wants, right?” Kate said. “The Lucis Caelum and Nox Fleuret lines ended, the gods dead or badly weakened, the world all but destroyed by daemons, and he gets to die after two thousand years of immortality. He wins. It’s one of the reasons why the game’s ending is such a downer. The bad guy wins.”
As far as Ignis was concerned, the fact that Noctis had to die was the main reason the ending was “such a downer”, but she still had a valid point. “True,” he admitted. “Then we oughtn’t assume his first move will be against the developers.”

“Of course,” Kate said ruefully, “that means his first move will probably be against us.”

“Also true.” Ignis sighed, absentmindedly nudging his sunglasses back into place. He had the distinct feeling he was missing something, but he wasn’t sure what. Too much had happened in the last few days - the last few months - and he needed some time to think it all through.

But time was a luxury of which they had precious little, despite this respite in Kate’s reality. Ardyn’s presence meant they only had as long as it took for him to find a way to force their hand, as he’d done in Zegnautus with Prompto. If what Kate said was true about him wanting the game to proceed as written, then he’d want to force them to return as soon as he could, specifically to deny them the time to make plans that might threaten his victory.

Ignis and Kate had been unable to come up with a way to save Noctis in the nearly six weeks Ignis had spent in this reality before, and the game’s fans had been likewise unable to do so for the game’s entire lifetime. Ardyn was unlikely to give them more than twenty-four hours.

But they didn’t have a choice. They had to come up with a plan, or Noctis would die.

* * *

“So,” Gladio said. “Way I see it, we’ve got two problems.”

“Only two?” Noctis asked dryly.

They were eating dinner in Kate’s spare bedroom, Prompto propped up against a mound of pillows on the bed, Ignis and Noctis on either side of him, and Gladio and Kate in chairs Gladio had hauled up from the dining room. A big pot of green curry sat on the bedside table near Ignis’s elbow; he’d had to improvise rather a lot to make it with this world’s ingredients but he thought he’d done a respectable job.

“You wanna borrow more problems, that’s on you,” Gladio said to Noct, his voice teasing. “But yeah, two problems. First, we gotta figure out how to bypass that stupid prophecy and keep Noctis alive—”

“And destroy the Starscourge,” Noctis interrupted. “I mean it, Gladio, if that’s the only way to save the world—”

“We’ll figure something out,” Ignis cut in. This was not an argument he wanted to have - Noctis and Gladio were both too stubborn for it to be a productive discussion. “What’s the other problem, Gladio?”

“What happens when we go back,” he said. “We’re gonna land right back in Zegnautus, smack in the middle of Ardyn’s deathtraps and rogue MTs and a mess of daemons. Now that we have Prompto, we need a plan for getting back to safety.”

“Not necessarily,” Ignis said. “I departed our world from Altissia, and returned in Tenebrae. We could return directly to Lucis if we wanted.”

“If we did that, we’d be leaving the Crystal in Ardyn’s hands,” Noctis pointed out.

“We can’t get near the Crystal without it kidnapping you,” Gladio said. “It can stay in Zegnautus
for now. Ain’t like any of the daemons or MTs can do anything to it.”

“But Ardyn can,” Noctis said. “Or at least, we don’t know that he can’t. And if he still wants to force me into it, then leaving it with him gives him more chances to do it.” A rustle of hair as he shook his head. “I don’t want to leave it there if we can avoid it.”

Gladio’s voice turned toward Kate. “What needs to happen for Noct to get sucked inside? Is it just proximity, or does he need to do something?”

“I’m not sure,” Kate admitted. “I think in the game he activates it somehow, but all the cutscene shows is him reaching toward it and asking it for help. Then it shoots out tendrils of light that grab him by the arm and drag him inside.”

“So just don’t ask it for help or stick out your arm near it,” Prompto said. “Easy, right?”

Noctis snorted. “Sure. I’ll try not to get too close,” he said, “but I still think we should retrieve it.”

Prompto shuddered, his elbow brushing Ignis’s. “Man, this sucks,” he said, and though he sounded like he was trying to joke, there was a real note of fear and anger in his voice. “We grew up thinking the Crystal was this all-powerful protecting… thing, and now we have to worry about it eating Noct.”

Ignis gripped Prompto’s arm in reassurance, careful to avoid the bandages wrapped around his wrist; at the same time Prompto swayed slightly as though Noctis had bumped shoulders with him on his other side. Noctis said, “I’m not going to get eaten by the Crystal.”

“Good,” Prompto said.

“Fine,” Gladio said at the same time, though he still didn’t sound happy. He continued, “So we’ll grab the Crystal. Can we go directly to it when we go back?”

“The Ring teleported Ignis directly to me when he came back the first time,” Noctis said. “I don’t see why not.”

Ignis shook his head. “It didn’t, actually. I was in Tenebrae, true, but I had to follow the train tracks for quite some time before reaching the station. Whatever means by which the Ring transports people, it’s not especially precise.”

“Of course it’s not,” Gladio muttered. “So assuming we land in Zegnautus at all, rather than who knows where in Gralea, what else do we have to worry about inside the keep?”

That last was apparently directed at Kate, who made a thoughtful noise. “Not much. You go to the Emperor’s throne room to destroy the Wallbreaker Wave device and unlock Noct’s magic—”

“Thank the Stars,” Noct muttered under his breath.

“—then fight Ravus, then Ardyn throws a bunch of daemons at you to force you guys to split up long enough for Noctis to go get eaten by the Crystal.”

“Wait, hold on,” Gladio said. “Ravus is dead. And he was on Noct’s side before he died. Why would we fight him?”

“Oh,” Kate said. “Ardyn… kind of revives him by turning him into a daemon. Sort of. It’s not really clear what he does but when you fight Ravus he’s like ten feet tall and mostly daemonified from his left arm out.”
“That’s creepy,” Noctis said.

“So, what, we gotta kill him?” Gladio said. “Doesn’t sound like that big a deal. We’re a hell of a lot stronger than the last time we went up against him—What?”

“It’s Ravus,” Noctis said, sounding appalled. “Luna’s brother. You’re okay with killing him? Just like that?”

“Doesn’t sound like it’s him anymore, if he’s been turned into a daemon,” Gladio pointed out. “You go down that road, you gotta start thinking about all the other daemons we killed.”

“I…” Noctis said. “That’s… Dammit.”

“They ain’t people anymore,” Gladio said, not ungently. “They’re daemons. You kill daemons, and you do it fast and you do it well, or they’ll do a lot worse to you.”

“Right,” Noct agreed. Silence for a moment, then Noctis said suddenly, “Prompto? You okay?”

Ignis put his hand on Prompto’s arm on reflex even as Prompto said weakly, “Yeah. I’m fine. Just… kinda sore.”

“You look pretty green,” Kate said in her doctor’s voice. “Do you need—”

“No, no, it’s okay, I’m fine,” Prompto interrupted. “Really, I’m fine.”

Something was off, something that caught Ignis’s attention, and then he realized Prompto’s left arm was moving restlessly under Ignis’s hand. It took another second for the motion to click: he was rubbing the back of his right wrist, and his breath was coming in short little hitches.

The barcode tattoo.

Prompto was supposed to be an MT.

They ain’t people.

It had been over a month since Ignis had learned about Prompto’s origins, but for Prompto it had been less than a week.

Ignis said, “Kate. Would it be possible to save Ravus instead of killing him?”

He knew he was right when Prompto went utterly still beside him. Fortunately, no one else appeared to notice; Noctis and Kate both said, “What?” and Gladio added, “Why the hell would we want to do that?”

Ignis thought fast. “He’s Lady Lunafreya’s brother, and carries the blood of the Oracle. Even if he can’t pass on the mantle of the Oracle, he may have power or knowledge which we could use against Ardyn or the Starscourge.”

“That’s great and all,” Gladio said, “but only the Oracle can heal the Starscourge. I don’t think there’s a whole lot we can do for Ravus.”

“The Crystal could probably do it,” Noctis said thoughtfully. “Its power is all about destroying the Starscourge once and for all, you’d think it could purge it from one person.”

“You just said you wouldn’t get close to the Crystal,” Gladio growled.
“I’ll be careful!” Noctis protested. “If you want, you can stand between me and it and fight off any light tentacles. But Ignis is right. If there’s a chance we can save Ravus, we should take it.” In a softer voice, he added, “We couldn’t do anything for all the other people who got turned into daemons before we knew what was going on, but maybe we can help him.”

There was a pause, then Gladio sighed. “Okay. We’ll have to figure out how to get him to the Crystal, though. If Ardyn’s forcing him to attack us, and wants to split us up before you get close to the Crystal, I doubt he’ll let us kite Ravus all the way there.”

“How about we figure it out somewhere else,” Kate interrupted, in her doctor’s voice again. “I’m declaring visiting hours over. Prompto needs rest if he’s going to be able to do anything at all in Zegnautus.”

“I’m fine, honestly!” Prompto protested.

“Your breathing is getting bad,” Kate said, “and if you keep sitting up and talking like that you’re at risk of your lung collapsing again.”

“Kate’s right,” Noctis said. “We’ve been talking your ear off and you need to rest.” He yawned. “I’m pretty beat myself. Tell you what, Specs and Gladio can go plan stuff. I’m gonna wash up real quick, then when I come back, you and I can play King’s Knight until you fall asleep. How’s that sound?”

Another pause; Ignis suspected Noctis and Prompto were both waiting for either him or Gladio to speak up, to say Noctis needed to join them in planning, not waste time playing games. But Gladio said nothing, and Ignis knew he’d realized what Noctis had - that Prompto needed to not be left alone just now, not so soon after the horrors he’d been through. Ignis and Gladio could come up with a plan for getting through Zegnautus safely on their own. Noctis would make sure Prompto was all right.

When it was clear no one was going to object, Prompto took a breath, careful and steady, his shoulder brushing against Ignis’s. “That sounds good,” he whispered.

“C’mon, Iggy,” Gladio said. “We’ve got planning to do.”
Chapter Summary

Secrets, fear, a much-needed hug, and a little bit of flirting.

Chapter Notes

Episode: Ardyn is finally out! The good news is, it didn't completely wreck my plot like Ep: Ignis did, and in fact it actually confirmed some guesses/headcanons I was using about certain things. It also helped me sort out what I think was the last big sticking point in my plot, so hopefully I can make faster progress now.

That said, there will be spoilers for Ep: Ardyn after this chapter. There will not, however, be additional hats. I’m terribly sorry.

“C’mon, Iggy,” Gladio said. “We’ve got planning to do.” Leather creaked and wood clunked as he stood and picked up the chairs he’d brought up from the dining room.

Ignis nodded firmly. “Right behind you.” He climbed off the bed, listening to Noctis and Gladio head into the hallway, the extra chairs clacking softly against each other as Gladio carried them out. Closer by, Kate’s socks made a soft susurrus against the carpet as she stepped past Ignis to retrieve the empty curry pot before following them. Ignis waited; he had grown familiar with this bedroom during the six weeks he’d stayed here, but the extra bodies and furniture made navigation more difficult.

When the room was clear, Ignis circled around the bed to the door. He was about to close it behind him when Prompto said, very quietly, “Hey, uh… Ignis?”

“Yes?” Ignis said. He kept his voice and posture neutral, though he had a strong idea what this was about.

A long pause, and a faint indrawn breath, then, “It’s… Nothing. Sorry. It’s nothing.”

Ignis stepped back into the bedroom. Gladio and Kate’s voices were moving down the stairs, talking about the game-battle with Ravus; further along the upstairs hallway, the bathroom door had just clicked shut behind Noctis. Ignis closed the bedroom door and crossed the two steps to the edge of the bed. “If it was nothing, you wouldn’t have called me back,” he said gently.

Prompto sucked in another breath. Ignis sat down on the edge of the bed, found Prompto’s shoulder and gripped it. Waited, feeling the small movements of muscle as Prompto fidgeted.

Finally Prompto burst out, “Did the… did the game—did it show you what—where I was—the—in the magitek facility?”

Fear and shame in his voice, his shoulder trembling. Ignis slid his hand down Prompto’s arm,
ghosting over the bandages that covered the skin, and he had to fight to keep his fury at Ardyn off his face. Prompto would read any anger in his expression as being directed at him, rather than at the man who’d hurt him so badly.

When Ignis’s fingers came to rest on the back of Prompto’s right wrist, Prompto’s breath hitched, his muscles tensing as though preparing for a blow. In a shaky voice, he said, “So… you know.”

Ignis said, gentle but firm, “What I know is that you stayed by Noct’s side throughout the nightmare of the last several months, and you fought to return to him even when you had every reason to believe he’d rejected you. Regardless of where and how you were born, you are as loyal and devoted a friend as Noctis could ever ask for. He’s lucky to have you.”

Silence for a long moment, except the harsh ragged sound of Prompto’s breathing. Finally he said, “You… you think so?”

“I know so,” Ignis said. He gripped Prompto’s wrist, mindful of the injuries beneath the bandages but trying to put reassurance in the touch.

“What about…” Prompto’s voice caught. “Gladio, and… and Noct? Do they know?”

Ignis shook his head.

“Then… on the train, what Noct said… he…”

It took Ignis a second to remember exactly what had happened on the train, the things Noctis had screamed in his rage. “Ardyn used an illusion to switch appearances with you,” he said. “Noctis thought he was talking to Ardyn. Didn’t he tell you?”

A soft rustle of hair against the pillows as Prompto shook his head, then he added hurriedly out loud, “No. I mean, he apologized but he didn’t say—I thought—He attacked me and then in the factory I couldn’t—I couldn’t use the armory and I figured he didn’t want… that he’d cut me off.”

“The Empire developed a weapon that blocks Noctis’s magic,” Ignis said. “The Wallbreaker Wave device Kate mentioned. Ardyn used it on us in Zegnautus; he likely used it on you in the factory.”


Ignis nodded. There was silence for a moment as Prompto digested this, his wrist moving slightly under Ignis’s hand as he fidgeted with the blankets. Finally Prompto said, “Are you going to tell them? About me?”

“When - or whether - to tell them is entirely your choice,” Ignis said. “If you do tell, you have nothing to fear. They know where your loyalties lie, no matter your origins.”

There was a slight shift of Prompto’s arm which probably indicated a nod. “I think - I know I should tell them,” he said.

“When you feel comfortable,” Ignis agreed.

Prompto blew out a breath, some of the tension bleeding out of his muscles as he did. “Thanks, Iggy.”

“Oh, of course,” Ignis said. He hesitated; he was not normally the hugging type, but Prompto was, and too much of the touch Prompto had received in the last week had been meant to cause pain. Carefully, Ignis pulled him closer, and when Prompto leaned in to bury his face against Ignis’s
shoulder, he knew he’d made the right choice.

Prompto stayed there until Ignis heard footsteps coming up the hall from the bathroom and nudged him. He had just enough time to sit up and compose himself before the door swung open and Noctis flopped onto the bed beside them. “So,” Noctis said cheerfully. “I’ve been thinking about that one bonus level, the one we gave up on a while back, and I think I know how to beat it.”

“Yeah?” Prompto asked, sounding excited.

Ignis stood and slipped out of the room as they chattered on. He had no doubt Prompto would eventually tell Noctis and Gladio about what he’d learned of his origins - even if the game didn’t force his hand when they returned and went after the Wallbreaker Wave device locked inside the Emperor’s chambers, Prompto was not the type to keep secrets like that. But that was a matter for later. As Ignis had said, it was Prompto’s choice when to tell.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he paused, ears straining, until he picked up the low rumble of Gladio’s voice coming from the kitchen. Kate answered, not quite loud enough for him to make out the words, but with a start he realized her tone was flirtatious. So was Gladio’s, when he next spoke.

Ignis sighed and ran a hand over his face. He probably should have expected that, given Kate’s newly-disclosed crush and Gladio’s propensity to flirt with every attractive woman he encountered. Ignis aimed his next step onto the creaky spot in the middle of the hall rug, and heard Kate say from the kitchen, rather hurriedly, “I, uh, I need to take this out to the compost bin. I’ll be right back.”

The kitchen door squeaked open and clattered shut again as Ignis rounded the corner into the kitchen. With Kate gone, he raised an eyebrow at the room in general.

“What,” Gladio said lazily from somewhere to his right.

“You’re incorrigible,” Ignis said.

“She’s a grown woman, Iggy,” Gladio said, sounding amused. “And it’s nice to have an admirer who’s not one of Iris’s little friends.”

Ignis couldn’t help a snort. “You noticed, then? I thought she was doing a respectable job of hiding it.”

Gladio laughed. “She has a picture of me shirtless as her phone background. Future-me, I guess - it’ll take ten years for my hair to grow out that long.”

“She does?” Ignis demanded, appalled. “And she showed you?”

“No,” Gladio said. “But I don’t think she realizes how much attention I pay to what people are doing on their phones around Noct.”

Ignis shook his head, smiling despite himself. Realistically, Gladio and Kate flirting wasn’t such a terrible thing. All five of them were badly stressed, wound tight not only from what they’d suffered in Zegnautus but also from what had happened in the hospital earlier. Kate was, as Gladio had said, a grown woman, more than levelheaded enough to know that any coquetry was just that and nothing else. And Gladio had always flirted as a way to blow off steam.

A squeak of hinges from the back door announced Kate’s return, and Ignis hurriedly composed his expression into neutrality. Kate said, “Hey. Is Prompto okay?”
“He’s tired,” Ignis said, “but Noct is with him.”

“Good,” Kate said. “So… now what?”

“Now we figure out a safe way through Zegnautus,” Gladio said. The angle of his voice turned toward Kate. “I want to see the whole ending of the game, too,” he added quietly. “I need to know.”

“Gladio—” Ignis protested. The last thing they needed was for Gladio to spend the rest of the night beating himself up for his future self’s failure to protect Noctis.

But Gladio cut him off, his voice dropping to a growl. “I can’t protect him if I don’t know what’s coming. That game’s just that - a game. It ain’t happening in real life.”

Ignis sighed. “As you wish.”

He sensed movement to his right an instant before Gladio bumped his shoulder lightly against Ignis’s on his way out of the kitchen. “I can handle it, Iggy.”

“I’d rather you didn’t have to,” Ignis answered as he followed. “Virtually or not.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Kate said. Movement, the static sound of the TV turning on and the beeps and blips as she pulled up the correct video.

Abruptly something occurred to Ignis. In a carefully neutral voice, he said to Kate, “Start the video at Ravus’s arrival. If I recall, the section before that is rather empty.”

For a bad second he thought she wouldn’t pick up on what he meant: the scene in the game of Prompto breaking into the Emperor’s throne room using the MT barcode on his wrist. Ignis had just promised Prompto he could reveal his secret to the others on his own terms; he didn’t want Gladio to find out from the game. Then Kate said, “Sure, gimme a sec.”

“What about that Wallbreaker thing?” Gladio asked. “You guys said something about unlocking Noct’s magic.”

“It’s literally just Noctis jamming his sword into a wall of machinery,” Kate said absently, her attention apparently on locating the right point in the video. “Then a string of generic daemon fights until… here.”

Ignis breathed a sigh of relief as the video clicked on to the low hum of background music and the clatter of booted feet against the keep’s metal floors, followed by game-Noct saying So, the central elevator’s through here.

Watching the ending of the game a second time was harder than Ignis expected it to be, even with Gladio there. Perhaps because Gladio was there; though he was doing his best to handle it as he’d promised, he was clearly as affected by the ending as Ignis had been. When it was over, they sat in a silence broken only by the telltale creaking of Gladio’s jacket as he repeatedly clenched his fists.

Finally Ignis said, “You see why I objected to this when I learned of it.”

Gladio gave a startled gasp of a laugh. “Objected is one word for it,” he said, his voice suspiciously thick. “How ‘bout, hell no.”

“Indeed,” Ignis agreed. “Though, while the sentiment is good, we’ve still no plan.”
“Don’t remind me,” Gladio muttered.

“Maybe start with getting out of Zegnautus,” Kate suggested. “One step at a time, and all that.”

“Okay,” Gladio said. “That fight with daemon-Ravus is the first big problem.” The couch shifted as he sat forward, his arm brushing Ignis’s as he rested his elbows on his knees. “It looked pretty brutal up there. Kiting him all the way to the Crystal’s gonna be tough, especially if Ardyn’s controlling him and all those other daemons.”

“Any chance of subduing him?” Ignis suggested.

“Doubt it,” Gladio said. He hesitated, then added, “He’s pretty far gone. Ain’t like you can subdue a normal daemon. And even if we did, we’d have to get through Ardyn’s next pack of nasties while lugging around a ten-foot-tall dead weight.”

“Avoid him, maybe?” Kate said. “Find a different way to the central elevator, where you’re not open to ambush like that hangar.”

“Possible,” Ignis said, “but risky.”

Kate must have looked confused, because Gladio explained, “There’s better places to create a bottleneck than a wide-open hangar - if Ardyn chose that for his ambush, it’s ‘cause he didn’t actually want to kill us. If we go a different route, he might pick a fight someplace we’re less able to survive in.”

“Even if he doesn’t want to kill you?” Kate asked.

Ignis shook his head. “Recall that in the game’s version of events, he didn’t fatally wound Prompto. But in real life, he was willing to do so in order to force us to continue down the path he’d laid for us. If we make another attempt to stray, he’s likely to make a similarly deadly counter-move.”

“Well, if we know he’ll do that,” Gladio said, “then we can look for a path that’s less ambush-prone but also no more likely to get us killed by something else.”

“Let me see if I can find a map of Zegnautus online,” Kate said. “See if we can spot anything.”

They set to it, Gladio leaning to the side to presumably peer at the maps Kate pulled up on her phone. Ignis sat back and bit his tongue, frustrated once again by his inability to see the screen, the useful information about the layout of the rooms and halls of Zegnautus Keep. Even when he’d been walking the keep in person, he’d struggled to build any kind of mental map of the place. There were too many echoes, too many identical corridors and strange corners and unexpected obstacles which might be anything from desks to supply crates to walls, for all he could tell.

Without that information, it was difficult, if not impossible, for Ignis to contribute to the discussion.

So he felt a small, selfish frisson of gladness when, after only a few minutes of studying the maps, Gladio growled low in his throat and sagged into the couch. “This ain’t gonna work,” he grumbled. “It’s just like Meldacio - those maps aren’t even close to what the actual building looks like.”

“Damn,” Kate said, and sighed.

“It all comes back to Ardyn,” Gladio said, and thumped his fist on his knee in clear frustration. “He doesn’t just have the upper hand, he has all the cards. The only reason we’re alive right now is ’cause he wants us to be.”
“We need to find a way to neutralize him,” Ignis agreed.

In a tentative voice, Kate said, “Leave him here, maybe? I mean, I really don’t like the idea of him running around this reality, but it would keep him out of your hair.”

Gladio snorted. “There’s an idea.”

“While appealing,” Ignis said, “I’d not count on it being possible. We don’t know by what mechanism he followed us here - we may not be able to prevent him from returning with us. And even if we could, it’s too dangerous.” He turned his head toward Kate. “I’ll not risk your life, for one, not to mention what he might be capable of if he did manage to reach the developers and decided to make use of them rather than killing them.”

“Yeah, fine,” Gladio muttered. “So if we can’t leave him here, and we can’t just kill him ‘cause he’s an immortal daemon, we’re stuck with him. We have to figure out a way around him.”

They spent the next few hours discussing possibilities, but no matter what any of them came up with, they ended up back in the same place: Ardyn’s complete control over Zegnautus and the daemons inhabiting it meant they would have to dance to his tune. The third time they all yawned in unison, Kate said reluctantly, “We’re not getting anywhere with this. Maybe we should go to sleep, come at it with fresh minds in the morning.”

Gladio grunted a negative. “Ardyn doesn’t sleep.”

“Ardyn is a freaky bag of daemons in a person skin,” Kate said dryly. “The three of us are humans, and we need sleep.”

“She has an annoying tendency to be right about such things,” Ignis said to Gladio, and Kate chuffed a little laugh. Ignis continued, “We should take the chance to rest in comfort and relative safety while we have it.”

Gladio growled, but sighed. “I just don’t like the idea of losing more time while Ardyn’s out there planning who knows what.”

“I don’t especially like it either,” Ignis admitted. “But we’ve little choice. We need our wits about us if we’re to save Noct.” He stood up, stifling another yawn. “Goodnight, Kate.”

“Night,” Kate said. “And… don’t worry. We’ll figure this out.”

“I hope so,” Ignis said quietly. “I very, very much hope so.”
dangerous deals

chapter summary

in which noctis makes a risky call, and ignis makes a riskier one.

chapter notes

see the end of the chapter for notes

the next morning brought a breakfast of pancakes and eggs, a continuation of the discussion about what to do next, and no ideas.

“there’s gotta be something,” noctis said, frustrated. he sat on the couch beside ignis, tension making his gestures short and sharp enough to stir the air. “zegnautus is huge, there has to be more than one way to get to the crystal.”

“more than one way, sure,” gladio agreed dourly from the other end of the couch. “more than one way that isn’t an ardyn deathtrap, that’s the problem.”

“maybe come up from underneath?” kate said. she’d taken the day off work, citing a need to recover from yesterday’s attack, and now sat with them in the living room, her rocking chair creaking rhythmically as they talked. “i was thinking about it more after i went to bed, and the crystal’s suspended on a catwalk over some kind of big open area.”

ignis shook his head. “too many daemons can fly. we’d be sitting ducks while we climbed.”

noctis growled in frustration and flopped back against the couch, his leg brushing ignis’s as it bounced restlessly. prompto sat on his other side, between him and gladio, though he’d said little all morning. ignis wasn’t sure if he was trying to work up to telling noct and gladio about his barcode in the event they needed his access to the keep, or if he was simply conserving his strength and going easy on his injured lung.

the rocking chair creaked as kate stood. “i’m going to make some more coffee,” she announced. “caffeine will help us figure this out.”

“thank you,” ignis said. as kate’s soft footsteps faded toward the kitchen, he leaned forward, lacing his fingers together and resting his chin on his knuckles. climbing was indeed incredibly risky, but perhaps if they didn’t have to climb far…

then gladio said, “maybe we should just leave the crystal there—no, hear me out,” he added when noctis drew a sharp breath to object. “we aren’t in a good position to recover it right now. you gotta admit that much. so we follow iggy’s original plan - get out of zegnautus, go back to tenebrae, regroup, pick up reinforcements. if aranea’s willing, she’d be a big help, especially with that dropship of hers. never mind the daemons - hauling around a giant hunk of rock is gonna be a problem itself.”

“he’s right,” ignis said to noctis. “trying to thwart ardyn when he holds all the cards is futile. a temporary retreat to put ourselves in a better position is the wisest choice here.”

“I know,” Noctis admitted, with a reluctant sigh. “It’s just… nothing has gone like we planned
since we left Insomnia. Nothing. I’d bet the entire gods-damned throne that if we leave the Crystal behind, something’s going to go wrong and we won’t be able to go back and get it later.”

“Fine,” Gladio said. “So we don’t go back later. You don’t need to be near the Crystal to use the Ring’s power, and we don’t want you anywhere near it anyway. I know you said leaving it with Ardyn gives him more chances to force you into it, but frankly you waltzing right up to it is the best chance he has.”

“I—” Noctis made a frustrated noise. “I know, I know that, I just…”

Ignis tilted his head. “Why do you really want to get the Crystal, Noct?”

“I told you—”

“This isn’t about Ardyn having it,” Ignis interrupted gently. He knew his prince; something else was bothering Noctis.

There was a long pause, though Ignis felt the tension in Noctis’s body where their knees and shoulders touched. Finally Noct sighed. “I want to save Luna.”

“Noct, she’s gone,” Gladio said, blunt but not ungenerly. “How’s the Crystal going to do anything about that?”

“Time magic,” Noctis said. “You said yesterday that time travel would cause all kinds of causality issues, but what if it didn’t?”

“I don’t think we follow,” Ignis said carefully. Noct’s voice had taken on the tone he got when he was particularly passionate about something, and Ignis had the unpleasant suspicion he knew what. Noctis had wanted to save Luna since he was eight years old, newly returned from Tenebrae after watching her sacrifice herself so he and his father could escape. It was part of why he’d taken her death in Altissia so badly, and Ignis was worried that Noctis was only reopening old wounds.

“Her body was never found,” Noctis said. “Remember? Everyone said she was—” A slight hitch in his voice, then he plunged on. “Was swept away by the tidal waves. But maybe she wasn’t. Maybe her body wasn’t found because I figured out how to use the Crystal to go back in time and save her.”

“If the Crystal really could let you time-travel,” Gladio said, “don’t you think one of the hundred and thirteen previous kings would’ve figured it out?”

“Maybe they never tried,” Noctis said. “Or maybe they did, but we don’t know about it because they didn’t cause any issues. I don’t know, but if we can recover the Crystal, we can try.”

“Noct…” Gladio said. There was a pause and a deep breath; Ignis pictured him pinching the bridge of his nose as he usually did when exasperated. “I know you want to save Luna, but she’s gone.”

“Gladio—”

“No,” Ignis interrupted him, as gently as he could. “Gladio’s right. This would be an enormous risk, with effectively no likelihood of success.”

“We’re not putting you - and all of us, for that matter - at risk for a wild goose chase,” Gladio said. “We need to get the hell out of Zegnautus, get Prompto somewhere safe he can heal up, and get you someplace you can figure out how to end the Starscourge without dying.”
Noctis flinched at Gladio’s words, hard enough to bump Ignis. That was a clever bit of dirty fighting on Gladio’s part, bringing Prompto’s wellbeing into it. Apparently Prompto thought so, too, because he protested, “I’m fine, really. Don’t worry about me.”

His voice was still breathy from the damage to his lung, and Noctis flinched again, but Prompto kept talking: “Yeah, sure, I got stabbed, but Iggy, you’re blind and you’re still fighting. I’m not—” His voice wobbled. “I don’t want to let that bastard win. The longer we leave the Crystal there, the more people are gonna get turned into daemons while we’re regrouping. I’m with Noct. You guys went to the keep to get the Crystal, so let’s get it.”

“We went to the keep to get you, idiot,” Noctis said fondly, and leaned away from Ignis to presumably bump shoulders with Prompto. “But other than that, you’re right.” His voice turned toward Ignis, then Gladio, and took on the serious note that made him sound so much like his father. “I know we were talking about leaving the Crystal behind before we found Prompto, and I get that trying to recover it is a risk. But so is leaving it there. We’ve had a chance to rest and recover already, here, and we’re closer to getting the Crystal back than we’re ever going to be. I say we get it.”

Gladio growled under his breath, and Ignis sighed. That tone meant Noct wouldn’t be argued with. He’d made his decision, and as his sworn retainers, they had no choice but to follow.

At least it meant they wouldn’t have to argue with the Lucii in the Ring about where to return. Ignis remembered all too well the dead kings’ determination to make Noctis walk the path laid out for him. Ignis had pushed them far enough on that point as it was; he hadn’t been looking forward to convincing them to allow a return to anywhere other than Zegnautus and the Crystal. He was a little surprised Kate hadn't brought it up, actually, given what she knew about the Lucii’s opposition to Ignis trying to change things.

...Come to think of it, where was Kate? She’d gone to make coffee, but it didn't take this long to start a new pot. Maybe she’d come back and he just hadn't heard her. He asked the room in general, “Is Kate back? I could certainly use more coffee.”

There was a pause, presumably while the others looked around - then Noctis shot to his feet with an audible snarl and the glittering crackle of a weapon being summoned.

Ardyn Izunia said, “Ah, but you all seem jittery enough already. I think coffee can wait.”

Ignis’s heart stopped. Straining his ears, he could just make out Kate’s breathing, short and terrified, from the same direction as Ardyn. He clenched his fists, hating his blindness yet again, his inability to do anything to help her.

“Let her go,” Gladio snarled. From the angle of his voice, he had also risen to his feet, though he probably hadn’t summoned a weapon yet. Kate’s living room wasn’t big enough to swing a greatsword around.

“Or what?” Ardyn asked, unperturbed. “You’ll have to go through her to get to me. She’s the one who saved your dear little Prompto - if you get her hurt, who’ll save her?”

Gladio growled, but neither he nor Noctis moved, which meant they felt Ardyn was right about their chances of getting to him. Ignis thought fast. Based on the direction of Ardyn’s voice and what he’d just said, he was standing in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen, with Kate held in front of him. Likely with a weapon of some kind at her neck, or some other means by which to keep her controlled. There was a secondary entrance to the kitchen from the backyard - probably how Ardyn had managed to enter unnoticed - but it would be impossible for any of them
to slip away from the living room and circle around to the backyard without him seeing.

“What do you want?” Noctis demanded.

“Come now, that ought to be obvious, don’t you think?” Ardyn purred. “I want to help you return to our reality. You can hardly become the king you were born to be if you’re here, after all.”

“I don’t need your help,” Noctis spat.

“What I don’t get,” Gladio added, “is why you’re trying to help Noctis at all. The Chosen King’s going to wipe out the Starscourge. That includes you.”

“Don’t overtax yourself,” Ardyn said. “Bodyguards aren’t meant for thinking.”

The floor creaked as Gladio took a step forward, but Kate gasped and Gladio stopped, growling under his breath. Noctis said, “What about a king? ‘Cause I don’t see what you’re getting out of this, either. If you know about the prophecy, you have to know it doesn’t end well for you.”

“I know what the gods want to happen,” Ardyn said. “But as I told you before, history is written by the victors. When I win, the prophecy will always have foretold my victory.”

Ignis frowned. Something in Ardyn’s phrasing nagged at him. History is written by the victors, he’d said. It was the same thing he’d said at the hospital yesterday, too - no. No, yesterday he’d said history is written by the survivors, and had said he wanted his turn to write. Puzzle pieces began to fall into place, so fast that Ignis’s breath caught at the realization.

Kate had said that in the game, Ardyn won - that his death at Noctis’s hands, his release from millennia of daemonic life, was part of his victory. But twice now Ardyn had implied he intended to survive the completion of the prophecy. If dying wasn’t part of his plan, Ignis could use that. Possibilities flashed rapidly through his mind: this would be a short-term solution at minimum, but he thought he could turn it into more - perhaps even a way to save Noctis.

He tuned back in to the conversation as Noct said, “You won’t win, you bastard. I’m going to kill you for what you did to my dad, to Luna—”

“Tsk.” Ardyn said, and fabric rustled as though he was making a melodramatic gesture, probably about to say something provoking.

Ignis said quickly, “Ardyn, may I ask you a question?”

There was an incredulous pause; Ignis felt the weight of his friends’ baffled stares. He stood up from the couch, next to Noctis, turning toward Ardyn but letting his hand brush against Noct’s back in reassurance.

In a condescending tone that didn’t quite manage to hide a note of curiosity, Ardyn said, “I suspect you’ll ask whether or not I say yes. So please, ask away.”

“This is a genuine question,” Ignis said, “not a threat. Do you want to die?”

“Iggy—!” Gladio hissed under his breath, and Noctis shifted against Ignis’s hand, though Ignis couldn’t tell whether he was turning to stare at him, or responding to something Ardyn was doing.

Apparently it was the former, because Ardyn only said mildly, “That’s an odd question.”

“Will you answer?” Ignis said.
“I should think the answer is obvious.”

“Ah, but it’s not,” Ignis said. He was taking a risk here, though not, he thought, a large one. “You know about the game by now, I’m sure.”

A pause; he suspected Ardyn was staring at him, trying to figure out what he was up to. Then Ardyn admitted, “I do.”

“Then you know it ends with your death.”

“As I told you,” Ardyn said, irritation starting to overcome the curiosity in his tone, “I have alternate plans.”

“Which don’t include dying,” Ignis pressed. Noctis was practically vibrating with tension against his fingers, but hadn’t interfered yet; clearly he trusted Ignis enough to let him pursue this.

“I could hardly enjoy my victory if I was dead, now could I?” Ardyn said.

“Of course not.” Ignis had to fight not to show the excited grin that threatened to overtake him. “In that case, Chancellor, I have a proposition for you.”

Chapter End Notes

I'd planned this particular reveal/scene before Ep: Ardyn, which is part of why I wanted to wait for it to come out, in case it royally jossed my headcanon that Ardyn doesn't actually want to die. Amazingly, Ep:A confirmed it instead. Serendipity!

I'm hoping it means I have a better handle on Ardyn's character than I feel like I do. Despite how much I enjoy writing other magnificent bastard villains and anti-villains, I really struggle with Ardyn. The moment he shows up in a scene my writing speed plummets, as I have to re-write pretty much everything he says/does repeatedly. Unfortunately, he's a pretty important part of this fic...
The Gods' Plan

Chapter Summary

In which some fan theories are debunked, and others are proven correct.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a bit tricky to write as the fic is set prior to Episode: Ignis coming out (roughly mid- to late summer 2017), which means it's also before the Royal Edition and accompanying lore was released. I had to do a lot of double-checking to make sure Kate was working off the correct fan theories and available lore.

At the same time, the chapter really benefited from the various revelations in Episode: Ardyn. I'm not necessarily using everything from it, but it certainly solidified several headcanons I've been operating from. (It also made canon that Ardyn is not good with Insomnian - and therefore Earth - technology, which aside from its use in my fic, I just find hilarious.) That said, I firmly believe Ardyn is an exceptionally unreliable narrator, with every incentive to spin things in his favor...

“Sorry,” Kate murmured to Ignis. “I was hoping to get through this whole thing without being a damsel in distress, but he grabbed me as soon as I walked into the kitchen, and I didn’t want to argue with a knife on my carotid.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ignis murmured back. “He would have taken whichever of us happened to go in there first.”

“Still.” Kate sighed, then slipped away to, judging from the soft noises, sit in the empty spot on the far end of the couch. Ardyn had let her go after a brief negotiation regarding a temporary cease-fire while they discussed Ignis’s proposal; Ignis wasn’t sure if the concession spoke more to his curiosity, or to his confidence that he didn’t need a hostage.

Noctis sat on the couch once more, with Prompto between him and Kate. Prompto still hadn’t spoken, though Ignis had heard him disentangle himself from his blankets, most likely so as to have his hands free to summon his gun. As best Ignis could tell Gladio remained standing, looming protectively on Noctis’s other side, directly in front of Prompto and Kate. Which was probably no coincidence and which suited Ignis just fine.

Ardyn took the rocking chair, which immediately transformed its homely creaking into something ominous. Ignis did his best to tune out the sound and focus, sitting down beside Noctis and resting his hands on his knees. To describe this cease-fire as tenuous was an incredible understatement, not to mention the plan he was about to propose, and he couldn’t allow Ardyn to unsettle him.

“So tell me,” Ardyn said. “What proposition could you possibly have to offer me? I can’t imagine you’re going to claim you can save me. Your dear prince wouldn’t stand for that.”
“No, he wouldn’t,” Ignis agreed, forcing calm into his voice. “And I’m not going to claim such a thing.”

“Then what?” Ardyn’s voice was his usual lazy drawl, but he couldn’t quite hide the note of curiosity in it.

“A level playing field,” Ignis said. He held up a hand, forestalling what he suspected was about to be a protest by Noctis - and Ardyn, for that matter. “You’ve said you have alternate plans to the gods’ prophecy,” he continued. “But you must know you’ve quite the uphill battle against two thousand years of destiny and planning.”

He paused, giving Ardyn a chance to interject, but was met with silence broken only by the soft creak-creak of the rocking chair. This entire affair would be so much easier if Ignis could only see, could read Ardyn’s expression, his body language—and then Ignis shoved that futile thought aside and kept going. “Likewise, Noctis faces a similar uphill battle for his own survival. Not only against the gods’ plans, but, in the short term, against yours.”

Ardyn scoffed. “Come now, surely you don’t believe I intend to kill him now? The little tests I arranged in Zegnautus are only that - tests. If he can’t handle such trifles, how can he hope to stand under the weight of the crown?”

Noctis growled low in his throat. “The only thing you’re testing is my patience.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Ignis said quickly. The last thing they needed was for Noctis and Ardyn to get into a fight, even a verbal one. To Ardyn, he continued, “I’m referring to your attempts to force him into the Crystal. If that happens, the gods’ plan is all but final - Noctis will have little choice after that but to do as they command, and destroy you and the Starscourge both.”

“Assuming he can,” Ardyn said. “I’ll hardly sit idle while he absorbs the Crystal’s light. The gods might have been planning for a long time, but so have I.” The chair creaked again, then there was a heavy thump of a boot hitting the floor - Ardyn must have uncrossed his legs. “You might want to get to the point - I’m starting to think you’re merely stalling. What is this deal you want to make?”

“As I said, a level playing field.” Ignis steepled his fingers and touched them to his chin. He couldn’t fix Ardyn with a look the way he’d used to do to aides during Council meetings, but he hoped the effect was similar. “You don’t force Noctis into the Crystal, and you allow us to leave Zegnautus with it. Unharmed.”

“And in return?” Ardyn drawled, though there was the slightest edge to his tone.

“In return, Noctis doesn’t use the gods’ power to destroy you.”

“Ignis—” Noctis hissed in surprise.

At the same time, Ardyn barked an incredulous laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

“I didn’t say he won’t destroy you,” Ignis said, keeping his voice calm. “I said, he won’t use the prophecy to do it. When the two of you fight, it will be a level playing field. Just you and him, no gods, no Starscourge, no fated destiny dictating the outcome.”

There was a choking noise from Gladio’s direction, as though he’d swallowed back an angry interjection by sheer force of will. Noctis only made a soft huh sound, and the couch shifted as he sat back, apparently intrigued. Ardyn said nothing, and Ignis had to fight not to hold his breath. He suspected Ardyn was well aware that the offer was his best shot at survival. Whatever plans Ardyn might have made prior to arriving in this reality, he knew now that they would fail. He was too
cunning not to have a multitude of backup plans, but all of those had likewise failed, according to
the game. Which meant his claims of alternate options were, at best, extremely optimistic; and at
worst, outright lies.

But if Noctis kept the gods and the Crystal out of it, then suddenly Ardyn had a chance. It was a
small chance, as far as Ignis was concerned; he trusted Noctis to have the skill and resourcefulness
to defeat Ardyn in combat despite the vast advantage Ardyn had in age and experience. But Ardyn,
arrogant as he was, would be equally confident he could defeat Noctis.

It wasn’t a perfect deal, of course, not by a long shot. Noctis would still need to kill Ardyn in a fair
fight - or at least, as fair a fight as Ardyn made it, which was likely to not be very fair at all - and
they still hadn’t solved the problem of the Starscourge. But if Ardyn agreed to it, then this deal
would solve a great many immediate problems without introducing more long-term risks than it
would be worth.

Of course, Ardyn still needed to agree to it.

The silence stretched. Ignis let it - he suspected Ardyn was trying to unsettle him, to get him to
keep talking, perhaps sweeten the deal somehow. Noctis said nothing; he and Ignis, and for that
matter King Regis, had used this technique before, during particularly aggravating Council
meetings. And thank the Stars, Gladio kept his mouth shut. As Shield to the King, he was expected
to advise Noctis much as Ignis did, but like Clarus before him, Gladio preferred to do so in private.
He might express his displeasure at all of them later, loudly so, but he wouldn’t interfere now, not
unless Ignis did something stupid.

Prompto, too, stayed quiet, and Ignis wished he had some way to offer comfort to him, reassurance
that while they might be making a deal with the man who’d tortured him, they hadn’t forgotten
and wouldn’t forgive. But reaching out to Prompto would only draw Ardyn’s attention to him.
Instead, Ignis kept his fingers steepled under his chin, his face turned toward Ardyn, and his
posture as relaxed as he could make it with their enemy in the room.

There was a soft rustle and swish of fabric, then the rocking chair began its steady creak-creak
once more. Ardyn said, “Quite an… interesting proposal. I stop playing games in Zegnautus and
allow you to leave with the Crystal, and in return, you hamstring your dear prince and all but tell
me to kill him.”

It took everything Ignis had not to react to that. He knew full well Ardyn was probing for a reaction
- a flinch, a protest - and Ignis refused to give him the pleasure.

After a moment, Ardyn continued, “Why, that seems too good to be true! How do you expect to
destroy the Starscourge and defeat me without the Crystal’s power?”

Noct’s heel bumped Ignis’s ankle, a subtle indication to stay silent. Ignis pressed his lips together
and let Noctis answer: “How do you expect to defeat me without ten years of ruin to prepare?”

The creak of the rocking chair stopped. “I’ve had far, far longer than ten years to prepare,” Ardyn
said, and though he was clearly trying to sound flippanter, there was a dangerous edge to his voice.
“A decade of darkness is but the blink of an eye against the time I spent bound. You can’t even
imagine how long I’ve been preparing for this.”

“Must suck, then,” Noctis said, faux-friendly, “to find out it’s all for nothing. I’m gonna win, even
if I have to die to do it. You’ve seen what will happen - no matter what you do, you fail. The gods
are on my side.”
“Are they?” Ardyn said. The dangerous edge in his voice sharpened. “I’m sure you know my true name by now.” A rustle of cloth as he gestured, probably toward the game console. “So as one Lucis Caelum to another, allow me to warn you: the gods are not on your side.” He chuckled, low and grim. “I learned that lesson a long time ago.”

“So let’s do this, then,” Noctis said. “You and me, no gods, no Crystal, no Starscourge.”

“Hmm,” Ardyn said. “I think not.”

Ignis froze, only distantly aware of Noctis likewise stiffening. Before either of them could respond, Ardyn continued, “If all I wanted was to kill you, I could have done that any time in the past, oh, twenty years. No,” he said, and his voice dropped to a low, deadly purr. “I want to kill the Crystal’s Chosen, the True King arisen. I want to demonstrate how utterly wrong it was when it rejected me, how powerless its Chosen is. I can hardly do that if you’ve not taken the time to absorb its power.”

“But you’ll die,” Ignis said. “You saw it. Once Noctis receives the power of the Crystal, there’s nothing you can do.”

A rustle of heavy fabric signaled Ardyn’s shrug. “Perhaps. But you misjudged me, boy. I’ve no intention of dying, it’s true. But even more than I want to live, I want to destroy the gods and the Crystal and everything my traitorous brother built. Your dear Noct is willing to die to achieve his goal. So am I.”

“You’re insane,” Noctis whispered, his tone horrified.

Ardyn laughed, a deep throaty chuckle. “Of course I am,” he said. “My beloved brother - your illustrious ancestor Somnus Lucis Caelum, the one you call the Founder King - betrayed me, destroyed everything I cared about, and bound me in torment for two thousand years. I think I’m entitled to a bit of sanity loss, don’t you?”

“Huh,” Kate said softly from the far end of the couch, then there was a faint sound like she’d clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Does that surprise you?” Ardyn asked, his voice turning toward her. “I would have thought that fascinating little game revealed all the... gruesome details.”

“Some of it,” Kate said. “I—sorry, it was more... most people think your brother’s name is Izunia, since you were so cryptic about it when you told Noctis in game.”

Ardyn laughed again, but this time he sounded genuinely amused. “The names are what interest you? I took the name Izunia because it sounds so much better than the one darling little Somnus gave me after taking away my own. And announcing myself as my true name would have drawn far too much of the wrong kind of attention.”

“I’m curious about this betrayal you mentioned,” Gladio spoke up. “None of the official histories or unofficial documents we have from back then say the Founder King had a brother.”

“Oh course not,” Ardyn said. “Somnus could hardly let it be known he was the usurper. He couldn’t kill me, so he locked me up in that prison and erased me from history.”

“Did he lock you up before or after you turned into a daemon?” Noctis asked, mock-innocently. “Seems like that might’ve been a factor in his decision.”

Amusement turned to rage in an instant. “I was chosen,” Ardyn snarled. “The gods chose me. I was
using the power I was given to save people. But after my traitor of a brother claimed the throne in defiance of the gods’ will, the Crystal cast me away despite all I had done for the people. But of course,” he added, abruptly and eerily calm once more, “neither the official histories nor that game would share those little tidbits. Wouldn’t want to reveal anything that might expose the Founder King’s treachery or make me look sympathetic, now, would we?”

“The power you were given,” Kate repeated. “You said in the game you were taking the Scourge into yourself. But no one else anywhere in the game’s lore has had that power. So where’d you get it from?”

“Kate,” Ignis said sharply. “This isn’t the time for fan questions.”

“What—No,” Kate said. “I’m not fangirling. I mean I guess I am a bit, because this is something the fans have wanted to know for forever, but it’s a serious question.”

Ignis frowned, but let it go. Her tone was more that of a doctor than a fangirl - perhaps she’d figured something out.

Kate said to Ardyn, “So?”

“My power came from Bahamut himself,” Ardyn said. His voice sounded flippant, but Ignis thought he heard the faintest hint of scorn at the word power.

“You said the gods aren’t on your side,” Noctis pointed out. “Why’d they give you any kind of power, then?”

“So I could help my people, of course,” Ardyn said. “Free them from the plague that caused so much pain and suffering.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kate said, and there, that was her fangirl tone, the one she tended to use when discussing fan theories. “If they wanted you to be able to heal the Starscourge, why not give you the Oracle’s power? Why give you a power that doesn’t heal anything? It’s like instead of giving you an antidote to administer, they just told you to suck the poison into yourself. It doesn’t result in less poison, it just makes you poisoned instead.”

“I was saving people—”

“No,” Kate interrupted sharply. “First-year freaking med students learn you can’t help any of your patients if you’re sick yourself. So why the hell would the gods give you a power that doesn’t even work?”

“It worked,” Ardyn hissed. “I saved countless lives. People who would have otherwise become daemons, or died to my brother’s pyres.”

“You were concentrating it,” Gladio said slowly, his tone one of revelation. “The gods didn’t give you that power to help people, they gave it to you so the Starscourge would be concentrated all in one place.”

Abruptly Ignis realized where Kate was going with her line of questioning. “You were set up, weren’t you,” he breathed. “Set up by the gods. That’s what you meant when you said they aren’t on your side. You becoming a daemon wasn’t an accident, it was their plan all along. You’re as much a sacrifice as Noctis is meant to be.”

Ardyn barked a laugh that held no humor. “Ah, now you begin to understand.”
“Seriously?” Kate demanded. “That’s even stupider—God, so all the ‘Bahamut’s a giant dick playing people chess’ theories are true?”

A rustle of heavy fabric that might have been a shrug from Ardyn. “‘So it is written, and so it shall be,’ he said. “The Draconian himself told me that.”

“And you just accepted it?” Noctis asked. “Doesn’t seem your style to take orders like that.”

“Hardly,” Ardyn scoffed. “I railed against my destiny most desperately. But even one such as I cannot change the fate laid before me. The gods will not allow it. Even this bizarre world is proof. That game, in which we are naught but puppets strung along the path laid for us.”

“In the original game, sure,” Noct said. “But we’re changing it.”

“Don’t you understand?” Ardyn said. There was the thump of his foot hitting the floor, a rustle of his clothes as he sat forward in earnest. “You can’t. Every word we speak, every teensy-tiny action we take… it’s all predetermined by the gods, and by the men of this world who created those gods. Protest all you want, Noct, but that game is proof. You will fulfill your destiny and I will get my revenge, even if I must die to do it.”

Ignis frowned. “That game isn’t proof of anything. We’ve already made changes to it.”

“I beg your pardon,” Ardyn said. His tone was perfectly polite, but there was something ever so slightly off about it. “What was that, now?”

“We changed the game,” Ignis repeated. “The events in our world didn’t happen as laid out in the game. We changed them.”

Even without his sight, he felt the weight of Ardyn’s stare like a physical thing. The room was silent for several long heartbeats. Then Ardyn said, low and dangerous, “What?”

Ignis tilted his head, trying to stare back at Ardyn as best he could. “How did you learn about the game but not see the changes?”


Did he really not know? Ignis turned to Kate. “Show him.”

“Right.” There was a brief flurry of movement as Kate pulled out her phone and called a video onto the television. “Here’s a side-by-side. Uh, ignore the YouTuber commenting on it.”

From the screen, an unfamiliar female voice began chattering animatedly: —interesting how the mechanics of the fight stayed largely the same, despite the massive story differences. In the original version on the left, you have Ignis coming up with the way to defeat the malboro thanks to his support abilities. In the changed version on the right, you still need to hit the malboro with fire, but all three of the surviving bros come up with the idea together. You see the same thing later on the train to Tenebrae—

“That’s impossible,” Ardyn whispered as the woman kept talking. He sounded genuinely shocked, more so than Ignis had ever heard him. “Nothing can change. Bahamut himself would have interfered.”

“Apparently he can’t,” Ignis said. “While we don’t know by what magic I was able to come here in the first place, it seems that whatever it is, it’s not under the gods’ control.”
We’ve made other changes, too,” Noctis said. “It’s possible.”

“Even the devs can’t control these changes,” Kate added as she stopped the video. “Ignis and I talked to one of them. They have no idea how the game code is changing and can’t do anything to make it stop.”

“Then what is the new ending?” Ardyn asked. His voice was startlingly raw, almost pleading. “How does it end?”

“We don’t know yet,” Ignis said. There was something horribly vulnerable in Ardyn’s voice, and Ignis had the sudden, uneasy feeling that they had finally reached a part of Ardyn that wasn’t lost to madness and hate. If Ignis could just word this correctly, if he could just say what that part of Ardyn needed to hear… “The changed version of the game doesn’t have an ending yet. We have to write it ourselves.”

“Our selves,” Ardyn echoed, sounding almost dazed.

“The changes we’ve already made mean the ending you saw in the game, the destiny Bahamut decreed for you, is no longer fixed,” Ignis pressed. “The game cannot move forward until we act, and we do not have to act in the manner it describes. The gods cannot reach us here. Destiny cannot reach us here.”

“Help us change it,” Noctis said, his voice soft. “We know what we need to do, but we need your help to make it happen.”

“You’ll have your revenge,” Ignis added. “Not on the innocents of our world, but on the very gods who created the fate which has done you such wrong. You can show them you won’t accept your fate. You can defy Bahamut himself.”

Ardyn made a low noise, strange and strangled as though he was trying to laugh and scream and sob all at once. Then he began to chuckle deep in his throat, the sound building up to a wild laugh that rang through the room. “Defying the gods? Now that’s a proposal I’ll consider.”
The Founder King

Chapter Summary

In which Noctis meets his forefathers, and Ignis makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

This is another chapter that benefitted greatly from the details revealed in Ep:Ardyn and Ep:A Prologue.

With Ardyn willing to work with them - or at least promise he wouldn’t actively try to kill them - planning their next move was straightforward. “We get to the Crystal and load it up, then haul it out,” Gladio said. “Simple enough.”

“What about Ravus?” Noctis asked, presumably toward Ardyn. “Did you daemonify him yet?”

Ardyn tsked. “That was supposed to be a surprise!”

“We know everything you were planning,” Gladio said, an edge to his voice.

“I’m sure you do,” Ardyn said, though his tone implied exactly the opposite. The rocking chair creaked rhythmically; Ignis imagined the chancellor lounging with the bored expression he so often wore. “I suppose you’ll ask me to leave the boy alone.”

“Ignis?” Noctis said quietly.

Ignis hesitated, considering the question Noctis was asking. If Ardyn didn’t revive Ravus as a daemon, then they wouldn’t be able to take Ravus to the Crystal to restore him - if such a thing was even possible. On the other hand, if Ardyn didn’t revive Ravus, then Ravus would be able to rest in peace, reunited with his sister and mother in whatever afterlife might await him. Ignis said to Ardyn, “You’ve no need to revive him.”

“But it would be such fun,” Ardyn protested.

Gladio growled, the floor creaking as he shifted his weight, and Ardyn laughed. “Call off your attack dog,” he said to Noctis. “I’ll leave the dead unmolested.”

“Thank you,” Noctis said stiffly.

“Consider it a test,” Ardyn added. “The Draconian claimed humans can do naught but what they are destined to do. You claim destiny can be changed. If you’re right, the hapless high commander will remain dead. If you’re wrong…” He trailed off eloquently.

“It’s you who revives him,” Ignis pointed out. “The only thing it will ‘test’ is whether or not you’re upholding your end of the bargain.”
“Then we won’t have a problem, will we?” Ardyn said lightly.

“Fine,” Noctis said. “That’s settled. We should get going.” He stood up, his movements a little too sharp to be casual; he clearly didn’t like the idea of working with Ardyn, despite agreeing to it. But he wasn’t wrong - they needed to get back to their own reality quickly. The sooner they gained the Crystal’s power and stopped the Starscourge, the fewer people would die.

Ignis stood as well, and heard Kate do the same. He said, “Kate, we cannot thank you enough for all you’ve done for us.”

“Oh, of course,” she answered. “I know coming here isn’t exactly easy, but if you do need to come back, you’re always welcome.”

“We appreciate it,” Ignis said, “though if all goes well, we won’t be back.”

“That’s what we thought last time,” Kate teased gently. “Seriously, though - anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

Ignis smiled. “You’ve already done a great deal. But we’ll remember that.”

“Thank you,” Noctis added. “For letting us stay here, and for saving Prompto.”

“Yeah,” Prompto piped up. Fabric rustled and the couch creaked as he moved; Ignis pictured him rubbing the back of his head as he often did when feeling overwhelmed. “You, uh, you saved my life. So, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Kate said. “I know what you’re walking back into so I can’t say take it easy, but…”

“I know,” Prompto said, and Ignis heard the smile in his voice. “I’ll be careful.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him,” Gladio said. There were soft sounds of movement; Gladio’s jacket creaked and Kate made a tiny sound somewhere between a gasp and a squeak. Ignis fought the urge to press a hand over his eyes - Gladio had probably done something amatory, as much as a way to express his appreciation for Kate’s help as for the enjoyment of flirting.

Of course, Ardyn ruined it by making an exaggerated ooh noise. “Dear me, I wasn’t expecting a show!”

“Can’t handle it, don’t watch it,” Gladio shot back easily. Then, presumably to Kate, “Thanks. Take care, alright?”

“You too,” Kate answered, though she sounded a bit breathless and Ignis couldn’t help but wonder what, exactly, Gladio had done.

But then Kate’s hands caught his and pulled him into a hug. “I’m so proud of you,” she murmured into his ear, too quiet for the others to hear. “I know you can do this.”

“Thank you,” Ignis whispered back. He squeezed her, then let go and stepped away, turning his head toward where he thought Noctis stood. “Noct, whenever you’re ready.”

“Right,” Noctis said.

There were rustling sounds and movement from the couch as Prompto disentangled himself from the blankets and climbed to his feet; Ignis heard his soft oof of pain, but Prompto’s voice was
steady and only a little breathy as he said, “I’m good.”

Ardyn stood as well, the rocking chair giving one final creak and his boots thudding to the floor. “This should be fun,” he said.

“Good luck,” Kate said. Her voice turned toward Noctis and she added, “You have an entire world full of people rooting for you. I know you can do this. You’ll make a great king.”

Noctis gave an embarrassed chuckle. “Thanks.” Then he touched Ignis’s arm, pulling him closer; Ignis took the hint and rested his hand on Noctis’s shoulder. He wasn’t actually sure whether they needed to be touching for the Ring’s magic to work, but better safe than left behind. He felt Noctis’s shoulder rise as he took a deep breath, clearly bracing himself, then the world dropped away.

Ignis had expected them to return directly to Zegnautus Keep, since Noctis as the rightful owner of the Ring had no need to stop in the in-between space to bargain with the Lucii. But to his surprise, he felt the Crystal’s magic engulf him, and a moment later the Lucii appeared before him. As before, he saw them not with his blind eyes, but with the magic that bound him to Noctis - but this time they were distinct enough that he could make out identifying details. Broad antlers like those on the Old Wall statue of the Clever, the wing-like cape of the Rogue, the helmet crest of the Warrior. Nine others flanking them, gazing down dispassionately. And in the center, the six horns of the Mystic, the Founder King of Lucis.

The reason for the additional clarity became clear a moment later, when Ignis spotted the slender, hazy outline of Noctis beside him. On Noct’s other side were two vague blue blurs, one large and one small: Gladio and Prompto. It was the most Ignis had seen in months, even if it wasn’t exactly sight, and his chest ached again with the loss of his vision. Even this small glimpse was a clarity he hadn’t had in far too long. He thought he’d accepted his disability, but seeing his friends beside him and the towering figures above him, knowing that the moment they left this realm he’d be once again relegated to endless darkness, hurt in ways he couldn’t describe.

Ignis ruthlessly shoved the pain down. He didn’t have time to mourn again; he needed to focus. He didn’t know why they were here - had Noctis done it on purpose, or had the Lucii caused it? The answer came a moment later when the Founder King’s deep voice said, “Chosen. You are insolent, to come before us after making a bargain with Adagium.”

“We need to talk,” Noctis said. His voice was strong, bold, but through the magic that bound them Ignis sensed his fear and uncertainty. Hopefully the Lucii couldn’t likewise feel it.

“You need to fulfill your destiny,” the Founder King countered. “Our Star is dying, while you delay your destiny and betray your blood.”

“He’s as much my blood as any of you are,” Noctis said, then added pointedly, “And he’s your brother.”

The Founder King visibly rocked back at that. There was a loaded pause, then he sighed. Magic rippled around them, and the towering form of the Mystic vanished, replaced by a smaller figure who stood before them. The hazy magic vision wasn’t enough for Ignis to see more than his outline, but he suspected the Founder King had taken on the form he’d worn in life. When he spoke, his voice was that of a human, soft and almost sad. “What did he tell you?”

“Does it matter?” Noctis asked.

The Founder King shook his head. “You must understand. My brother died long before the Crystal
made its choice. The monster which wears his skin is mad. No matter what he tells you, know that by the time I struck him down, he was naught but a daemon. I do not regret what I did, only that it was necessary.”

“It wasn’t necessary,” Noctis said. “Your brother is a pawn in some stupid game the gods are playing with our lives, just like you are. Just like I am.”

“That ‘game’ is the only way to rid our Star of the Scourge which plagues it,” the Founder King replied testily. “If being a pawn to the gods’ will is what it takes to save our people, then I will happily play.”

“It’s not the only way,” Noctis said. “It can’t be.”

“We understand your reluctance, Chosen One,” the Rogue Queen spoke up, her voice startlingly loud after the quiet of the Founder King’s human form. “Your destiny is the darkest of any save the Usurper himself. But it is necessary.”

“I don’t believe it is,” Noctis said. “That’s why I made a bargain with Ardyn. I think we can change it.”

“A bargain with Adagium is as no bargain at all,” one of the other kings said. His voice wasn’t familiar, but from the wide decoration atop his helm, Ignis thought it might be the Fierce. “Daemons cannot be trusted. A daemon with the cunning of a man even less so.”

“I know,” Noctis said. “Which is why I came here. I want to ask for your help.”

“The aid we may offer is limited, young king,” the Clever said. By his voice, Ignis realized this was the one who’d once called Ignis clever, and he felt a quiet surge of pride to have earned such a compliment. The Clever continued, “Our glaives will help you destroy the Usurper, and you may use the power of the Crystal as we did before you, but there our influence ends.”

“Not quite,” Noctis said. “You can do… this, this moving between worlds thing. You can bring people here.”

“Only when directed by one who wields the power of the Ring,” the Clever said. “What would you have us do?”

“We need to save the Oracle,” Noctis said.

Startled, Ignis spun to look at him - or at least at the hazy blue outline that was all he could see - dimly aware of the blurs that were Gladio and Prompto likewise reacting with surprise. Ignoring them all, Noctis continued, “I know I can’t trust Ardyn. Even if he agreed to work with us for now, he always has something up his sleeve. So I need something up mine.”

“The Oracle,” the Rogue said skeptically. “Her life is forfeit to the covenants she made for you.”

“No,” Noctis said fiercely. “Her body was never found. And if the gods really wanted to save our Star, they’d never have killed her in the first place. Without the Oracle’s power, the Starscourge can spread freely. Ardyn knew it - it’s why he tried to kill her in Altissia. If we save her, she can help us defeat him. And he won’t be expecting it, so he can’t plan for it.”

Ignis sighed inwardly, resisting the urge to speak up. He’d said his piece to Noctis already about saving Lunafreya, and he would not disagree with his prince - his king - in front of the Lucii. But he couldn’t help but fear that the inevitable disapproval of the Kings of Yore would be even more of a blow to Noctis than Ignis and Gladio’s had been.
So it surprised him when the Clever said thoughtfully, “It’s a reasonable argument. But there remains the problem that the Oracle was lost to the waters of the Tidemother.”

“That’s exactly it,” Noctis said, excitement in his voice now that he hadn’t been wholly shot down. “We - the line of Lucis, I mean - we have time magic of some kind, right? Ardyn does, and supposedly the Messengers do, too. I need you to send me back in time to Altissia just long enough to grab Luna before she dies. Then we can take her back to Kate for healing, and when she’s ready, she’ll be able to help us deal with Ardyn and the Starscourge both.”

The Founder King made a considering noise. “You’ve put a great deal of thought into this, Chosen. Are you so desperate to escape your destiny?”

“I want to save our people and our Star,” Noctis said fiercely. “I just don’t think the gods’ plan is the right way to do it. Too many people will die before it succeeds.”

“The gods care naught for the mortals whose lives are forfeit to their scheme,” a woman’s voice said, and after a moment Ignis spotted the Just Queen off to one side of the row of Lucii. “Grandfather, if the Chosen’s plan will truly save the lives of those under the care of our line, we should do all we can to support him.”

“It is a noble goal,” the Founder King admitted. “But his plan is flawed. Though this realm within the Ring exists outside of space and time, we cannot send a mortal through time.”

“But Ardyn—” Noctis protested.

“Adagium was cursed with powers unlike any of our line before or after him,” the Founder King interrupted. “These powers are part of the role he plays in the gods’ plan, and are for none save him.”

Noctis’s hazy outline seemed to sag. “So… it’s impossible?” he whispered. “There’s nothing we can do?”

Silence fell over them all, heavy with Noctis’s despair, the Lucii’s unyielding forms like a wall surrounding them. Then the Clever said, “Perhaps there is a way.”

“What way?” Noctis demanded.

“We cannot send a mortal through time,” the Clever said. “But there is one man who was in the right place at the right time, who wielded the Ring’s power despite not being of the line of Lucis.”

As one, the Lucii all turned to look at Ignis. A beat later, so did Noctis, and Gladio and Prompto behind him. Ignis stared back as he realized what the Clever meant. “I was there,” he whispered. “I’ve no memory of what happened that day in Altissia, but I came away with the Ring. Lunafreya had it, so I must have been near her with it at some point.”

The Founder King was nodding thoughtfully. “It may work,” he said. “But there would be a price for such an attempt.”

“Of course there’s a price,” Noctis muttered bitterly.

“The powers of the Ring and the Crystal were granted to our line in service to our Star,” the Founder King chided. “The price is a reminder that such power is to be used wisely, and only in that service.”

“What is the price?” Ignis asked. He had the horrible feeling he knew what it was, but he wanted to
The Founder King turned to him, and seemed almost to meet his gaze. “To use the Ring to save the Oracle will cost your sight.”

Ignis's breath caught. He’d been right - but more than that, it meant…

“Wait,” Noctis whispered. “You mean, this is how… this is what…” He spun back to Ignis. “Then…”

Ignis was frozen, his eyes throbbing, his chest tight. If this was how he’d lost his sight, then if he didn't do it, if he said no right now, then would he - would his eyes—

A stab of guilt shot through him. How could he even think that? How could he place his own ability to see above the life of the Oracle, and the lives of all those she could save?

“No!” Noctis yelled. He must have realized it too. “That's not fair!”

Ignis held up a hand to silence him. “I’ll do it,” he whispered, before he could lose his nerve. The words hurt and he swayed, nauseous.

“No, Ignis!” Noctis protested. “You can't—” He turned back to the Lucii. “Don't ask this,” he begged. “It's my idea, I should pay the price.”

“It is your idea, but your companion who will wield the power,” the Founder King said.

“But—”

Ignis shook his head. “My sight is a small price to pay for the Oracle's life.” The words were like razors in his throat, but he forced them out anyway. “I’m already blind. Let it be worth something.” His voice caught, came out small on the last word. “Please.”

Noctis subsided, though Ignis could sense his frustration and anger through the magic that bound them. The Founder King said, “You agree to try?”

Ignis nodded. “To save the Oracle, I will gladly pay any price.”

It was a lie, a bitter one. A selfish part of him hated it, hated the Lucii for their price, Ardyn for his attack on Lunafreya, the gods for orchestrating it all. But if this was what it took… if this was what he had to do to save Noctis…. for that, he would pay any price.

“It is done,” the Founder King intoned.

“Ignis…” Noct whispered, but Ignis barely heard him. A heavy weight settled in the pit of his stomach, choking him, making breathing all but impossible. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d still clung to the hope that Kate had been wrong, that someday his eyes would heal and he’d be able to see again. But a price paid to the Lucii would not heal, ever. The knowledge that it had been - would be - his own choice to sacrifice his sight was cold comfort against the empty blackness which awaited him the moment he left this realm.

“So what now?” Gladio spoke up. His voice was rough, grim, a sure sign he was as upset about this as Noctis and Ignis. “He agreed to it. What do we have to do to make it work?”

“While we Lucii are not bound to the flow of time here in this realm, the four of you are,” the Founder King said. “Once you leave, we will provide the means and the knowledge at the
appropriate time and place. Then it will be up to he who wields the Ring’s power to succeed.”

“Okay,” Noctis said tightly. “How will we know it succeeded?”

The Founder King actually seemed to hesitate. “I cannot say,” he admitted. “This is like nothing we have done before.”

Noctis swore under his breath. Ignis couldn't blame him - the Lucii weren't even promising success in exchange for his sacrifice. Only a chance. But it was a chance they hadn't had before, and Ignis had to believe he could do it. Or had done it, however this outside-time bargain worked. Making his voice steady, he said, “It will succeed. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Then you must leave this realm,” the Clever said. “We cannot do our part while your presence binds us.”


“Remember your purpose, Chosen,” the Founder King warned. “We have agreed to aid you in this attempt to save the lives of our people, but in the end, there is one final price to pay.”

“I know,” Noctis said, flat and grim. He raised his hand, the Ring glowing bright on his finger - then hesitated, and turned toward the far end of the row of Lucii, where one spectral figure stood slightly apart from the rest. Though Ignis could only see its silhouette, hazy and ethereal like the others, he knew immediately who it was.

“Dad…” Noctis whispered, pain in his voice; Ignis remembered how broken he’d sounded when he’d asked if his father knew about his fate. Then Noctis turned his head away and clenched his fist. The Ring’s magic flared, the glowing forms of the Lucii faded to darkness, and Ignis's next breath brought with it the oil-and-metal scent of Zegnautus Keep.
Zegnautus Keep. Ignis staggered, his legs wanting to give out as the enormity of what he’d just done sank into his bones. His sight was gone. His sight was gone, forever, with no chance of recovery. The darkness surrounding him seemed doubly heavy after those few minutes in the Lucii’s realm, where he’d been able to see again. Grief choked him, as intense as it had that first day in the hospital, and for a moment it was all he could do to breathe, to stay upright.


“I’m fine,” Ignis said. He breathed in, breathed out. Gladio had rested one big hand on his back at some point, and he could hear Prompto’s rough breaths beside him. They couldn’t afford to talk about this here, not with Ardyn presumably nearby and watching. The whole point of the time trick was so Ardyn wouldn’t know they’d saved Lunafreya until it became necessary.

Ignis forced himself to stand upright. “I’m fine,” he repeated.

“But you—” Noctis started.

“No,” Ignis interrupted. Making his voice steady, he said, “Remember: A king pushes onward always, accepting the consequences—”

“—and never looking back,” Noctis finished. Pain in his voice, but acceptance, too. His hair brushed Ignis’s chin as he nodded.

Gladio’s hand moved from Ignis’s back to his shoulder and squeezed, then the hand dropped away and his boots clanked against the keep’s metal floor as he stepped back. “Right,” Gladio said. “Let’s focus on getting the Crystal and getting outta here.”

“Agreed.” Ignis made himself let go of Noctis and step away. “We’ve made a deal with Ardyn, but we should still expect a fight. Even if he’s not directing the daemons toward us, there’s still a horde of them in here.”

“Looks like my powers are sealed again,” Noctis said, sounding frustrated. “Kate said something about unlocking them. Do you know where we do that?”

“The Emperor’s throne room,” Ignis said. If they were going there, he wanted to give Prompto a warning, so he added. “Getting inside will be something of an issue, as it’s locked.”

“My keycard’s pretty good at opening doors,” Noctis said. “And if that doesn’t work, we can always break it down or something. Do you know how to get there?”
Ignis shook his head. “Only that in the game, it wasn’t far from here. ...Or at least, wasn’t far from the holding cells. Is that where we are now?”

“Not quite,” Noctis said. “We’re in one of the dorm rooms. I think it’s the one near the cells, at least. So the throne room shouldn’t be too far.”

“The game’s maps ain’t accurate to real life,” Gladio pointed out. “Kate and I checked.”

“Accurate or not, we’re not going to find it if we don’t get moving,” Noctis said. His boots clanked, then stopped. “Hey, Prompto, if you need to rest—”

“I’m fine,” Prompto said, too quickly to be believable. “It’s just…” He broke off with an audible shudder. “Being back here…”

“We’re on our way out,” Noctis said. “C’mon.”

Prompto made a soft noise of agreement. Ignis couldn’t tell if he’d picked up the warning or not, but there wasn’t much else Ignis could do without making Noctis and Gladio suspicious. So he pulled his cane out of his jacket and unfolded it, following his friends’ footsteps out of the dorm into the halls of the keep.

Ignis had, privately, rather hoped their bargain with Ardyn would mean the chancellor would cease his intercom-assisted taunting. But they’d barely set foot beyond the dorm before the loudspeaker crackled to life and Ardyn’s tinny voice said, “Ah, there you are! I’d begun to wonder if you’d gotten lost.”

“How about you get lost,” Noctis muttered.

Ardyn tsk’d. “Come now, Noct, I’m only trying to help.”

Noctis didn’t answer, his footsteps tapping a steady rhythm against the metal flooring. Thankfully, Ardyn didn’t say anything else, though the back of Ignis’s neck prickled with the awareness of Ardyn’s watchful eye.

They walked for what seemed like a short eternity through narrow halls and sealed doors, senses on high alert for any sign of a daemonic ambush. It was disconcerting to be back here so suddenly after having spent three days in Kate’s reality. When they’d arrived here the first time, they’d already been tense and afraid from the attack on the train that had forced them to flee in the Regalia. The interlude of peace and safety left Ignis feeling wrong-footed, having to struggle to stay appropriately wary.

A lockpad beeped and a door hissed open, a blast of chill air ruffling Ignis’s hair. He paused, head tilted, ears straining. A high-pitched whine sang somewhere close by, tugging at his memory.

“Noct, do you hear that?”

“Noct, ask what?” Noctis asked.

“I’ve heard this sound before,” Ignis answered. The words gave him an eerie sense of deja vu; he was repeating lines from the game. “On the train, just before your weapons failed you. It’s nearby, and likely the key to restoring your powers.”

There was a pause, Noct’s footsteps moving back and forth uncertainly. “That thing?” Noctis asked, then, apparently realizing Ignis couldn’t see where he was indicating, “Up there. Big red glowing thing.”
“Looks suspicious, all right,” Gladio said. “Let’s go.”

Ignis followed, only half his attention on Noctis. The rest was on Prompto, whose breathing had grown even less steady as they approached the source of the high-pitched whine. Ignis found his shoulder and squeezed it; felt Prompto straighten slightly before pulling away.

Up ahead, Noctis said, “Door’s locked, just like Ignis said. And my keycard isn’t working.”

Gladio growled. “There’s gotta be some way through.”

There was a pause, long enough that Ignis almost thought Prompto wasn’t going to speak up at all, was going to choose to keep his secret. Then, “There’s a way,” Prompto said.

His voice was hoarse and tense; a moment later there was the beep of a lockpad and the hiss of a door opening. He continued, softly, “So, MTs… They’ve got those codeprints… just like I do.”

“Do they?” Noctis asked. He didn’t quite manage to make the words sound casual; wary curiosity tinged his voice. “Never looked.”

“Yeah,” Prompto whispered. He was clearly trying to sound strong, but his voice wavered, on the verge of tears. “So, as it turns out… I’m one of them. Not exactly something I could tell people growing up in Lucis. Still… You guys are like… the only friends I’ve ever known. I just hope that things can stay the way they were.”

Ignis opened his mouth to speak, to reassure him as he had done in Kate’s house, but Noctis beat him to it. “Whatever. Who cares where you were born?”

Prompto’s breath hitched. Ignoring the feeling of déjà vu that hit him again with the words, Ignis said lightly, “I don’t see you turning against us. Not now, or ever.”

“Thanks, guys,” Prompto whispered. “Still… I can’t change where I came from. What I am.”

“Since when does where you come from matter to you?” Noctis teased. “You never once treated me as a prince.”

“He’s got you there,” Gladio agreed.

“Never so much as a ‘Highness,’” Ignis added.

“We’re done here,” Noctis said firmly. His boots clanked on the floor as he stepped toward the throne room. “C’mon, crown citizen.”

“You’re one of us, right?” Gladio said, his voice turned toward Prompto even as he caught Ignis by the elbow, nudging him along after Noctis.

Prompto didn’t answer; didn’t, from the lack of footsteps, follow them into the throne room, either. Ignis pulled free of Gladio’s hand and prodded gently, “Unless you’d rather not be.”

That seemed to do the trick. Prompto made a soft noise in his throat, like he’d started to say something but swallowed it down, and his steps picked up beside Ignis’s. His hand touched Ignis’s elbow, ostensibly to steer him around the doorway into the room, but he murmured, “Thanks, Iggy. You were right.”

Ignis smiled at him. “When am I not?”

Prompto let out a startled laugh. Up ahead, Gladio said, “Something in here probably controls the
There was a grunt of effort, then a metallic screeching and cracking noise, and Gladio swore in surprise. Electronics crackled and popped overhead, then the low background whine faded and died. Noctis must have jammed his sword into the wall of machinery controlling the Wallbreaker Wave device. “That ought to do it,” Noct said, sounding satisfied.

“So…did it work?” Prompto asked.

“With the device down and out, Noct’s power should be up and running,” Ignis said.

“Go on, try it,” Gladio urged.

“Alright,” Noct said. There was the faintest hesitation in his voice - he was probably worried they were wrong, that his magic remained sealed. “Moment of truth.”

There was the crystalline sound of a weapon appearing, and Prompto whooped with delight. Gladio, sounding relieved, said, “We’re back, baby.”

“Let’s roll,” Noctis said. “Time to get the Crystal and get gone.”

His leather jacket snapped as he turned toward the exit. They followed him out, Gladio’s heavier steps hurrying to get out in front of him. Ignis stayed on high alert as they left the throne room; he vaguely remembered a battle happening here in the game. But no enemies appeared. He’d just started to relax when Ardyn’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker: “Well done, Noct. You’ve smashed your way through yet another obstacle.”

“Not gonna throw more in our path, are you?” Noctis grumbled.

“I’ll admit, the thought is tempting,” Ardyn said cheerfully. “A king must be able to solve problems with more than a sword.”

“Thought I demonstrated that plenty already,” Noctis shot back.

“Oh, I’m sure you have,” Ardyn said, and with that, the loudspeaker clicked off.

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?” Noctis muttered.

“Ignore him,” Gladio said. “He’s just trying to get under your skin.”

Noctis grunted; he didn’t sound any more convinced about that than Ignis felt. For a moment, Ignis let himself dwell on the conversation with the Lucii, the plan to rescue Lunafreya. If Ardyn was truly up to something, they would need the Oracle on their side. But had the plan worked? If Ignis had taken Lunafreya with him to Kate’s reality, what had happened to her? Why hadn’t she been found with him?

Doubt knotted his stomach. Had something gone wrong? Surely if Lunafreya had gone to Kate’s reality with him, she’d have been taken to the same hospital, and treated by Kate or one of her colleagues. But Kate had never said anything about Lunafreya, had never given any indication that the Oracle might have survived. After everything he’d gone through, after paying for the chance with his sight… had he failed?

Distracted by the fears running through his mind, Ignis only half paid attention as he followed the others along catwalks and through hallways back toward the central elevator. A few daemons and rogue MTs tried to attack them, but were swiftly dispatched by Noctis and Gladio’s swords, often
before Ignis even realized they were under attack. Cursing to himself, Ignis struggled to focus. He couldn’t afford to falter now. Whatever had happened in Altissia was done. He’d succeeded, or he hadn’t, and either way he had to live with the consequences.

More halls, more rooms. More locked doors giving way to either Noctis’s stolen keycard, or Prompto’s barcode. In one room they were jumped by the daemonified Iedolas Aldercapt, his death-rattle pleas for the Ring more pitiful than frightening, though the deadly power behind his attacks made up for it. “Guess Ardyn wasn’t behind this one,” Noctis said as they fought.

“I’ll admit to pushing him over the edge,” Ardyn spoke up over the intercom. “But the good emperor’s downfall began as a result of his own greed.”

“Think he still would’ve wanted the Ring if he knew the price of its power?” Noctis asked bitterly.

Ardyn didn’t answer, but then, Ignis suspected the question was mostly rhetorical. Despite the banter, the battle was a difficult one. The small size of the room hampered Gladio and Noctis’s ability to swing their swords, and the metal surfaces echoed strangely, making it nearly impossible for Ignis to track Aldercapt’s location. He took several blows which could have been lethal if not for the protection of his Crownsguard uniform, and finally fell back into a corner to get out of his friends’ way, cursing inwardly at his own helplessness.

Finally the fight was over, Aldercapt’s ghastly proclamations of greatness fading to nothing. Gladio caught Ignis by the shoulders and pulled him upright. “You good?”

“Fine,” Ignis lied. The ribs he’d cracked in Altissia had begun to ache again, and he didn’t need his sight to know he was developing spectacular bruises along his arms and shoulders. But he could live with it. “We should go.”

“Prompto?” Noctis asked, somewhere across the room. “Hey—!” Soft sounds of impact and a pained gasp told Ignis that Noctis had caught Prompto on the way to the ground. Worry in his voice, Noctis said, “There’s a dorm up ahead a little ways. We can rest there for a bit.”

“I’m okay,” Prompto said, but his voice was strained and nobody dignified the lie with an answer.

Gladio kept a hand on Ignis’s back as they followed Noctis and Prompto out of the room, down another hall, and finally into the dorm Noctis had spotted. As Noctis got Prompto settled on one of the bunks, Gladio drew Ignis over to the other side of the room. “So,” he said in a low voice. “You knew about Prompto.”

Ignis nodded. “Kate confirmed it during my first stay in her reality, though I’d noticed the barcode some time before.”

“Me, too,” Gladio admitted. “Meant to ask you about it but didn’t get a chance before things went all to hell.”

“All things considered, the truth ended up being far better than I’d feared when I first made the connection.”

Gladio chuckled. “C’mon, you know the kid can’t lie to save his life. No way he could’ve been any kind of double-agent.”

Ignis couldn’t help but smile. “Are they all right?”

The angle of Gladio’s voice shifted slightly as he looked back at Noctis and Prompto. “They’re fine.” A hesitation, then, quietly, “What about you?”
He wasn’t asking about the battle with Aldercapt. Ignis turned away, fighting to keep his voice steady. “I knew what I was doing.”

“You got guts,” Gladio said.

“I only hope it was worth it.”

Gladio gripped his shoulder, his hand steady and solid, and Ignis allowed himself to lean into the touch. It would be worth it. He had to have succeeded. Lunafreya was alive, safe somewhere, and when they needed her, she would be there. He had to believe it.

Some time later, Prompto spoke up from the far side of the room: “I’m okay now. Let’s keep going. I want to get out of here.” Though his voice was still breathy, it wasn’t much worse than it had been before the fight with Aldercapt. It was as good as he was likely to get until they escaped Zegnautus and he had a real chance to rest and let his damaged lung heal.

Ignis nodded, pulling away from Gladio. “The sooner the better.”

“Right,” Noctis agreed. He took point again as they filed out of the dorm, his steps slow and his voice turning as he looked around. “Should be an elevator around here somewhere—There. We can get to the hangar from here, and from there to the central elevator.”

“It won’t be long now,” Ardyn chirped from the intercom. Noctis swore in surprise, then snarled under his breath. Ardyn tutted. “Such language from the would-be king! Your father should have taught you better.”

“I’ll teach you something,” Noctis muttered. The elevator chimed and the doors hissed open; Gladio steered Ignis inside with a touch on the elbow. Either Ardyn had nothing further to say, or the elevators weren’t connected to the intercom system; the ride to the hangar was mercifully free of commentary.

Finally the elevator stopped and the doors opened. Gladio whistled softly as they emerged, the sound falling away into a vast open area. “One helluva hangar.”

“Look at all this space,” Prompto added. His bootsteps turned a circle on the metal floor as he looked around.

Noctis’s jacket rustled; he was probably pointing, his steps guiding Ignis up a short metal staircase as he moved. “So, the central elevator’s through here.”

“And out of the loading bay,” Gladio said. He drew breath to say more, but a heavy clanking from somewhere across the big space cut him off. They all stopped, then Gladio cursed sharply, and Noctis sucked in a breath through his teeth.

“What is it?” Ignis demanded, worried.

At the same time, Prompto whispered in horror, “Is that…”

“Oh no,” Noctis said softly.

“What?” Ignis repeated.

Across the room, the heavy clanking noise sounded again, and a hoarse, ragged voice hissed, “Kill me… end it…”

Across the room, the heavy clanking noise sounded again, and a hoarse, ragged voice hissed, “Kill me… end it…”
Ignis’s heart stopped. He knew that voice, those words, from the game.

That was the daemonified Ravus Nox Fleuret.

Chapter End Notes

It's still really, really awkward integrating whole scenes, or even just lines of dialogue, from the game into this fic. The things Prompto says during the revelation about his background never quite made sense even in the base, original version of the game; they make even less sense once you add in Ep:Prompto and some of the additional lore. It's pretty obviously a holdover from Versus XIII when his character was actually a spy and traitor as an adult, rather than how he is in XV proper, an orphan who had no knowledge of his background until Ep:P. But there's a reason for so much of the dialogue coming straight from the canon game...
Just Like the Game

Chapter Summary

In which Prompto has an idea, and Noctis refuses to cooperate.

Chapter Notes

RAVUS AETERNA is one of my favorite songs off the soundtrack, but holy hell is he a difficult fight.


“Or... what’s left of him,” Prompto said. He sounded appalled, and Ignis spared a moment to wonder just what Ravus looked like.

“Damn it,” Noctis spat, and summoned a weapon, the crystalline chime barely audible over Ravus’s clanking steps. “Ardyn, you traitor!”

“Oh, I didn’t do this,” Ardyn said from the intercom. His voice had that dangerous edge to it as he added, “It looks like our little test has failed, Noct.”

Ignis called his own weapon to hand, backing away from his friends as they spread out to face Ravus, their bootsteps loud against the metal hangar flooring. “It’s not over yet,” he called up to Ardyn.

“No?” The dangerous edge turned mocking. “Did our hapless High Commander hate the line of Lucis so much that he became a daemon of his own volition?”

A grunt from Ravus’s direction was the only warning Ignis had; he leapt backward and felt air rush past, uncomfortably close. Metal clanged and Gladio grunted, then Prompto filled the air with gunfire. Ignis said to Ardyn, “Remember what we discussed. It’s only over if you force Noctis into the Crystal.”

“Hmm. We’ll see about that,” Ardyn said, then the intercom turned off with an audible click.

Ravus made a sound more like a an iron giant’s roar than anything a human should have been able to produce. Noctis shouted a warning; Ignis tried to dodge, smacked into some kind of metal wall, and let himself fall flat to the ground as a blast of blistering heat washed over him. For a moment he couldn’t breathe, the air itself on fire; then it was over and he scrambled to his feet again, gasping.

He remembered this fight being brutal from the game, but there was a huge difference between hearing it on a screen and playing it out in real life - a difference that brought pain and terror as he struggled to dodge attacks that seemed to cover the entirety of the hangar platform and hit with Titan’s own strength. The few blows Ignis managed to land in return were glancing things that didn’t faze Ravus in the slightest. The others didn’t seem much better off, either. Ignis tried to track
their grunts and cries of pain, but the hangar was too large, the echoes too confusing, and he could only hope none of them took a serious blow.

“Noct!” Gladio yelled. “What’s the plan? You still wanna kite him?”

“Dunno!” Noctis shouted back, then gave a shout of effort, followed by a clang of blades and a gasp of pain. Ignis took half a step toward him, but had to dive away from the whistling sound of Ravus’s weapon. Thankfully, Noctis continued a moment later, “If we can, but I don’t think he’s going to cooperate!”

“What’s the path from here to the Crystal?” Ignis called.

A pause, broken by the angry growl of Prompto’s buzzsaw and the crack-hiss of Noctis warping. Noct’s voice came from somewhere high overhead when he called back, “Cargo elevator down to a bunch of catwalks, then the central elevator.”

“We can’t get Ravus through the elevators,” Gladio said over the sound of another warp. “He’ll kill us.”

“Gladio’s right,” Ignis said toward where he thought Noctis was. “I wish we could save him, but not if it would put you in further danger.”

Noctis swore, some ninety degrees to the right of where he’d expected. Ignis paused, leaning on his lance, trying to catch his breath and mentally re-map the space. He’d been doing his best to stay away from both the confusing, cramped nooks he thought might be cargo containers lining the edges of the loading bay; and the whistling, echoing openness that indicated the edge of the bay’s platform, but he’d lost track of where he was in the chaos of battle. Dangerous - he couldn’t afford to either get trapped in the maze of containers, or lose his footing at the edge of the platform. Ravus roared and the stench of daemon miasma hit Ignis half a second before Ravus’s blow did. By luck alone was the shaft of his lance between him and the sword; without it he would have been cleaved in two. As it was, he went flying, the world spinning sickeningly before something thin and hard slammed into his back. He grabbed it and clung, his lance vanishing into the armory. Cold air whistled upward past his face - he was against the railing surrounding the edge of the loading bay, above the massive open shaft of the keep’s central chimney. Someone shouted a warning and he called his lance back to hand on reflex, barely in time to catch another swing of Ravus’s sword. The blow crushed him against the railing, the metal bar digging painfully into his spine, and he barely managed to turn the force of the sword to the side. Metal screeched as Ravus’s sword cut through the railing, and Ignis lunged in the opposite direction - only for a clawed hand to sink into his shoulder and yank him back.

“Ignis!” Noctis screamed from somewhere across the hangar.

Ravus lifted Ignis up, knife-sharp claws digging into his shoulder straight through his Crownsguard jacket. The wind of the open shaft howled past him; Ignis struggled to twist in Ravus’s grip, to get a hand on the railing or Ravus’s arm or anything as Ravus swung him out over the railing—

“Ignery!”

Prompto’s voice was much closer, followed by a grunt of effort. Ravus staggered, making a confused noise, and his grip on Ignis loosened. Ignis twisted, flailing, his foot kicking the broken rail but unable to find purchase. He plunged, suddenly - then hands grabbed him by the arm,
Prompto cried out in pain as he took Ignis's weight, and Ravus's heavy bulk tumbled past, his howl of rage fading into the depths below.

Ignis scrabbled with his free hand, finding the broken rail and clinging even as Prompto tried to haul him up. Booted footsteps and the crack of a warp indicated Gladio's and Noctis's arrival; their hands joined Prompto's to pull Ignis back up and over the edge. The four of them fell in a heap, gasping; Ignis clung to them, his heart racing, his breath dangerously close to hyperventilation. Tears of terror and frustration stung his eyes and he allowed himself a moment to rest his head against Noctis's shoulder. If he could only see, none of that would have happened—

But it was a futile wish. He'd sacrificed his sight for a chance to save Lunafreya. There was nothing to do now but live with it.

“Prompto,” Noct panted. “What the hell?”

“What?” Prompto gasped back. His voice was pitched high and breathless with pain; Ignis realized his ribs must have slammed against the railing when he'd caught him. He got a hand on Prompto’s chest, checking for the thick padding of the bandages over the stab wound there; felt the warm seep of fresh blood. Prompto hissed with pain at the touch, and probably would have flinched away except the four of them were too exhausted and tangled together to move.

“You shoved him over the edge,” Gladio said, and gave a disbelieving laugh. “Good thinking. Means for sure we won’t be able to help him, though.”

“Not necessarily,” Prompto said between gasps. “Just like a video game, right? If you don’t see the bad guy die, he’s not dead, and he’ll show up later at the worst possible time.”

“Not sure that’s an improvement,” Noctis said dryly.

“Actually,” Ignis said, “it’s quite brilliant. The most dangerous time for us will be when we reach the Crystal and find out whether it will make an attempt on its own to pull you in, Noct. If Ravus shows up then…”

“Huh,” Noct said. “That… makes a weird kind of sense. Prompto, you’re a genius!”

“You know it,” Prompto said, and despite the pain in his voice almost managed his usual cockiness.

“While I’m touched by this little display of brotherhood,” Ardyn broke in over the intercom, “I feel I ought to point out that the fight’s not over yet. And these aren’t under my control, either.”

Gladio moved, then swore as he spotted whatever Ardyn was talking about. Ignis focused, listening; heard the wet bubbling and smelled the rotten stench of daemon miasma. More daemons, very close by. He struggled to his feet, the movement sending throbbing waves of pain through his shoulder where Ravus’s claws had sunk in. He could feel the slow ooze of blood under his jacket, but they didn’t have time for medical attention - not with a growing horde of daemons materializing in front of them.

“What do we do?” Prompto asked over the crack of his gun, his voice pitched toward Noctis.

Noctis didn’t answer right away; Ignis wished he could see his prince’s face so he could know whether Noctis was hesitating out of fear or a desire to provide a measured response. Or, given the clang of steel against claws, a need to defend himself. Then, his voice level, Noctis said, “We make a run for the Crystal. Together.”
“You sure about that?” Gladio asked. From the sound of his voice he was half-turned, guarding their flank. “We try to run, they’re gonna swarm us. I know it ain’t what we planned, but maybe you should go ahead anyway—”

“No,” Noctis said firmly, then had to pause to attack something that had gotten too close. “I’m not leaving you guys behind. Not again.”

Ignis sensed something nearby; sidestepped and felt the heat of a Reaper’s blade bite into his calf instead of his ribs. Something else crashed into his back and he staggered, only for Prompto to grab him and yank him in the other direction an instant before yet another daemon clanged off the metal floor. “Noct,” Ignis said uneasily, trying to catch his balance. “Gladio may be right—”

“We go together or we don’t go at all,” Noctis snapped. “What do you want it to be - we die here, or we make a run for it?”

Gladio growled under his breath and Ignis sighed, though a larger part of him was relieved. Precarious as an attempt to flee together would be, the thought that they might be trapped in the game’s path after all was far more terrifying. “Lead the way,” he said.

A hand - probably Prompto’s, judging from the too-close thunder of his gun - wrapped around Ignis’s wrist and tugged. He let himself be steered along the platform and into a cramped space which rumbled briefly beneath their feet: the cargo elevator Noctis had mentioned earlier. Daemons crashed against its walls, rattling the metal, and when the door hissed open at the bottom, Gladio charged out with a roar and the whistle of his greatsword cutting through daemonic flesh.

Ignis tried to follow, only to bump into Prompto’s back as Prompto stopped abruptly, cursing. His gun cracked, deafening in the confines of the elevator, then he lunged forward, tugging Ignis along with his free hand. “They’re everywhere!” he panted.

The rattle of claws on metal warned Ignis of something crawling over the railing at his elbow; he summoned his daggers and stabbed until it fell away. Over its dying shrieks, a woman’s voice, disconcertingly calm, said, “Hangar gate closing. Please stand clear.”

With a sinking heart, Ignis remembered this from the game: the massive door that had locked Noctis away from the rest of them, the race against time and an ever-growing horde of daemons to get through the door before it closed. Whether or not Ardyn was responsible for triggering it, if they didn’t make it through they’d never reach the Crystal. Noctis apparently realized this too - from somewhere up ahead, he screamed, “Run!”

They ran.

Two weeks ago, Ignis had been afraid to even walk along a city sidewalk unaided. Now he raced full speed along the catwalks on his friends’ heels, guided by nothing but the slap of their boots and their cries of battle. Wind whistled past from the deadly drop on the other side of the thin railings, but Ignis barely noticed, daggers in hand as he sliced through a press of daemons. He hit a corner and nearly went over the rail before catching himself, following his friends’ pounding footsteps around the bend of the platform.

But then they came to a skidding halt. The stench of daemon miasma was thick here, and the chittering and howls spread out before them told Ignis they faced a veritable wall of daemons.

“There’s too many of them!” Prompto yelped. “We can’t get through!”

“You could still get to the Crystal… if you went on your own,” Ardyn offered over the intercom.
“Your friends would have to stay behind.”

“No!” Noctis screamed. “We’re going together!”

“If you wish to obtain the Crystal’s power,” Ardyn said, “you must be prepared to lose all else.”

“Shut up!” Noctis screamed. His sword whistled and a daemon screeched. “Prompto, you’re up!”

Prompto’s gun cracked, the lighter sound of his sunburst bullets, and the daemons fell away with a chorus of tormented squeals. Noctis shoved Ignis forward. “Guys, come on, run!”

Ignis went, staying close to Noctis as they pounded along the catwalk. Noct grabbed him just before he collided with another corner, yanking him in yet another direction even as the heat of a Reaper’s blade whistled past his ear. Ignis flung a dagger and heard the creature’s death rattle, called his dagger back to hand just in time to plunge it into the imp clawing at his leg.

Something landed just ahead of them with a bone-rattling thump, and Gladio swore. “We ain’t gonna make it!” he yelled.

Closer by, Prompto gasped out a choking breath. Noctis cried, “Prompto!”

“Go!” Prompto panted. His next breath came with the telltale dry rattle of a collapsed lung, and when Ignis’s hand found him, he had fallen to his knees, curled around his ribs. Something gibbering and wet crashed into Ignis’s injured shoulder and he staggered; Prompto’s gun barked and the thing exploded in a burst of miasma.

Noctis warped close. “C’mon, we’re going together,” he said, and hauled on Prompto’s other arm. “Ignis, help me—”

“Damn it, Noct, go!” Gladio shouted. “Door’s almost closed! I can’t cover you much longer!”

“You’d better think fast, Your Majesty,” Ardyn crooned from the intercom. “I don’t envy you your decision.”

“I’m not leaving you guys!” Noctis insisted.

“Noct—” Ignis tried.

Noctis cut him off. “Gladio, get over here!”

A wave of air blew past Ignis’s face, the warning sign of an iron giant’s sword, and he summoned his lance to block. Then there was a heavy clang of metal on metal and Gladio grunted with effort right in front of him - he must have caught the blow on his shield. Noctis bumped against Ignis’s side, one arm reaching out past him toward Gladio. “Ignis, Prompto, hold on!”

Ignis grabbed Noctis around the waist even as he asked, “What are you—”

Noctis grunted with effort, his body twisting in a throwing motion. A heartbeat later, the world lurched and spun nauseatingly and Ignis was moving, fast, like he’d been thrown—

Like he’d warped.

The ground reappeared under his feet and he staggered from the shock and disorientation; Gladio grabbed at him for balance but Ignis’s legs gave out and they both dropped to the metal floor beside a still-coughing Prompto. Something heavy fell on top of Ignis and he caught it on reflex before realizing it was Noctis, limp and trembling.
Behind them, the hangar bay doors slammed closed with a bone-shaking boom, cutting off the daemon horde’s howls of rage.
The Crystal

Chapter Summary

In which they reach the Crystal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The harsh, echoing silence of whatever space they were in was almost oppressive after the chaos of the hangar bay. The only sounds were Gladio’s panting breaths and Prompto’s coughing. Noctis lay motionless in Ignis’s arms; if not for the rapid-fire flutter of his heartbeat under Ignis’s palm, he would have seemed dead. Ignis himself was shaking, only partly from the nausea and disorientation of the warp. Adrenaline still pumped through his veins and his whole body strained for any sign of a threat.

But a second passed and no daemons materialized, then another second, and another. Gladio’s breathing steadied, Prompto’s coughing fit finally eased. Noctis’s heartbeat gradually slowed to something more reasonable, until Ignis felt it was safe to nudge him gently. “Noct,” he said. It came out hoarse, his throat dry and strained from fighting, and he swallowed and tried again. “Noctis.”

Noctis spasmed, gasped, and barely managed to turn away from Ignis before he was throwing up, violent heaves that wrenched his whole body. Ignis shifted his grip so he was supporting his prince, half-holding him up as he retched. The reaction was hardly a surprise - Noctis had burned a lot of power in the fight with Ravus and the run for the hangar bay door. That he had still managed to dredge up enough magic to warp not only himself but his three companions through the door was nothing short of a miracle.

When the last dry heaves finally faded, Ignis pulled Noctis back against his chest, letting him lean there as he panted softly. Yesterday at Kate’s house, Ignis had refilled their armory stores with necessities - bottles of water, protein bars, and the like. He retrieved one of those bottles now, cracked it open, and handed it to Noct. “Slowly,” he warned.

Noctis grunted but obeyed, taking the time to rinse out his mouth first. Ignis pulled out a second water bottle and downed half of it himself before holding it out toward Prompto. A crystalline sound, followed by the crack of another seal, told him Gladio had summoned a bottle of his own. Ignis’s chest ached, the ribs he’d cracked in Altissia protesting again, and the deep cuts from Ravus’s claws still trickled blood down his arm and chest, but the moment was almost peaceful.

So of course, that was when the intercom crackled and Ardyn’s mocking voice spoke up: “Well, look at that. You managed to bring your friends with you. But at what cost?”

Noctis muttered something entirely too rude for a king under his breath. Over the intercom, Ardyn tsk ’d. “Now, now, Your Majesty. When will you learn that a king must make sacrifices?”

“I won’t,” Noctis said aloud. His voice was ragged, but strong. “People aren’t sacrifices. If I can save them—”
“Oh, dear,” Ardyn broke in. “Be careful with language like that.” His voice dropped to that
dangerous purr. “It will get you killed.”

Noctis barked out a bitter laugh. “I thought that was the plan anyway.”

“It is not the plan,” Ignis interjected irritably.

“Are you so sure about that?” Ardyn asked. “You promised changes, yet it seems fate itself is bent
on ensuring the completion of the prophecy.”

“It’s not over yet,” Gladio growled. “Don’t count us out.”

“I wait with bated breath,” Ardyn said, and the intercom clicked off.

“Hate that guy,” Gladio muttered.

“Tell me about it,” Prompto agreed vehemently, though Ignis heard the shudder in his voice.

Noctis leaned away from Ignis, the leather of his jacket rustling softly as he moved to reassure
“We stay here too long, we’ll get swarmed again.”

“Yeah,” Noctis said reluctantly, then he sucked in a sharp breath, his body jerking in Ignis’s grip as
he twisted to look at Gladio. “Shit, you’re bleeding.” He scrambled up off Ignis’s lap toward
Gladio.

“I’m fine,” Gladio said. There were sounds of a brief scuffle; by the time Ignis pushed himself to
his feet, his reaching hands found Gladio holding Noctis away from him with one arm. “Cool it,
Princess,” Gladio said. “I can patch it up once we’re out of here.”

“We’re all injured,” Ignis said, resting a hand on Noctis’s shoulder and drawing him back. “The
best thing we can do is find the Crystal and leave as quickly as possible.”

Noctis sighed. “Fine.” He turned under Ignis’s hand, bending down slightly; Prompto grunted and
his breath hitched with pain as Noctis hauled him upright. Worry in his voice, Noctis said, “Your
lung collapsed again, didn’t it?”

“It’s fine, I have two,” Prompto joked, but his voice was frighteningly weak. “Like they said, the
sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can heal up, right?”

Noctis’s hair rustled in a nod. “Central elevator’s just over here,” he said. “C’mon.”

Ignis couldn’t help but picture how ragged a group they must have made as they staggered toward
the elevator, leaning on one another for support. Noctis led them across a rattling catwalk and
around the elevator’s circular walls until they finally made it inside. The door hissed closed and
Ignis sagged against the wall as the elevator began to move.

“It’s right after this, isn’t it?” Gladio asked. “The Crystal?”

It took a second for Ignis to realize the question was directed at him, but he was the only other
person who’d actually watched the ending of the game. “I believe so,” he said. “I don’t recall any
further battles, at least.”

“Good,” Noctis said. “Just… hang in there, guys. We’re almost out of—”

Something crashed against the side of the elevator hard enough that Ignis stumbled and fell to his
knees. His friends were yelling in surprise, but their voices were drowned out by the groan of straining metal and a daemonic roar. A familiar daemonic roar.

Ravus.

Ignis had no idea how the man had gotten to the central elevator - perhaps whatever meta-mechanic was trying to keep the game on track had aided him. But that was a question for a time when the daemonified commander wasn’t tearing his way straight through the walls of the elevator. A big hand - Gladio - landed on Ignis’s shoulder and hauled him to the other side of the tiny space, the crystalline sound of his shield appearing barely audible beneath Ravus’s continued howling.

“Looks like you were right,” Gladio growled, presumably to Prompto. “He showed back up at the worst possible time.”

“How much further do we have to go?” Prompto’s voice was high and desperate. “He’s about to break through!”

“No idea,” Noctis said. “This damn keep is huge!”

Ignis climbed to his feet, bracing himself against the elevator wall for balance. On the opposite wall, where he’d been leaning a moment ago, rivets popped and metal shrieked. Wind blasted through the elevator car along with a sharp increase in the volume of Ravus’s howling. He had torn open the wall.

“Get back!” Gladio yelled. Metal clanged against metal - probably Ravus’s clawed magitek arm striking Gladio’s shield. Someone bumped into Ignis; he reached out, got a handful of familiar leather jacket, and tugged Noctis close. There were sounds of a scuffle, the elevator rocking on its track, Gladio grunting with effort or pain. In the elevator’s cramped confines, with the wind rushing past and Ravus roaring, it was impossible for Ignis to tell what was going on; his best guess was that Gladio stood between Noctis and the hole in the wall where Ravus had broken through and was trying to bash him away with his shield.

But Ravus wasn’t so easily dislodged. The elevator shook, its motor shrieking as it strained against whatever Ravus was doing, then Gladio slammed back against Ignis and Noctis. The sharp report of Prompto’s gun was deafening in the tiny space, but his cover fire seemed to be enough to hold Ravus back until Gladio disentangled himself from Ignis and Noctis. As Gladio took up position in front of them once more, Noctis tried to step forward to join him, but Ignis grabbed him by the jacket and hauled him back.

“Damn it, Ignis, let me help!” Noct snarled.

“Let him do his job,” Ignis said, and at the same time Gladio snapped, “Shut up and stay put!”

Noctis growled under his breath but let Ignis pull him back. Ravus’s claws clanged against Gladio’s shield, and the elevator shook again. Something crashed into Ignis from the side; he nearly stabbed it before realizing it was Prompto. “We’re slowing down!” Prompto gasped. “Almost there!”

The elevator jerked to a groaning halt, the doors hissing open with incongruous ease behind Ignis. He backed through, dragging Noctis with him, Prompto pressed against his side. “Gladio!” Noctis called.

Ravus howled and metal shrieked; Gladio grunted under the force of another ringing blow. “Go!”
he yelled. “I’m right behind you - we need to get him to the Crystal!”

“Right!” Noctis grabbed Ignis’s wrist and steered him away from the elevator at a run. From the elevator came a sharp sound of impact and a battle cry from Gladio, then a roar of pain from Ravus. A moment later, footsteps pounded toward them, or at least, Ignis thought so. All he could tell of the space they were in was that it was small, echoes bouncing chaotically and the sounds of a struggle behind him deafening.

Prompto breathed, “There it is.”

Sound fell away from them abruptly as whatever narrow hallway they’d been in opened into a vast space, their footsteps no longer thudding against solid ground but clanking hollowly on the metal of a catwalk. His voice angled as though he’d turned to look over his shoulder, Noctis gasped, “Almost there. C’mon, Gladio, just a little further—!”

The echoes tightened around them once more, though they hadn’t left the catwalk. Noctis stopped, shoving Ignis to the side. “Prompto!” he called.

“On it!” Prompto’s gun barked and Ravus howled in pain.

Gladio staggered up to them, gripping Ignis’s arm and half-falling against the railing next to him. Ignis pushed Gladio behind him, away from Ravus. In front of him, Noctis whispered, “Please, help me save him. Help me stop the daemons and save everyone.”

He wasn’t talking to them. Power surged suddenly, roaring through Ignis’s veins, making him gasp. Noctis’s breath caught, and he made a straining noise in the back of his throat. For an instant Ignis sensed the Crystal behind him as he’d seen the Lucii, not with his eyes but with Noctis’s magic, its radiant power searing into his brain. Ravus shrieked, the cry rising to a tortured howl, straining far longer than a human could have managed.

Noctis wavered against Ignis’s side and Ignis grabbed his arm, holding him upright. Through the touch he felt the Crystal’s magic thrumming through Noctis’s body as he fought to cure Ravus, power building like a live wire. Metal popped and cracked and Ravus’s shriek ratcheted up another impossible notch - then something exploded. The stink of daemon miasma and scorched metal rolled through the room, and at the same time, a thud rattled the catwalk as Ravus collapsed.

For just a moment, Ignis thought he smelled sylleblossoms.

Noct gasped, sagging into Ignis’s grip. “I think it—”

Gladio shouted, “Noct! Look out!” His footsteps clanged against the catwalk as he lunged, accompanied by the crystalline sound of his shield appearing—

—then he screamed in raw agony. There was the heavy sound of a body falling to the floor, and he went abruptly silent.

An instant later, the power of the Crystal washed over Ignis in a burning, searing wave. He cried out, falling away from Noctis, his eyes throbbing. He was distantly aware of Noctis grunting, straining with effort, and horror knotted his gut. Was Ravus still attacking after all? Had new daemons appeared and gotten past Gladio, or—

No. Noct’s voice was moving away from where Ravus had been.

He was moving toward the Crystal.
Ignis’s heart stopped. Gladio’s reaction, the surge of power… *If you want, you can stand between me and the Crystal and fight off its light*, Noctis had said last night. Gladio had tried, and failed, and now the Crystal was drawing Noctis in.

“Noct!” Ignis yelled, and scrambled to his feet, bouncing off the railing and stumbling desperately toward his prince’s voice. His eyes burned, the Crystal’s magic reigniting the agony of his injuries, and his next breath was a struggle against the pain.

“No!” Noctis shouted. “Stay back! Ignis, stay back!”

“No!” Ignis’s legs weren’t working correctly; they tangled beneath him and he tripped. Hands grabbed him - Prompto, ducking under Ignis’s arm and steadying him. “Noct!”

Booted footsteps ahead and to the side, the swish of heavy fabric. Ardyn’s voice: “Unharmed by the Light. The Chosen King, indeed.”

“Let him go!” Prompto demanded. “Make it let him go!”

“Ah, but I can’t,” Ardyn said. “The Crystal rejected me a long time ago. I’ve no claim to its power any longer.”

Ignis ignored them both, still fighting to make his legs work, to carry him to Noct. But for every step he managed, Noct’s grunts of effort drew further away.

“It was a lovely thought, I’ll admit,” Ardyn said conversationally. “That we might change fate. That we could defy the Astrals themselves.”

“We still can,” Ignis said. Begged. Pledged, trying not to think about his prince being dragged into the Crystal just a few feet away.

But Ardyn wasn’t listening. “Noct, killing you as a mortal will bring me scant satisfaction,” he said, his voice turning away from Ignis. “Claim the Crystal’s power. Arise as its champion, as fate intended. Only once the Crystal and King are no more, can I know redemption. Come back soon. I shall keep your friends company until you are ready.”

“No!” Ignis cried.

“Wait for me!” Noctis called, his voice strained. “Ignis, Prompto, Gladio - I’ll come back, I swear it. Just hold on until—”

His voice cut off. The Crystal’s power faded to silence.

Ardyn chuckled, a low sinister rumble that rose and spread to fill the whole of the space. “He’s been claimed by the Crystal,” he said. “Your darling king. What say we have a little fun while we wait for his return?”

The crack of Prompto’s gun and the wet snap of a bullet through flesh cut off the end of Ardyn’s question. Prompto fired again, screaming, wordless and hoarse and furious, shooting over and over until the hammer was clicking on an empty chamber. Then he collapsed, dropping out from beneath Ignis’s arm with a sob. Without Prompto’s support, Ignis’s own legs gave out and he sank down beside him.

The stench of daemon miasma washed over them. Ardyn said, “I suppose I can take a hint.” Fabric swished and rustled, his boots clanked, and the angle of his voice changed as though he had turned away and was speaking over his shoulder. “I’ll be waiting.”
The daemonic stench faded, and Ignis didn’t need to ask to know that Ardyn had vanished, leaving them alone with the Crystal that had just swallowed their king.

Chapter End Notes

All I'll say is that this fic does still have the "Fix-It" tag...
Failure

Chapter Summary

In which everything hurts and nothing is okay.

Chapter Notes

There's this stage at the end of the second act or beginning of the third act of a typical three-act structure, which is the lowest point of the hero's journey where all hope is lost and there seems no possibility of success.

I apparently have a thing for making that low point really low. Sorry...

The sound of failure was the endless low hum of Zegnautus Keep’s air circulation systems. It was Prompto’s hoarse sobs, the choking gasps as he struggled to breathe with a collapsed lung. It was soft whimpering cries which Ignis didn’t realize were his own at first, barely audible over the hollow thudding of his heart.

They’d failed.
Noctis had been sucked into the Crystal, dooming the world to a decade of darkness.
He would return in ten years only to die a brutal, violent death days later, an innocent sacrifice to the gods' plan.
He would never even see the sunrise that cost his life.
They’d failed.

Movement beside him. Had it been a daemon, Ignis would have been summarily killed, too stunned and despairing to move. But it was only Prompto, unsteady shuffling sounds marking his progress along the catwalk back the way they’d come. “Hey…” Prompto whispered. “Gladio? Hey, big guy, please…” His voice hitched. “Please be alive.”

Right. Gladio had fallen trying to shield Noctis from the Crystal. Ignis’s brain woke up all at once, the sudden fear of losing someone else sending a jolt of energy through him. He shoved himself to his feet, but his ribs spiked with pain and he staggered, barely catching himself against the catwalk railing. With the rail as a crutch, Ignis stumbled toward the sound of Prompto’s gasps. He found Gladio by tripping over his legs, falling to his knees beside Prompto.

“He’s alive,” Prompto whispered, relief welling in his voice.

Ignis still checked for himself, hands skating over Gladio’s body until he found his chest, sticky with blood. Gladio’s heart beat under Ignis’s palm, rapid and thready, but his breathing seemed stable enough. He stirred when Ignis’s searching fingers found a long cut arching from his collarbone over the top of his shoulder, then spasmed. “Noct—?” he groaned.
It took Ignis three tries to get the words out: “Taken by the Crystal.”

Gladio made a low sound of despair, his fist thumping weakly against the catwalk. “Damn it.”

The words were wholly insufficient, nowhere near enough to encompass the enormity of their failure. Their hubris, and Ignis almost didn’t recognize the sound that escaped his lips as a laugh. It was bitter and broken, like shattered glass in his throat, and he laughed again, welcoming the pain of it. It was no more than he deserved, for believing he could change fate. Believing he could defy the gods, the game, whatever uncaring entity controlled his life and Noctis’s death.

The others were calling his name, Gladio worried and Prompto afraid, but Ignis couldn’t stop the laughter. He bowed his head, only dimly aware of Gladio sliding out from beneath Ignis’s hand and hauling himself to a sitting position. Calloused fingers gripped Ignis’s jaw, forcing his head up, as though Gladio was trying to look him in the eyes.

“Iggy,” Gladio said sharply. “Pull it together. It ain’t safe here. We gotta get out, get somewhere safe, take care of all these injuries. We can’t—we can’t—”

The words didn’t register at all, right up until Gladio’s voice broke. But that was so unexpected, so unlike Gladio, that it sank through the despair that wrapped Ignis and gave him the strength to swallow the crazed laughter. Gladio would keep it together for him and Prompto, but at the cost of his own heart, hardening himself to a point from which few men ever returned. Ignis had to stay strong enough in turn to keep that from happening. Ignis had to stay strong enough in turn to keep that from happening. He reached up, fingers wrapping around Gladio’s wrist where he still held Ignis’s jaw. “I know,” he whispered.

Through his grip on Gladio’s wrist, he felt him take a silent shuddering breath. Stay with us, Ignis thought desperately. I can’t lose you too. But then, Gladio was probably thinking the same thing about Ignis.

Gladio rested his forehead against Ignis’s, still gripping his jaw, seeming to brace himself with the touch. “Can you walk?” he asked. His voice was rough, but stable enough.

Ignis nodded. He wasn’t actually sure it was true, but Prompto only had one working lung right now. He needed Gladio’s help more than Ignis did.

“Good.” Gladio’s silent sigh of relief brushed Ignis’s face, then he sat back and let go. Ignis stayed down beside the railing, out of the way, while Gladio got Prompto up off the ground and riding on Gladio’s back. Prompto was audibly flagging, his voice fading in and out, punctuated by broken coughs and whimpers of pain he couldn’t quite swallow. When they were settled, Ignis dragged himself upright using the railing for balance, and leaned on it as he began to follow them back along the catwalk.

Then Gladio stopped short with a soft huh of surprise. “I think he’s still alive,” he said.

It took Ignis a second to realize he meant Ravus, lying forgotten where he’d fallen when Noctis called on the Crystal’s power to purge the Starscourge from him. “Alive as a daemon?” Ignis asked dully. They simply stood no chance against a daemon of Ravus’s power right now.

“No,” Gladio said, still sounding surprised. “He’s human, far’s I can tell. See if you can wake him up.”

Ignis wasn’t entirely certain he’d be able to stand again if he knelt once more, but he did it anyway. They’d gone to significant effort to save Ravus; it seemed a shame to just abandon him here. His searching hands found tattered leather over steel armor, both stained with thick fluids whose origins
Ignis didn’t want to consider. He traced up Ravus’s body, finding his chest and then his neck and then his pulse, surprisingly strong.

Ravus groaned at the touch, twitching under Ignis’s hand. Then he gasped and spasmed upright. “Lunafreya!”

Ignis jerked away, startled. Ravus called his sister’s name again, his voice turning as though he was looking around for her. Ignis made himself say, “She’s not here.”

“I saw her,” Ravus whispered. His voice was broken, desperate. “I saw her. Lunafreya—!”

“She’s gone,” Ignis snapped. That failure rose up with all the others, tangling in his chest, his throat. The Oracle was dead. Ignis’s attempt to save her had failed - must have failed, else Kate would have said something, Lunafreya would have reappeared before now. The sacrifice of his sight had been for nothing.

“No,” Ravus moaned. There were quiet sounds of movement; when he next spoke his voice was muffled, as though he was bent over with his head in his hands. “She was here. She spoke to me. She told me to wait for her.”

It was too much like what Noctis had said, in those last moments before he’d been swallowed by the Crystal. Ignis shook his head. “It wasn’t her,” he whispered. “She’s gone, just like Noct.”

“Then how am I here?” Ravus demanded, voice wild. A hand gripped Ignis’s arm, tight enough to bruise. “I was a daemon. I remember that much. And yet… and yet now I’m not.”

“Noctis healed you—” Gladio started from somewhere overhead, but Ravus cut him off.

“Only the Oracle can heal the Starscourge,” he insisted. “Only Lunafreya can. She was right there, I saw her!”

“The Crystal healed you,” Ignis said dully. His eyes ached and he raised the arm Ravus wasn’t holding to rub at them. “Perhaps you were close enough to the brink of death to see your sister, but it was Noctis using the Crystal to heal you.” He wanted to add at the cost of a decade of darkness and his own life, but couldn’t get the words out.

Ravus moaned again, letting go of Ignis’s arm to collapse back to the catwalk. “Why?” he whispered. “Why heal me?”

“I’m really starting to fucking wonder,” Gladio snapped before Ignis could say anything. “You wanna make it worth the price, get off your ass and help us get outta here.”

There was a startled sort of pause; Ignis wondered how often anyone had dared to speak so to the Imperial High Commander, the former Prince of Tenebrae. Gladio added, “You got five seconds to get moving before we leave you here.”

“What difference would it make,” Ravus said sullenly. “I was already dead. I did not ask to be dragged back to this miserable existence. Leave me here to die. Perhaps I’ll see my sister again.”

Rage bubbled up inside Ignis, as sudden and hot as the day in Kate’s reality when he’d confronted her about the truth of Noct’s destiny. Without meaning to he was moving, grasping hands finding a grip on the tattered remnants of Ravus’s jacket and shaking him. “It’s a difference,” Ignis snarled. “It’s a difference Noctis gave his life for. He would never have gone to the Crystal, would never have tapped its power, if not for the desire to save you. For Lunafreya’s sake.” And Prompto’s, but Ravus didn’t need to know Prompto’s secret right now, his fear of being a daemon himself. Ignis
shook Ravus again, hard enough that he heard Ravus’s teeth rattle. “So get up. Walk out of this Stars-forsaken keep and earn what Noct gave you. Make it worth the price he paid.”

Another startled pause. Ignis didn’t wait for Ravus to answer; he stood up, unsteady but nonetheless determined to haul Ravus up with him. Ravus didn’t move, so Ignis let go of his jacket and grabbed for his arms instead. He found the right arm easily enough, but spent several seconds feeling around for the left before Prompto spoke up hoarsely: “It’s gone. I think it blew up when Noct cured him.”

Ravus made a sound too bitter to be a laugh. Right, his left arm had been artificial, a magitek prosthetic. Magitek powered by daemon miasma, like all Imperial technology. No wonder the Crystal had destroyed it. Hauling Ravus around with only one arm would be more difficult, but Ignis could make do. He managed to duck under Ravus’s right arm and heave him upright by main strength. Ravus didn’t exactly help, but he didn’t resist, either, and together they staggered after Gladio’s heavy footsteps.

*   *   *

By the grace of the Astrals - or perhaps by unexpected help from Ardyn - the four of them managed to escape Zegnautus Keep without further harm. The central elevator took them directly to ground level, and the handful of daemons and rogue MTs they encountered were swiftly dispatched by Gladio’s sword or Prompto’s gun. The biggest threat, exhausted and wounded as they were, was the hours-long walk from the Keep’s base out to the city’s edge.

There was a bad moment when they finally arrived where they weren’t sure how to open the massive gates that had sealed off the city, which Ignis had completely forgotten in the days since they’d passed through. But Ravus, unexpectedly, directed him to a small shed off to one side of the rail yard which apparently held controls for the gates; a few minutes of clattering keys and beeping buttons and the gates groaned open.

From there, the walk to where they’d left the train was mercifully short. Biggs and Wedge greeted them with a combination of surprise and horror. They leaped to help Gladio get Prompto settled on one of the bunks in the sleeper car, while Ignis deposited Ravus in the cabin next door.

He rejoined the others in their cabin just as Biggs and Wedge were ducking out; Wedge said, “We’ll be up by the engine. Radio if you need anything.”

Ignis nodded, and their footsteps faded away toward the front of the car. He could hear Prompto’s struggling breaths from the lower bunk nearby (Noct’s bunk, and Ignis’s heart ached at the thought). Prompto needed medical attention immediately - it was a miracle he’d lasted this long as it was.

Gladio said, “I’m gonna go up front and help them get this thing moving again. You got Prompto?”

Ignis nodded again, already mentally running through what little he knew of first aid pertaining to a collapsed lung. Gladio’s hand dropped onto his shoulder, heavy and solid and comforting. He drew a breath as though to speak, but didn’t manage any words; the breath rushed back out in a sigh that brushed Ignis’s face.

Ignis took a step closer, reaching up to grip Gladio’s arm. Gladio’s hand moved from his shoulder to his jaw, holding him in place as he once again rested his forehead against Ignis’s. He was cracking at the seams; Ignis could feel it through the touch, but then, they all were. They’d all lost today, and what they’d lost would come back in ten years only to be ripped away from them.
permanently a few days later. Ignis couldn’t imagine how they would survive it.

In the face of that, there were no words they could say, and he was grateful Gladio didn’t try. They stood there together for a long moment, but Prompto’s pained breaths reminded them they couldn’t afford any more time. Gladio let go and stepped away, boots heavy on the metal floor of the cabin. “I’ll be right back,” he said, and Ignis heard both the plea and the promise in the words. *Keep it together. I can’t do this if you lose it too. I’ll hold together for you if you’ll hold together for me.*

“We’ll be fine,” Ignis promised. *We’ll hold together. For you, for us, for Noctis.*

Gladio’s hair rustled softly against his jacket as he nodded, then he turned and left the cabin, his footsteps clanking away through the rail car. Ignis felt his way over to Prompto’s side, kneeling beside the bunk. Prompto sounded horrible, but despite his gasps managed to say, “There’s a… thingy… up under my arm. The… the nurse said they left it there… in case my lung collapsed again.”

Ignis found the “thingy”, which turned out to be a small device with an air tube and a one-way valve, tucked neatly beneath one of the many bandages that covered Prompto’s torso. Following Prompto’s whispered directions, passed along from the discharge nurse at the hospital, Ignis got the valve working to expel the excess air from Prompto’s chest cavity so his lung could re-inflate. With that resolved, Prompto sagged against the bunk, taking slow deep breaths.

Ignis pushed up from the floor of the cabin, his abused muscles screaming and his various wounds spiking pain through him. The claw marks on his shoulder needed bandaging, as did the myriad other small and not-so-small cuts scattered across his body. He should have retrieved their medical supplies from the armory, should have begun tending his wounds.

Instead, he collapsed to sit on the bunk beside Prompto. Prompto shifted, pulling himself half into Ignis’s lap so he could rest his head on Ignis’s leg and bury his face against Ignis’s stomach. Just as Noctis used to do, how Noctis had done only days ago on this very train, this very bunk, and Ignis gasped with the pain of it. Worse than anything any daemon had inflicted upon him, worse than losing his eyes.

He’d lost *Noct.*

In a voice muffled from being pressed against Ignis’s stomach and hoarse from screaming, Prompto whispered, “Iggy… what do we do now?”

His fingers dug into Prompto’s shoulder, curled into his hair as though he could hold them both together by sheer will. He’d promised Gladio, after all. And Noctis was counting on them.

Noctis was counting on *him.*

“We wait,” Ignis whispered, the words acid on his tongue. “We wait, and when Noctis returns, we…”

His voice hitched. He swallowed hard, felt Prompto shiver in his grip. Made himself say the words, no matter the shattering of his heart, because Kate, and Ardyn, and that Stars-cursed game had made clear what would happen. What *had* to happen, when Noctis returned from the Crystal.

They’d tried to change destiny, and destiny had fought back. The gods, and the prophecy, and the game, would not accept any other answer.

“We see it through. To the very end.”
World of Ruin

Chapter Summary

In which ten years pass and humanity - and Ignis - struggle to hold on.

Chapter Notes

The entire World of Ruin situation is a giant logistical nightmare. Where does meat come from, when animals are susceptible to Starscourge? How do you grow plants for food or resources without any sun? How are cell phones still working, when according to Tabata they're only an Insomnian thing and Insomnia's been abandoned to daemons?

I love Square's characters and sweeping plots, but they really need someone to focus on worldbuilding details like this...

Ten years was a long time.

It was nearly half Ignis’s entire life, and almost three-quarters of the time he’d spent with Noctis. It was two years longer than Gladio had been Noctis’s shield, and twice as long as Prompto and Noctis had been friends.

The first year was unbearable. Niflheim was entirely overrun with daemons, its few surviving citizens long since fled or dead. Tenebrae was no longer safe, and Tenebraen refugees flocked to Lucis with the aid of Aranea’s crew. But Lucis was in no shape to protect its existing settlements, much less the vast refugee camps that sprung up outside their borders.

Ignis tried to help where he could, but his lack of sight was a crippling disadvantage: he needed an aide wherever he went, someone who could read the missives and checklists and supply tallies which were vital to organizing the displaced and terrified populace. But anyone who could read to him could do the job themselves, leaving Ignis nothing but a useless tagalong.

He rarely saw Gladio or Prompto. Despite the game’s warning that they would drift apart over the missing decade, it was all but impossible to find time to spend with them. The two of them were among the best fighters in the country, and were desperately needed to guard refugee caravans and search for anything that could aid the survivors: safe food, fresh water, clothes, bedding, shelter. Unlike Ignis, they were useful, and as the Starscourge wrapped the planet in endless night, anyone useful couldn’t afford a moment’s rest.

Even Ravus, missing an arm and perpetually drunk on whatever alcohol he could get his remaining hand on, was in demand. A one-armed drunk could still swing a sword at daemons, and despite the disgrace he’d suffered in the Empire’s last days, many former Imperial citizens still considered him an authority figure. Likewise, he was the last living member of the Fleuret family, and the remaining Tenebraen population looked to him as their prince. He was frequently called to settle some dispute or other, or issue orders, never mind that it was Gladio or Cor holding him upright and whispering the words in his ear.
Talcott was Ignis’s lifesaver. He came to Lestallum with Iris a few months after Noct was—after, lonely and afraid and bored. He originally stayed with Ignis only because there was nowhere else to put him; a seven-year-old was of little more use in the ruined world than a blind man. But they quickly realized that working together, they could help: Talcott serving as Ignis’s eyes so that Ignis could participate in planning and rationing and all the management of a population of terrified refugees from warring nations. It kept both of them sane as the first year rolled into the second and Ignis began to forget what sunlight felt like.

Much of the second year was dedicated to re-learning how to fight. Ignis had managed well enough in Zegnautus with his friends by his side, but the daemons were growing larger and deadlier by the month, and too many hunters had died. The handful of surviving Kingsglaive did what they could, but it was painfully obvious more warriors were needed. So Ignis trained - not to fight as part of Noct’s retinue, surrounded by friends he could trust to have his back, but alone, or with hunters he’d never met before and would never see again.

He told himself he was ready the first time he was sent out as the only protection for a group of scavengers hunting for edible wild plants. It was a lie; terror closed his throat and made his hands shake, and when they were inevitably set upon by daemons, he very nearly panicked. Nearly.

When the fight was over, he was bleeding from a dozen wounds, and three of his charges had been injured, one badly. But no one was dead. They retreated to a haven, the hum of its runes already weakened by the Starscourge but still enough to keep the daemons at bay, and Ignis patched everyone up. Wound care was largely a touch-based process anyway, as long as someone told him where the wounds were.

They made it back to Lestallum three days later, exhausted but triumphant with knapsacks full of wild roots and herbs. Gladio met them at the city gates, worry hidden in his gruff greeting, and Ignis all but collapsed against him. “They’re safe,” Ignis whispered into his shoulder. “I didn’t lose any of them.”

Gladio’s arms tightened around him, and Ignis knew he, too, was thinking of the Crystal and what they’d lost. “You did good,” Gladio said. “Knew you could do it.”

The success didn’t make fighting blind and alone any less terrifying, but it was proof enough of his prowess that he was assigned guard duty again, and again. Between that and the administrative work of managing the refugee camps, the remainder of the second year and most of the third passed far more quickly than the first year had.

The beginning of the fourth year was marked with the accidental but fortuitous discovery that Ravus’s blood could refresh a dying haven. He was not an Oracle, but he was of their bloodline, and it was Oracles whose magic had created the havens in centuries past. The death of the last Oracle and the rise of the Starscourge was leeching the havens’ power - but an infusion of Fleuret blood was enough to not only stop the drain, but restore some of what was lost.

The challenge, after that, became to keep Ravus from martyring himself for the havens.

Ignis was tasked with this, often. Ravus listened to few people and would fight, albeit drunkenly and poorly, when made to do something he did not want to do. But Ignis was used to wrangling a far more obstinate prince; a drunkard lost in grief was easy enough to manage.

“Why did you do it?” Ravus asked, one night when he and Ignis were alone at Turncouth Haven.
“Do what?” Ignis asked. He’d been distracted trying to cook dinner from the handful of root vegetables that was all they’d been able to spare for the trip.

“Save me,” Ravus said. “In Zegnautus.”

Ignis’s breath caught and his heart stuttered in his chest. Even four years later, the memory of Zegnautus hurt. Ravus added, “You could have killed me. Or left me there. But you didn’t. He didn’t.”

Noctis.

“It was for the Lady Lunafreya’s sake,” Ignis answered. He knew his grip on the vegetable knife had gone white-knuckled, prayed Ravus was too drunk to notice.

No such luck. “Liar,” Ravus muttered. Ignis heard sloshing and caught the sharp scent of alcohol as Ravus waved his flask. “You said it’s a difference. A difference from what?”

Ignis focused on the vegetables, on sliding them from the cutting board into the pot over the fire. He was honestly surprised Ravus remembered. But then, Ignis tried his hardest not to think about what had happened that day, while from the sound of it, Ravus must have been ruminating on it for the last four years. Still, Ignis didn’t dare tell him the truth, about the game and how it had forced destiny upon them all. Ardyn probably wasn’t around right now, probably wasn’t listening - but even if Ravus didn’t ask about Lunafreya, Ignis couldn’t trust him to keep the secret after they left the haven. The rest of the world didn’t need to know about the game.

“Nothing,” he said. “I was... distraught. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Ravus repeated, mocking and bitter.

“I...” Ignis said, and sighed. “As I said, I was not in my right mind. I’ve little memory of anything I said then.”

“Am I truly worth so little, then?” Ravus asked. Alcohol sloshed as he took a long draught from the flask. “Not remembered, restored to life only for my dead sister’s sake, wrung for blood and puppeteered in the pretense of authority over two dead countries?”

Ignis bit back his first retort, which was you’re the one who wants to restore the havens with your blood, and his second, which was it’s only pretense of authority because you’re too drunk to take it in truth. Instead, he said, “Your worth is what you make of it.” He gestured at the haven, the runes Ravus had just restored to warm, humming strength. “Is this worth so little? The power to restore safe places in a world which has none?”

Ravus didn’t answer. The bottle sloshed again.

After that talk, Ignis had hoped Ravus might retrieve his head from where it was, as Gladio so crudely put it, “shoved so far up his ass he swallows things twice”. Instead, he deteriorated further until, in the early hours of the morning in the middle of winter, he turned up on Ignis’s doorstep after a battle with daemons, too wounded to stand and doing his level best to replace the blood dripping from his abdomen with the contents of a wine bottle. Ignis took him in after that, and spent the rest of the fourth year nursing him back to both health and sobriety.

Despite his frustration, Ignis couldn’t help but pity Ravus. The man had lost everything, twice - first when the Imperials conquered his country and murdered his mother, then again when they killed his sister, destroyed his home, and turned him into a daemon. He had nothing to live for, no reason to wake up each day except that the people he hated, whom he’d actively fought against for
years, insisted he must. It was no wonder he drank himself to oblivion, no wonder he sought to finish what the Emperor and the Starscourge had started.

But as the fourth year became the fifth, pity turned to sympathy and then to an unexpected bond. Ravus had dedicated his life to Lunafreya, just as Ignis had dedicated his to Noct, and the fact that both were gone did nothing to dampen their loyalty. There was something refreshing about it, about having a companion who didn’t expect everything from him, whose own life and soul were given to another just as Ignis’s were to Noct. As much as it meant to Ignis, it meant far more to Ravus. Ignis had Gladio and Prompto, who understood as well, who had made similar commitments to their prince - their king. Ravus had had no one.

By the end of the fifth year, Ravus could be safely left unsupervised, and had even begun helping Ignis with the management of the refugee colonies in truth, rather than as a figurehead. Eventually Ignis felt comfortable turning it entirely over to Ravus, freeing himself to instead travel with Talcott around the world. He vaguely remembered mention from the game of such a trip, that he and Talcott had sought and found more information about Ardyn Izunia. Maybe they could find something that would help Noctis when he returned.

In the end, though, they found nothing Ignis hadn’t already learned in the alternate reality. They returned to Lestallum as the seventh year rolled into the eighth, with far more experience battling the greater daemons of Niflheim but no new information.

“It was worth a shot, though,” Prompto said. He sat across from Ignis at the tiny, rickety kitchen table in Ignis’s apartment, nursing a glass of the fine aged scotch he’d dug out of some secret stash to celebrate Ignis’s safe return. “We can’t just… We can’t.”

Ignis turned his own glass in his hands, fingers running restlessly over the chip on the rim from when Ravus had once dropped it while doing the dishes. Kate’s voice rang in his head, a memory from all those years ago in a burger restaurant in an alternate reality: If there is another way, even the gods don’t know it. Taku the developer’s voice, too: Noctis’s destiny is what it is. Ignis said softly, “And if we’ve no choice?”

“We saved Ravus,” Prompto said stubbornly. Ignis could no longer remember what expression he made when he sounded like that, if his jaw jutted obstinately or his eyebrows lowered. Instead he recognized the edge in Prompto’s voice, the soft creaking of his fingerless leather gloves as he gripped his glass too tightly. “That has to mean something, doesn’t it?”

Another memory of Kate, talking about how Ravus was composed entirely of tropes, following a villainous playbook right up until the game’s writers decided he was no longer necessary and wrote him out. Ignis sighed and downed his scotch, the alcohol burning his throat in a bitterly pleasant sort of way. “Perhaps only that the game considers him too unimportant to care that he stayed dead.”

“The game can shove it,” Prompto muttered. The bottle clinked as he refilled both Ignis’s glass and his own. “Anyway, that reminds me. Me ‘n Cindy kinda… put together a thing.”

“A thing?”

“Um,” Prompto sounded embarrassed; Ignis heard the rustle as he rubbed the back of his head. “An arm. For Ravus. Like a prosthetic, y’know? He still has the port in his shoulder where the old one plugged in, and I figured, it’s worth a try, just with real tech instead of magitek. Not that it’s very fancy or anything,” he added hastily. “It’s not good for much other than basic grasping, but it’s still an arm, right?”
Ignis smiled. “I’m sure he’ll be delighted.”

Ravus was indeed delighted, though he’d spent so long without his left arm that it took some getting used to before he felt comfortable with the replacement. Still, it was a small bright spot in the darkness of the failing world, and they’d had too few of those lately. They’d learned to celebrate what few they had.

Time passed. Half Ignis’s life became a third, and the memory of colors faded to the realm of dreams. Noctis’s face grew fuzzy in his memories; Ignis had to focus, now, to remember what his prince - his king - looked like. Gladio took formal command of the hunters from their tiny outpost in Meldacio after a bad injury left Dave Auburnbrie confined to bed, while Prompto settled into more or less permanent residence at Hammerhead, keeping the station safe so Cindy could keep the hunters’ cars functional. The surviving Glaives united under Cor’s command, save a handful of those who’d once turned traitor and now sought redemption by vigil on the island of Angelgard. Ignis was elected regent of Lestallum, despite his attempts to avoid the title, with Talcott as his aide and Ravus as his right-hand man. The world settled into a routine, the darkness and daemons as normal now as though they’d always been there.

Then one morning Talcott barged into Ignis’s apartment and shouted, “Ignis! There’s a dog here with a message for you!”

It took a second for the implications of that to sink in. Another second for his brain to dredge up a memory of a grey dog - or had it been black? - with a strip of fabric around one leg and sharp blue eyes. “Umbra,” he breathed.

Umbra woofed gently, his wet nose nuzzling Ignis’s outstretched hand. Ignis knelt before him, his other hand running gently down the dog’s neck until he found the strap that wound around his torso. A folded sheet of paper was tucked under the strap; Ignis’s fingers traced his own name stamped in raised letters into its surface. “What does it say?” he asked, even though he already knew.

Talcott’s leg brushed his shoulder as he leaned down past him to take the paper. It rustled gently as he unfolded it, and anticipation and fear tightened Ignis’s gut. He’d forgotten, caught up in the routines of life, but it was ten years to the day since Noctis had been taken from them. There was only one thing this letter could say.

“The True King awakens,” Talcott read. “His companions are summoned. The time of reckoning is nigh.”

Ignis’s hand shook as he reached for the notepad and pen he kept on the counter, and he took a moment to steady himself before trying to write. His handwriting was no longer as reliable as it once had been, and he needed this note to be perfect. He tried several things, ripping off pages and crumpling them into the trashcan, before finally settling on a simple message:

“We’ll be waiting in Hammerhead.”
“What, no Ravus?” Prompto asked as Ignis climbed out of Talcott’s truck in the Hammerhead parking lot.

Ignis shook his head. “He went ahead into the Crown City.”


The memory of that particular argument ached. Ignis had never told Ravus the truth about the game, and therefore couldn’t admit he was worried about Ravus going ahead on his own when the game had no interest in ensuring he stayed alive. It might even actively try to kill him, to restore parity with the original state of the game. “He insisted,” Ignis said to Prompto, and didn’t quite manage to keep the worry from his voice. “He said the Oracle’s duty is to prepare the way for the Chosen King. With the Lady Lunafreya gone, he intends to fulfil that duty in her stead.”

Prompto grunted acknowledgement. “Brave guy.”

“Indeed,” Ignis admitted. He didn’t want to think any further about what Ravus might be walking into, so he said, “I brought us something.”

“Yes?” Gravel crunched as Prompto followed Ignis around to the side of Talcott’s truck

Ignis trailed his fingers along the canvas cover until he found the ties holding it down, then tugged them open and reached inside. He found the heavy suitcase and heaved it out.

Prompto gasped. “Holy shit! Isn’t that—”

“Our Kingsglaive uniforms,” Ignis said. “Along with Noctis’s formal raiment.”

“Ignis and I found them when we were in Niflheim a few years back,” Talcott called down from the driver’s seat. “They were in the trunk of the Regalia all that time.”

“Man,” Prompto murmured. The suitcase shifted and Ignis heard the soft sound of fingers on
leather as Prompto ran a hand over it. “I remember getting fitted for this way back when,” he said. “I was so nervous - I still couldn’t believe they were letting me go with Noct to get married.” He gave a little laugh, though there was something sad, almost bitter behind it. “I’m not sure they’re gonna fit anymore, though. Even my old Crownguard stuff doesn’t fit right anymore.”

“Ten years of lean eating and constant fighting’ll do that to a guy,” Talcott said ruefully. “I don’t fit into any of my clothes from ten years ago, either.”

That got a real laugh from Prompto, and Ignis smiled as well. “Don’t worry,” he said to Prompto, and this time it was pride in his voice. “A little cleaning, a bit of mending and tailoring, and they’re good as new.”

“Awe...omazing,” Prompto said. “I can’t wait to see all of us in them.”

“If we’re to put our king on his rightful throne,” Ignis said, and tried to ignore how his chest tightened at the words, “we ought to dress the part.” To cover the hitch in his voice, he thumped the side of the truck. “You’d best be off, Talcott. Wouldn’t want to keep His Majesty waiting, now would we?”

“Definitely not,” Talcott agreed. “You’re all set, sir?”

“Fine,” Ignis said. “Be careful out there.”

“See you in a bit,” Talcott answered. Excitement bled into his voice; he knew he would be returning with Noctis.

Ignis waved as the sound of the engine faded, then turned back to Prompto. “Is Gladio here?”

“Not yet. It’s a lot further from Meldacio to here than it is from Lestallum, and that’s if the roads are even open right now. I figure he’ll turn up late tonight or early tomorrow morning.” Prompto’s fingers brushed Ignis’s elbow; Ignis picked up the suitcase and allowed himself to be steered across the pavement. He hadn’t been to Hammerhead in… Stars, in at least three years, not since he and Talcott had stopped by on their search for information about Ardyn. It sounded different than he remembered: smaller and more tense, with fewer voices in the background.

“Have you told her yet?” Ignis asked quietly, tilting his head toward the garage. Cindy Aurum still lived here, almost single-handedly responsible for keeping the hunters equipped with daemon-safe vehicles, ever since Cid had had to move to Lestallum some years ago.

“Yeah,” Prompto admitted, “but only ‘cause she figured out something was up. She knows nothing short of Noct coming back would get the three of us in the same place anymore.”

Ignis winced. “I wish that weren’t the case.”

“Me too,” Prompto said. His stride shifted from one step to the next and Ignis took the cue to find the raised entrance to what had once been Takka’s diner. “Noct’s gonna be disappointed.”

“He’ll be proud,” Ignis corrected. “We accomplished far more separately than we could have if we’d all stayed in the same place.” Despite his words, doubt curled in his stomach. Noctis had asked them to wait for him, but in many ways, they’d moved on. It had been impossible not to; ten years was far too long a time to remain stagnant. But what would Noct think of his companions when he learned they only saw each other once or twice a year?

Fabric rustled as Prompto shrugged. “I guess.” He steered Ignis to a low seat - one half of what had once been diner booths, as best Ignis could tell, now pulled away from the walls and tables to form
part of a small sitting area. Prompto helped him prop the suitcase against one end, then flopped onto the seat beside him with a groan. “Now we wait. I hate waiting.”

“We’ve waited ten years,” Ignis said. “Another day won’t hurt.”

Prompto sat up sharply. “Shit. Do you think Gladio’ll get here in time?”

Ignis thought back to Kate’s living room, listening to the ending of the game for the second time, the brief reunion between the four of them. “He will.”

“You just saying that?” Prompto asked, then dropped his voice. “Or do you, y’know, know?”

Ignis hesitated before answering, ears straining for any sign of others in the room, but heard nothing. Still, he lowered his own voice when he answered: “It’s what the game depicted, yes.”

“All that engine oil crusted beneath your nails doesn’t stop you?” Ignis teased. Prompto carried the same smell as Cindy, lately: oil and grease, metal and tar. Ignis didn’t often think in pictures anymore, but the vague mental image he could still assemble of Prompto had taken on the same grease smears Cindy used to have.

Prompto laughed. “Are you kidding? We don’t get meat out here anymore - engine oil’s how I get my iron now.”

Ignis smiled back, resting one hand on Prompto’s chest to feel the steady thrum of his heartbeat as it began to slow with sleep. Soon enough, Prompto was snoring softly, though Ignis suspected the speed at which he’d fallen asleep was a testament not to his state of relaxation, but to how little he slept nowadays. Ignis himself was too wound up to even doze; instead he listened to the quiet sounds of the hunters moving around Hammerhead outside the walls of the diner. Once or twice the door opened and someone moved through the space, but nobody acknowledged him and Ignis made no attempt to speak up. His throat was tight with nerves; small talk was not in the cards just now.

He had no idea how long he sat there waiting before the door opened again and familiar heavy bootsteps thudded on the tile floor. Ignis nudged Prompto gently; he woke with a gasp and a flailing of arms as Gladio’s deep voice boomed, “Iggy! It’s been a while.”

“Too long,” Ignis said. Prompto sat up off his leg and Ignis stood in time for Gladio to fold him into a rib-cracking hug. Prompto likewise got a hug and, from the sound of it, a staggering clap on the shoulder.

“Good to see you both,” Gladio said. His voice had grown even more gravelly in the year or so since last Ignis had spent time with him, but Ignis could still hear the fond smile in it.

“You too, big guy,” Prompto said. “You must’ve really booked it from Meldacio - we weren’t expecting you for a while yet.”

Gladio chuckled. “I was actually on my way to Lestallum when Umbra found me.” His voice turned toward Ignis as he added, “Was gonna requisition another shipment of meteor shards - we’re running low.”

“I’ll have Talcott handle it when he returns,” Ignis replied automatically.
“Speaking of Talcott returning,” Gladio said, “any word yet about our sleepyhead prince?”

“Not yet,” Ignis said.

“It’s only been four hours since Talcott left,” Prompto added. “He won’t even get to Galdin Quay for another four or five.”

Gladio groaned. “I hate waiting.”

“Join the club,” Prompto said. He flopped back onto the booth seat; after a moment Gladio moved a few feet away and sat down as well, on a second booth seat from the sound of creaking vinyl. Ignis resumed his own seat beside Prompto, crossing his legs and folding his hands on his knees to keep from tapping his fingers nervously.

They had at least twelve hours before Talcott could possibly arrive with Noctis - assuming he found him immediately, assuming Noctis made it through the desolation of Galdin Quay, assuming he’d even got off the island—Ignis shut down that line of thought. The gods, the game, and Ardyn all needed Noctis to reach the Crown City and the throne safely. He would be fine.

But they still had twelve hours at minimum before he arrived, and they couldn’t spend it all sitting in silence in the former diner-turned-munitions-storage. They chatted for a while, catching up on what they had each been doing since they’d last been together, but eventually tiredness overcame the jittery combination of worry and excitement keeping them awake, and they retired to the rusty, creaky, but still serviceable camper parked at the edge of the lot.

Ignis slept badly, jolting awake at every crunch of gravel outside, every low rumble of an engine. He’d grown accustomed to his blindness these last ten years, but now he hated it again with a passion because he couldn’t simply glance out the camper’s window to see who’d arrived. His only reassurance was that Prompto and Gladio both seemed as restless as he was, and from the sounds of movement, were studying the new arrivals as intently as Ignis wished he could.

The sudden ringing of his cell phone snapped him out of an uneasy doze, and he fumbled it from his pocket. It wasn’t the sleek touchscreen model he’d owned in Insomnia and lost in Altissia; this was an old flip phone repurposed after its previous owner had succumbed to the Starscourge. While some small part of Ignis chafed at the fact that the tactile buttons were easier for him to use than a touchscreen would have been, he knew it didn’t matter much. The small Lestallum cellular hub and the handful of surviving cell towers were good for naught but basic phone calls anymore.

Fortunately, a phone call was all he needed. Ignis put the phone to his ear, acutely aware of Prompto and Gladio crowding close to listen, and managed to keep his voice almost level.

“Talcott?”

“Found him, sir!” Talcott said proudly.

Relief and joy curled together in Ignis’s stomach. “He’s all right?”

“He’s fine.” Beside Ignis, Gladio blew out an audible sigh of relief.

“You’re still near Galdin Quay?” Ignis asked.

“Yes, sir, that’s—that’s right,” Talcott said, his answer broken by a burst of static in the middle.

“I’d like a word with him, please,” Ignis said. More static all but swallowed his words and he had to repeat himself twice before Talcott got it.
“Oh,” the boy said. “Just a second.” His voice faded as he presumably handed the phone to Noctis. “Said he wants to have a word with you?”

Ignis couldn’t quite make out Noctis’s reply, though even the faint and muffled sound of his king’s voice sent a spike of emotion through his chest. A moment later, Talcott’s voice came back on the line. “He said you can have it in person,” he said ruefully.

Ignis nodded, swallowing his disappointment. Noctis was right; this reunion was better had face to face than over a phone. “In person it shall be, then.”

“Oh,” Talcott agreed. “We should be there shortly, sir.”

“Okay,” Talcott agreed. “We should be there shortly, sir.”

“Drive safely,” Ignis said, and hung up.

“He’s here,” Prompto whispered. “He’s back! It’s really happening!”

“Did you think Umbra was lying?” Gladio teased.

“No,” Prompto said, though the waver in his voice belied his light tone. “I just… Man. I don’t even know. He’s back.”

“Soon,” Ignis said. “But it’s still eight hours from Galdin Quay to Hammerhead. We should try to rest in the meantime.”

“Dammit, we’ve been resting,” Gladio muttered. “I ain’t gonna sleep another wink until I see him safe with my own eyes.”

“Me neither,” Prompto said fervently.

“Nor will I,” Ignis admitted reluctantly. “I’m sure there’s plenty of work around here which we can do while we wait.”

“Let’s go, then,” Gladio said, and nudged Ignis’s shoulder. “We don’t find something to do soon, Prompto’s gonna vibrate right through the floor.”

Prompto snorted, but didn’t deny it. They spent the next eight hours tackling odd jobs around the outpost, things which normally the overworked residents had no time for but which provided enough of a distraction that Ignis managed not to lose his mind. He was just finishing his latest task - sorting a scavenged cache of screws and bolts and miscellaneous small hardware - when his ears caught the low distant rumble of a familiar engine.

Talcott.

Ignis sat up so quickly he very nearly spilled the bolts he’d been sorting. “Prompto,” he called, and didn’t care that his voice shook. “Gladio!”

They were by his side in an instant, Prompto’s boots squeaking as he bounced excitedly. “He’s here?” Prompto demanded. “That’s him?”

“It’s them,” Gladio confirmed. His voice came from further above Ignis than normal; he must have stood on his toes to see over the heavy gate. There was a rustle of fabric and Prompto’s squeaky boots fell silent as Gladio dropped a hand on his shoulder. “Calm down,” Gladio said. “You’re gonna blow a gasket or something.”

“Noct’s back,” Prompto said. “I think I’m allowed.”
The gate creaked and screeched as it rolled aside to admit Talcott’s truck. “Come,” Ignis said, then fell silent, not trusting his voice to further words.

He followed his friends’ footsteps and the sound of Talcott’s engine across the lot. The truck door opened and boots crunched onto the gravel, coming toward them. Then Noctis said, “Hey.”

It was studiously casual, as though Noctis had been at school for the day instead of missing for ten years, and it was the most welcome sound Ignis had heard in a decade.

Gladio said, “‘Hey’? That’s all you have to say for yourself? After all this time?” He, too, was clearly making an attempt to sound casual, and the soft sounds of a scuffle told Ignis he had shoved Noct’s shoulder or ruffled his hair, the way he’d done when they were younger.

Noctis didn’t respond, and even after all this time Ignis knew his prince - his king - well enough to guess it was because Noctis was swallowing back an emotional reaction of his own. Before he could say anything, Prompto said, “Noct, it’s you! It’s really you!”

“Is it?” Noctis said, and he almost managed to maintain his laid-back tone. “I hadn’t realized.”

It took effort for Ignis to keep his own voice calm, light, teasing. He didn’t normally give much thought to the game or the multitudes of players in an alternate reality, but he was suddenly, acutely aware that he didn’t want to have their true reunion in front of so many prying eyes. “Well, well,” he said. “You kept us waiting.”

A footstep on the gravel, then a brush of air warned Ignis a moment before Noct’s hand gripped his shoulder. “Not like I wanted to,” Noct said softly. “We’ve got catching up to do.”

Ignis nodded, and had to swallow before he could trust his voice. “Let’s head inside.”
Chapter Summary

In which everyone catches up, and it's time to leave on their final mission.

Chapter Notes

Chapters will still come out a little slower than usual as I make sure the fixed ending goes correctly. Plus life is crazy hectic right now. Wish me luck!

The old diner had been occupied by a group of hunters passing through on a supply run, but they cleared out with a rapidity which suggested Gladio had made use of his considerable ability to glower. Ignis managed to hold himself together long enough to follow the others to the seating area where he and Prompto had waited earlier, but suddenly he couldn’t bear the thought of simply sitting down as though everything was fine.

Letting the brush of air and the soft sound of footsteps guide his hands, he reached out, found Noctis’s arm, and pulled him into a fierce hug. Noctis hugged him back with equal force; an instant later Prompto and Gladio collapsed on them as well, their arms wrapping around Noctis and Ignis alike. Ignis’s throat was tight and he didn’t trust his voice; from the soft strangled noises, the hard swallows, the not-quite-silent sniffles, the others felt the same. They stood there for a long while, just clinging to one another - to Noctis, alive and well and returned after ten long years.

Ignis had feared, as the years stretched on, that a decade apart would strain or even break his bond with Noctis. It had certainly strained his bond with Prompto and Gladio, despite their attempts to keep it whole. He’d grown accustomed, these last ten years, to no longer thinking of Noctis first and foremost. He’d grown accustomed, as he feared the memory was slowly becoming more idol than truth, more an image of a boy he’d once known in his youth than the reality of a king he would follow as a man. It might still be true - Noctis had been back for all of five minutes yet - but at least in this moment, in this embrace, the bond he remembered was as strong as ever.

They didn’t so much disentangle themselves as collapse onto the booth seat in a heap, Noctis at the center as though he were the sun around which the three of them orbited. And in many ways, that was true. Without Noctis, they’d drifted, but the moment he’d returned he’d drawn them back, inevitable as gravity.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Noctis admitted once they’d settled. “You guys all—You look great. But Hammerhead… Galdin Quay...” He trailed off with a sigh. “Kinda hard to have a happy reunion when that’s what I came back to.”

Ignis nodded, giddy relief fading under the weight of the reality of the situation. “It’s not what we hoped, certainly,” he said. “But neither is it as bad as we expected. We’ve still this outpost, as well as a hunters’ settlement in Meldacio, and half a dozen more around the country.”
Noctis shifted, his voice turning toward Ignis in surprise. “That’s a lot.”

“Mostly thanks to Ravus,” Gladio added. “He kept the havens alive. Without those, we never could’ve kept most of those bases.”

“Ravus?” Noctis asked. “He survived?”

Ignis nodded. “You succeeded.”

Noctis’s sigh of relief brushed across Ignis’s arm. “I’m glad. Where is he?”

“He went ahead to the Crown City,” Ignis said. “He intends to fulfil the Oracle’s duty to prepare the way for the True King.”

There was an odd pause, almost a hesitation. “Oh,” Noctis said. “Okay.” Ignis frowned, straining his ears. Was that amusement in Noct’s voice? He wished, suddenly, for his sight, to be able to see his king’s face. He hadn’t thought ten years would have affected his ability to read Noctis’s tone so badly.

But apparently he wasn’t the only one who’d heard something off. Gladio said, “Hey, go easy on Ravus. He straightened out, got his shit together. He’s done a lot of good things for Lucis.”

“I’m glad,” Noctis said again. “I just… I didn’t expect it from him.”


“Really,” Noctis said, his voice turning back to Ignis. “How’s that?”

Ignis nudged Noctis with the arm he had slung around his shoulders. “I have a great deal of experience managing recalcitrant princes.”

Noctis snorted. “I think that’s the nicest way you’ve ever said I was a little shit growing up.”

Ignis smiled back, and for a moment it was like before, as though the last ten years hadn’t happened. It hurt - oh, it hurt - to think that this day and a handful more were the last he might ever get with Noctis, but in this moment he couldn’t bring himself to care. “As long as your use of the past tense remains accurate, I’m willing to leave it behind us.”

“Deal,” Noctis said with a chuckle. “So Ravus is on our side for real now. What else has happened? What have you guys been up to? Talcott gave me an overview on the ride here, but I want to hear it from you.”

“I’m glad,” Noctis said again. “I just… I didn’t expect it from him.”


“All good,” Ravus said. “But he’s a bit of a task.”

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“Oh, that,” Ignis said. “I’ve been keeping busy in Lestallum. Whether anyone still celebrated the major holidays, whether any children were being born. Who had become romantically involved with whom, which turned into a forty-minute sidetrack that had Prompto falling off the seat in a laughing fit at what was apparently a beautifully scandalized expression on Noctis’s face. Ignis had to chase Prompto off in search of refreshments to get the discussion back on track.”

They talked for hours. Noctis wanted to hear everything - not just the tactical situation report, but the details of their lives, of the state of his people and his country. Iris Amicitia’s development into a daemon hunter and Gladio’s simultaneous chagrin and pride. Dave Auburnbrie’s retirement after his injury, how Cid was keeping busy in Lestallum. Whether anyone still celebrated the major holidays, whether any children were being born. Who had become romantically involved with whom, which turned into a forty-minute sidetrack that had Prompto falling off the seat in a laughing fit at what was apparently a beautifully scandalized expression on Noctis’s face. Ignis had to chase Prompto off in search of refreshments to get the discussion back on track.
Prompto returned with strips of mushroom jerky and a bottle of Altissian wine to share. The wine was a surprisingly good vintage; according to Prompto, an Accordan refugee had traded it to him and Cindy in exchange for day headlights for her motorcycle. But the mushroom jerky was enough to turn the conversation back to more grim matters, like the fact that animal protein had become a scarcity years ago as most wild animals were infected with the Starscourge and turned into daemons. Lestallum and Meldacio both kept stables of livestock in the relative safety of day lamps, but they were too precious for the eggs and milk they generated to slaughter for meat.

“Even I’m mostly a vegetarian now,” Gladio complained jokingly. “I don’t remember the last time I had a good steak.”

“Can’t have that,” Noctis teased back, though there was a somber edge to his tone, and his voice turned solemn when he added, “I wish I could have come back sooner. I know you did all you could - and it’s better than we feared - but still.” He sighed.

“You, too, did all you could,” Ignis said. “The Starscourge must be eliminated, and to do that, you need—” His voice caught, the emotions he’d been ignoring while they talked threatening to swell up and choke him. He swallowed them down once more and continued, “You need the power of the Crystal.”

Noct’s hair rustled against his collar as he nodded. “I know. But too many people are dead because of how long it took. If I’d only—”

“Nuh-uh,” Gladio cut in. “No ‘if only’s. We did what we did, and we are where we are.”

“A king pushes onward, always,” Noctis recited softly. “Accepting the consequences, and never looking back.”

Ignis nodded. “Precisely.”

“Just sucks that the consequences are… what they are,” Prompto said quietly. “It’s not your fault, Noct, or anyone’s, but…” He sighed, wine sloshing as he took a too-long drink. “I can’t even say I’ve buried too many friends, ‘cause we don’t get to bury the ones that turn into daemons.”

“You’re not going to have to bury any more,” Noctis said. There was steel in his voice and Ignis’s stomach plummeted as he realized what it meant. “I’m going to end this.”

“Noct!” Prompto yelped. “No! No way, we’re not gonna just—”

“There’s no other way,” Noctis interrupted. Gladio drew breath to speak and Noctis’s voice turned toward him. “I know you promised to protect me, even from my own dead ancestors, but this… I learned a lot inside the Crystal. I know why it has to happen this way.”

“I don’t care,” Gladio snarled. “I’m your Shield, Noct, and ten years ain’t changed that one bit. Anyone tries to kill you—”

Noctis leaned away from Ignis toward Gladio; he must have put a hand on Gladio’s arm because Gladio stopped talking abruptly, sucking in a sharp breath as though he’d been struck instead. Noctis said, “Please. I know what I’m asking you to do, and I swear to you, if there was any other way, I wouldn’t.” His voice turned toward Prompto, then Ignis. “The best thing you can do - what I need from you - is to help me do this, and don’t interfere when…” His voice hitched. “When it happens.”

“Noct,” Ignis whispered, then stopped; he didn’t trust his voice right then. He’d hoped to convince Noctis to search for an alternate option, a way to defy destiny even at this last minute, but if Noctis
had already made up his mind...

Noctis shifted closer again, bumping Ignis’s shoulder with his own, then his voice turned back toward Gladio and Prompto. “We should get going. We’ve got a long road ahead of us, and the longer I stay here…” He shook his head. “This isn’t… isn’t easy for you. For any of us. I don’t want to make you hurt any longer than… than is necessary.”

“Noct—” Prompto said, but then cut himself off with a strangled sound.

Noctis stood up, the leather of his jacket snapping with the too-quick movement. “Come on. We’d better get ready.”

His voice was firm, decided: the voice of a king, and there was nothing Ignis could say to fight it. He stood, Gladio and Prompto at his side as they followed their king to begin the preparations for their final journey together.

*             *             *

Ten years ago, Ignis had witnessed the ending of the game - the end of Noctis’s life - twice. Both times, he’d been aware that the events were shown out of order, that the last camp they would make with their king happened before they crossed the long bridge into Insomnia, not after. Yet he still found himself surprised when they reached the cliff above the bridge and pitched camp. Some irrational, childish part of him had clung to the idea that even after the throne room, after that final sacrifice, he would get one more night by Noct’s side.

Talcott had dropped them off back by the old Niflheim barricade; the road beyond had been badly damaged during the invasion, and the subsequent decade of disrepair had left it impassable to vehicles. He’d hugged Noctis goodbye, the creaking of his canvas jacket and Noctis’s quiet oof giving away just how tightly Talcott had clung. Still, he’d managed to sound brave as he wished them luck and drove away.

Now it was just the four of them: Ignis, Gladio, Prompto, and Noctis. They’d changed into their Kingsglaive uniforms back in Hammerhead, and Noctis into his formal suit, giving themselves time to get used to the new clothes as they walked from the barricade up to the old campsite on the cliff’s edge. Ravus had clearly passed through and cleaned out the area on his way to the city: few daemons remained, and those which dared approach fell quickly to Prompto’s gun or Gladio’s sword.

The old campsite was right where Ignis remembered, overlooking the channel between Insomnia and Lucis. The air was heavy with the briny scent of seawater, and the rush of waves was a quiet susurrus in the background. Gladio dug out the old camping gear still stored in the armory, and Ignis put the little camp stove to use making dinner. Their supplies were sorely limited, but he did what he could to at least mimic Noctis’s favorite dishes, and tried not to think about the fact that he was preparing a condemned man’s last meal.

They managed to keep the mood, if not light, at least elevated as they ate, telling Noctis some of the sillier stories they’d accumulated over the last ten years. But neither the food nor the stories could last forever. Eventually there was a lull in the conversation, the crackling of the fire and the distant, ever-present howling of daemons the only sounds.

“The four of us around a campfire,” Noctis said quietly, in the tone of one pretending he wasn’t feeling a surge of emotion. “How long’s it been?”

“An eternity,” Ignis said, then bit down on his tongue. He would not give in to the grief first - he
had to be strong for his prince. His king.

“So, yeah,” Noctis said, then stopped. His chair creaked slightly as he shifted; to Ignis’s other side, the angle of Prompto’s breaths - slightly too loud, too harsh - changed as though he’d hung his head. Ignis didn’t trust his voice, still biting his tongue hard enough that he tasted blood. No one else spoke, either, and eventually Noctis tried again: “I, um…”

“Out with it,” Gladio said.


“So, I…” Noctis said, then, all in a rush, “Whatever happens tomorrow, I’ve made my peace. We’ve done everything we can. I said before that if I have to die to save everyone, I’ll do it. Still… Knowing that, and seeing you here, now…” His voice cracked, and so did Ignis’s heart. “It’s… more than I can take.”

“Yeah,” Prompto murmured. “You’re damn right it is.”

Gladio made a sound that might have been an attempt at a chuckle. “You spit it out.”

It was several seconds more before Ignis could unclench his jaw enough to speak. “It’s good to hear,” he admitted. He wanted to say more - to say how proud he was of Noctis, not just for admitting all that, but for everything he had done for them and everything he was about to do - but the words locked in his throat and he had to swallow, to bow his head as tears slid down his cheeks.

Beside him, the rich fabric of Noctis’s suit rustled as he stood. “Well,” Noct said, and there were tears in his voice, too. “What can I say? You guys are the best.”

*    *    *

They retreated to the tent, letting the thin fabric walls shut out destiny for one last night. They didn’t talk, just sat shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee in a huddle until first Prompto, then Gladio, then Noctis fell asleep leaning on each other. Ignis hadn’t expected to sleep, but woke some time later to the soft sounds of movement at the tent entrance. For a bad second he thought daemons had found them, but then he realized Noctis was no longer lying against his side.

A quick brush of his hand to his other side told him that Prompto and Gladio were still asleep, sprawled across the floor of the tent. Ignis eased upright, feeling his way carefully to avoid stepping on them, and slipped out of the tent. Noct’s footsteps were already moving away on the other side of the camp and Ignis’s heart clenched - was Noct planning to sneak away without them?

But then Noctis said, voice pitched low to avoid waking the others, “I, uh, didn’t think I’d ever be the one to say this, but I couldn’t sleep.”

The sudden relief was enough to make Ignis chuckle. “I’m surprised any of us managed it.”

“I’m glad we did, even for a little bit,” Noctis said. His voice turned away again, moving further out from camp toward the cliff. “Tomorrow’s… not gonna be easy.”

“No,” Ignis agreed.
The terrain here was treacherous, the rocks slick with salt spray, and Ignis had to pay attention to his feet for a moment. He was about to ask a question just to get Noctis to talk again, so Ignis could orient himself, when Noct said, “You know, looking back, it wasn’t all bad.” He was clearly trying for levity, but missed, melancholy heavy in his voice.

“I suppose we had some fun along the way,” Ignis agreed, and forced his own voice to be light.

“And our fair share of trouble, too,” Noctis said with a faint chuckle. “But I don’t have any regrets. Luna and you guys brought me this far, and now it’s all on me.”

“No,” Ignis corrected. Even ten years later, he still remembered listening to the last scenes of the game, Noctis leaving them behind to ascend the throne alone. If Ignis could change nothing else - if Noctis would allow him to change nothing else - he would change that. “You won’t be going alone. I’ll—”

“No, you’re right,” Noctis interrupted, his voice turning toward Ignis. “I mean, I wouldn’t have made it all this way without you guys. Why stop now?”

Ignis frowned at him, surprised at the easy agreement. Noctis continued, “I didn’t… I still don’t want you to have to—to see that. It’s not fair to make you watch and not be able to do anything. But…” A long pause. If he was fidgeting, Ignis couldn’t hear it over the soft rush of water in the channel behind him. “But you’re right. I won’t be doing this alone.”

“Noct—”

A footstep on the stone, Noctis moving closer to him. “You can’t follow me into the Crystal’s realm in body, but you’ll be there in spirit. I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

Once again emotion closed Ignis’s throat, choking him. He took another step forward, one hand reaching out in a way he hoped didn’t look as desperate as he felt. He couldn’t see his king’s face, and he needed the reassurance of touch.

Noctis’s hand wrapped around his, his other hand coming up to cling to Ignis’s wrist with a strength equal to Ignis’s own. “Thanks,” Noctis whispered. “Thanks for everything, Iggy.”

The tears he’d been fighting slid down Ignis’s cheeks. He wanted, desperately, to see Noctis’s face, but that was an old wish, an old ache. Instead his mind offered a memory of their childhood, meeting Noctis for the first time, holding his hands much the same way he did now. That image, too, was blurred and faded, but he still remembered his simple, childish joy at the way Noctis’s face had lit up when Ignis had smiled at him, the brilliance of Noctis’s own shy grin.

“To the very end,” Ignis whispered back.

Noctis squeezed his hand, then, without letting go, moved to stand at Ignis’s side, close enough that their shoulders touched. They stood in silence, letting the sound of the waves roll over them, until Prompto and Gladio emerged from the tent and it was time to return to Insomnia.
Insomnia

Chapter Summary

In which Noctis and his retinue return to Insomnia.

Chapter Notes

This fic uses the original, non-Royal Edition ending of the game as a baseline. While there are good things about the Royal Edition ending, the writing is hilariously bad (among many other laughable lines, street-punk hardass Cor says the 80s-pulp-fantasy line, "For many moons we have awaited your return" XD ). Also, since the fic is set before the RE was released (and therefore the version of the ending Ignis watched with Kate), it made more sense to use the original one instead of trying to find a way to incorporate all the new RE stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Across the long bridge over the Lucian Channel. Through the tunnel under the physical wall which had once supplemented the magical one. Over hills of rubble which were all that remained of grand buildings and sweeping highways.

Into Insomnia.

“Home, sweet home,” Gladio murmured as they came to a stop just outside the tunnel. The three of them were probably taking in the sight of their city destroyed.

“Yeah,” Prompto agreed quietly. “At long last.”

“What we’ve been waiting for,” Ignis said.

“Sure is,” Prompto said.

“Next stop, the Citadel,” Gladio said, his voice grim. He strode forward, boots heavy on the broken pavement; Ignis followed for a few steps before realizing Noctis hadn’t moved.

He was about to ask when Noctis said, “Yeah.” A shimmer of power from where Noctis stood told Ignis he’d put on the Ring of the Lucii.

There was a sudden clatter of metal armor from off to the side and Ignis twitched, hands reaching for his weapons before he registered the familiar footsteps clambering toward them over what sounded like a pile of debris. Ravus said, “Your Majesty. Welcome home.”

“Ravus,” Noctis answered. “It’s good to see you.”

“You’re hurt!” Prompto yelped, and stepped closer, but Ravus brushed him off with a rattle of his prosthetic arm.
“Flesh wounds,” he said dismissively, then, “I’m fine,” as Ignis closed the distance between them and ran his hands over Ravus’s torso and good arm. He found a handful ofrips and tears in Ravus’s heavy jacket, but as he’d said, nothing severe. Ravus pushed him away, though not ungently. “Honestly, it’s no more than scratches and bruises,” he said. “I was clearing a squad of MTs from the tunnel, and while I was occupied with them, an Iseultalon snuck up on me.”

A few years ago, Ignis would have checked more thoroughly despite Ravus’s protests; the man was remarkably durable and would hide and push through wounds that should have maimed if not killed him. But Ravus no longer felt as though death was his only answer. He wanted to live, for the sake of the man his sister had loved, for the king he’d vowed to support. So Ignis let himself be moved aside, falling back to stand beside Noctis. “If you say so.”

“What,” Noctis said to Ignis. “You couldn’t mother-chocobo me for ten years so now you’re doing it to Ravus?”

“You can have him back,” Ravus said dryly.

“You underestimate me,” Ignis answered lightly. “I’m perfectly capable of managing two obstreperous royals simultaneously.”

Noctis laughed, and oh, Ignis had missed that laugh. His chest ached and he turned away, using the pretense of straightening his jacket to hide the wash of grief that burned away the moment of levity.

He must have been more distracted than he’d thought, because when Noctis next spoke, his voice came from ahead of them instead of to Ignis’s side where he’d been standing a moment ago. “I’d like to think I need less managing now.”

Gladio snorted. “Never heard of a king that didn’t need managing. And speaking of obstreperous, we’ve got incoming.” His voice was directed off to the side and Ignis tilted his head in that direction, ears straining; after a moment he picked up the dragging steps and whir-click of rogue MTs.

“Right,” Noctis said, his voice coming from his spot at Ignis’s elbow once more. He must not have moved after all; the stone around them was simply causing Noctis’s voice to echo in unexpected directions. When he spoke again, he sounded determined, almost eager: “Are you with me?”

“Of course,” Ignis said, and called his daggers to hand.

“Lead the way, Majesty,” Ravus agreed.

“Ever at your side,” Prompto said.

“Until the very end,” Gladio added.

They launched themselves at the MTs, working with a synchrony that came surprisingly easy despite the ten years which had passed since they last fought side by side. Without an Imperial controller, the troopers were uncoordinated, but what they’d lost in intelligent behavior they more than made up for in raw power. No surprise, since they ran on daemon miasma and the air was thick with it. At least their creaking joints and whirring servos made it easy for Ignis to track their frenzied, erratic movement.

He and the others had barely dispatched the first group before more emerged, trickling out from within alleys and behind rubble. “Damn,” Noctis muttered. “How many of these things are there?”
“An invasion’s worth,” Ignis said grimly.

“We keep fighting every one of ‘em that turns up, we’re never gonna get anywhere,” Gladio said.

“Yeah,” Noctis agreed. “Come on.”

They pushed forward, along what had once been the broad boulevard running through the heart of Insomnia. Noctis took the lead with Gladio by his side, while Ignis, Ravus, and Prompto guarded their flanks. The city was eerily quiet, and Ignis struggled to connect it to the Crown City he remembered. His mind supplied images from his youth of bustling streets, bright with sunlight reflected off mirror-walled buildings, and colorful with signs and trees and citizens. He wasn’t sure he wanted to see what the place looked like now. The silence was bad enough; the rubble crunching underfoot and the stink of rot and death on the breeze made clear that those memories were long gone.

They walked for some time, six to eight miles perhaps, following the boulevard toward the center of the city. More MTs dogged their heels, and they stumbled across several larger daemons: Nagarani, Yojimbos, Ariadnes, and an Isueltalon. By the time the second Ariadne fell dead, Ignis was panting, his muscles aching from the constant fighting. He stumbled away from the Ariadne’s death throes, intending to find a wall to lean on.

“Iggy!” Gladio yelled. “Tree!”

Ignis froze. It had been years since his companions had had to warn him about an imminent collision during a fight - he must be far more tired than he’d thought. A moment later Gladio’s heavy bootsteps approached. “Stars, Iggy,” he muttered, his voice ducking low as he presumably dodged branches. “How the fuck did you get in here without braining yourself?”

“Luck, I suppose,” Ignis answered automatically, even as unease curled in his stomach. He hadn’t felt anything - not the brush of leaves or cobwebs threaded between them, not the subtle pressure change caused by the presence of something large enough to affect the flow of air. He knew he was tired, but navigating blind was second nature by now.

Gladio took him by the shoulder and steered him away, making him duck his head half to the ground before releasing him. The hum of unease intensified as they moved: Ignis still felt nothing, no leaves, no tree at all. He very nearly waved an arm around in search of the branches he’d supposedly passed through, stopping himself only with the knowledge that if he appeared too weak or incapable, his friends might force him to stay behind for his own safety.

As it was, Noctis touched his elbow and asked, “You all right?”

“Fine,” Ignis said. It came out a bit stiff and he shook himself, trying to throw off that lingering unease.

“Don’t worry about Iggy,” Prompto spoke up. His boots slapped the ground behind Ignis and Ignis felt the slight brush of air that was an incoming thump on the shoulder. “He can take care of himself.”

“Better than most of us, I bet,” Noctis said, his voice light. “Still, we can take a breather if you need it.”

“I’m fine,” Ignis insisted, and let a bit of his irritation show. “We should keep going.” He ran through his mental map of the city, trying to figure out where they were. “How close are we to the Citadel?”
“Probably another three, four hours,” Gladio said, “unless we can catch a break from the daemons.”

“You sure you don’t want to rest?” Noctis asked Ignis.

Ignis opened his right eye just so he could roll it at Noctis, which earned him a soft laugh. “Point taken,” Noctis said. “Let’s go.”

He led the way again, Gladio taking a couple quick strides to fall into step beside him. Ignis started to hurry forward to join them when Ravus’s clanking steps approached. In a voice pitched for Ignis’s ears only, Ravus said, “You feel it, don’t you? Something’s off.”

“What do you see?” Ignis asked, equally low.

“I blink and people aren’t where they were a moment ago,” Ravus admitted. “Your friends as well as the daemons. It’s harder to be certain, but I believe it’s happened with walls and trees as well.”

“When Gladio called for me, I would have sworn on my life there was no tree there,” Ignis said. “I should have felt *something*.” Abruptly he remembered the moment at the entrance to the city, when Noctis had seemed to move without moving. “I think I heard it happen with Noct earlier.”

“Could it be Izunia?” Ravus suggested. “He’s capable of creating illusions.”

“Perhaps, though I can’t see what purpose it would serve.”

“If not him, then who?” Ravus asked. “Or what?”

Ignis shook his head. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

Ravus’s hair rustled against his collar as he nodded. Up ahead, Prompto whistled a warning that more daemons were approaching, and Ignis stepped away from Ravus, calling his weapons to hand once more. From the hiss of steel through the air, it was a Yojimbo, and the five of them dispatched it quickly before resuming their forward march.

They’d only gone another mile or so when Noctis’s footsteps came to a halt and he muttered a curse. “Road’s blocked,” he said out loud.

“Not making it through here,” Prompto agreed.

“Think there’s any other way around?” Gladio asked.

Ravus’s armor jangled as he walked up to whatever blockage they were looking at. “Come, it’s not that bad. Is the King of Light deterred by a little rubble?”

“It’s more than a little,” Noctis protested.

Ravus scoffed. “The other side looks clear enough,” he said. The gears in his mechanical arm whined and he grunted, his coat snapping with a sharp movement. When he next spoke his voice was far over their heads, and teasing. “Will you join me, Majesty, or shall your Shield carry you?”

“But all of us are eight feet tall,” Noctis grumbled. “Gladio, gimme a boost.”

Gladio obligingly boosted Noctis up, then Prompto and Ignis before climbing up after them. The stone under Ignis’s hands felt ancient, not the sleek, polished granite of the newer buildings but the rough, weather-beaten marble of Insomnia’s oldest statues.
“What is this?” Prompto asked uneasily as they scrambled across it. “Is that a hand?!"

Ignis had a moment of worry that they’d stumbled across a still-fresh dead body before Gladio said, “Looks like one of the Old Wall statues.”

“The Wise King, I think,” Noctis added absently. “Look, see the feathers?”

“They really took a beating, huh,” Prompto said.

“Supposedly one of the Kingsglaive activated the Old Wall during the invasion of Insomnia,” Ignis said. “They fought the Empire’s daemonic weapon.”

Prompto whistled. “I thought that was just a story.”


Ravus said nothing, though there was tension in his body when he hooked an arm around Ignis to help him over an uneven section of rubble. Ravus had been there during the fall of Insomnia, though he’d confessed to Ignis once that he didn’t remember anything after he’d tried to wear the Ring of the Lucii and it has burned off his left arm. Ignis squeezed Ravus’s good hand in reassurance, and felt some of the tension ease.

Eventually they picked their way across the mound and down the other side, resuming their trek along the city’s main street. More daemons met them out here, another Isueltalon and a horde of daemonified Imperial troopers. The fights were becoming almost rote by now, the five of them working in a comfortable rhythm. Ravus slotted easily into their movements; he and Ignis had always fought well together, and his height and long rapier gave him enough reach to stay out of the others’ way. They cleared the Isueltalon and the troopers, then a small gang of imps and bussemands, then a Nagarani, making steady progress toward the Citadel.

Then Gladio said, “Hey, Prompto - something wrong?”

Ignis had been roaming off near the edge of the street, on the opposite side from Prompto, guarding their flank. Now he tilted his ear toward Prompto, suddenly afraid Prompto had been injured and expecting him to brush it off. But to his surprise, Prompto hesitated, then said, “It’s… Anyone else feeling like, deja vu? Only not exactly, but like…” A pause, the telltale rustle as he bounced restlessly. “I keep feeling like we’re supposed to be underground. Like if I turned around I’d see the subway or something, y’know?”

“Actually…” Noctis said slowly, “yeah, I’ve been feeling like that, too.”

“…Same,” Gladio admitted. “Like I can see the tunnel walls out of the corners of my eyes. Iggy, what about you, do you hear any—” He broke off with a sharp curse. “Iggy?! Ignis!”

Ignis frowned. “I’m right here,” he said. “Why are you shouting?”

“Right here, where?” Noctis asked. Ignis heard uncertain footsteps, as though the others were looking around for him. “Are you… inside that building?”

“What building?” Ignis held out a hand, but felt only air around him. “There’s nothing—”

“Fuck!” Prompto yelped. “Look!”

“What?!” Ignis demanded in frustration.
“Your hand,” Noctis breathed. “Ignis, take a step toward me?”

Ignis frowned harder, but obliged, though he still felt nothing around him. “Will someone please explain what’s going on?”

“You’re standing in a wall,” Ravus said. His voice had gone flat and aloof in the way it did when he was especially upset.

Not that Ignis could blame him. “I’m sorry?”

“I—” Heavy bootsteps, then Gladio grabbed Ignis by the wrist and hauled him forward. “Stars, Iggy, that’s fucking creepy.”

More footsteps as Prompto circled around them to where Ignis had been standing. He breathed out a soft curse. “It’s not real, look.” His jacket rustled and air brushed over Ignis’s skin as Prompto waved his arms around.

“Just like the tree,” Ravus said.

“The…” Gladio sucked in a sharp breath as he got it. “Earlier, Ignis, when you walked into that tree. You didn’t brain yourself ‘cause the whole thing was an illusion.”

“Is it Ardyn?” Prompto asked uneasily.

“Maybe,” Noctis said, “but why? I mean, I know he wants to mess with me, but this isn’t exactly his style.”

“I don’t like this,” Gladio growled. “If it ain’t Ardyn, then who?”

Ignis shook his head, the unease from before flaring to full-blown worry in his gut. “I don’t know, but perhaps walking through the open streets is no longer the wisest route.”

“There’s a subway entrance a couple blocks that way,” Prompto said. “I’m pretty sure that line connects to the Citadel Station - we could probably walk straight there.”

“I dunno,” Gladio said uneasily. “We’ve been feeling like we should be underground. Could be whatever’s causing this shit’s trying to force us down there, where we can’t run.”

“If it’s a trap,” Noctis said, “then springing it should let us find out who set it. I say we go down.”

His voice turned toward Ignis at the end of the sentence, the inflection not quite a question. Ignis considered for a moment, trying to think both of their current situation, and what he still remembered from the ending of the game as Kate had narrated it all those years ago. If memory served, they had gone underground at one point on their way to the Citadel.

The moment he thought of it, he felt a rush of relief, as though something had clicked into place. Almost without meaning to, he nodded. “I agree. We’re likely to be safer in the tunnels.”

Gladio growled under his breath but didn’t protest further; Ignis had the unpleasant suspicion Gladio had felt the same inexplicable sense of relief at the decision as Ignis had. The cape on Noctis’s suit snapped as he pivoted toward the subway entrance. “Let’s move. The sooner we figure out what’s going on, the better.”

Ignis followed, thoughts racing. Illusory walls and trees made no sense as a tactic for Ardyn Izunia - he wanted them at the Citadel so he could fight Noctis. It was possible he was deliberately trying
to herd them into the subway tunnels, but Ignis couldn’t imagine why he’d do that, either. Unless the tunnels were an easier route through the destroyed city, and Ardyn had simply grown impatient? But even that didn’t sit right. Ardyn wasn’t that subtle an opponent - if he was involved, he would have put in an appearance by now, taunting Noctis and trying to throw him off-balance.

But if not Ardyn, then who? Or as Ravus had said earlier, what? Ignis struggled to remember this section of the game, what other opponents their game avatars had faced, but he and Kate had spent little time on the path through Insomnia. In the game, it was nothing but a sequence of miniboss fights, and Ignis hadn’t been interested in gameplay at the time.

The echoes of his friends’ footsteps and the movement of air on his skin changed, in time for Ignis to find the top step of the staircase down into the subway. As they descended, Prompto said wistfully, “It’s worn down, but still the same.”

“Just like I remember,” Gladio agreed.

“Always came in handy,” Ignis said absently, then frowned at his own voice. He hadn’t meant to say that; the words had come out on their own.

“Used to be filled with people,” Noctis said, a melancholy note to his voice. “Let’s see that it is again.”

*Lines from the game,* Ignis realized suddenly. It had happened back in Zegnautus, too, if he remembered correctly. They were speaking to the game’s script, and he couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened had they not descended into the subway. Would they still have spoken the lines?

—and then it hit him, with all the suddenness of a galvanade’s blast. It wasn’t Ardyn who had been driving them down to the tunnels, nor a heretofore unknown type of daemon.

It was the game itself.

Chapter End Notes

We’ve now entered the finale. I hope it lives up to all your expectations! <3
In which a tornado is brewing...

The realization that the game itself was forcing them along its path stole Ignis’s breath, left him dizzy for a moment as he processed the implications. When he’d been in Kate’s reality, the game had crashed, refusing to progress; while in this world, life continued as normal. Or at least, as normal as it could be given the apocalypse descending upon them all. The point being, none of the others had ever mentioned noticing that they were being guided - or forced - down a particular route.

Ignis had noticed its touch, here and there: the moments back then when they’d spoken lines from the game, and most obviously with Ravus’s unexpected revival as a daemon despite Ardyn claiming not to be the cause. But Ignis also hadn’t been able to speak of the game to his friends upon his return from Kate’s reality ten years ago, had kept finding excuses to himself to go along with the game’s script. Noctis had done so, as well, when they’d returned the second time - had insisted they go to the Crystal despite all logic and sense telling them to go anywhere else. And he was doing it again, even now. Ignis remembered the conversation in Hammerhead’s former diner, Noctis’s insistence that this was how it had to be, his refusal to allow them to consider any other option.

The game.

Nearly ten years since Ignis had last given any significant thought to the alternate reality and the game which narrated - dictated - their lives. But that had been a mistake. He should have anticipated this, should have considered that the game daemonifying Ravus ten years ago meant it would take additional action to keep them on the path it intended.

Ignis gritted his teeth, shoving the self-recrimination to the back of his mind. There was no time for that now. He could be angry at himself later, after he’d figured out what to do about it.

The unsteady clatter of daemon footsteps against the subway tile warned him of an approaching squad of enemies, and he threw himself into the battle, letting his body fight while his mind turned over this new development. The game was turning to increasingly less subtle means to force them along its intended path. Was that somehow related to the illusory trees and walls, to the way his friends seemed to jump around in space?

Video games hadn’t been a viable form of entertainment for anyone since the Crown City fell, but Ignis still remembered watching Noctis and Prompto play, sprawled on the couch in Noctis’s apartment. They’d complained about glitches in the games not unlike what was happening now, in the real world: characters jumping back and forth between locations, or walking through walls or other scenery. Instances where the game wasn’t running properly and causing bizarre effects as a result.

It made sense, after a fashion: Ignis and the others hadn’t been following the intended path through the subway tunnels. They’d “broken” the game in which they lived, which had in turn caused the game to glitch. But why? An alternate route through the city seemed like too small a change to
matter so dearly; they were, after all, still headed toward the Citadel, and Noctis still seemed
determined to fulfill the game’s intended ending. But more important even than the why was the
question of how they could fix it - how they could make buildings be solid once more and stop
themselves from being randomly moved through space.

The last of the daemonic troopers fell with a shriek of collapsing metal, Noctis’s footsteps already
pressing forward even before the creature’s death throes had ended. Ignis trailed behind the others,
thinking furiously. This would be easier if he knew more about the nature of video game glitches,
but aside from listening to Noctis and Prompto complain about them, he’d never paid them much
heed.

“This sucks,” Gladio grumbled from somewhere up ahead beside Noct. “I was expecting a trap, but
there’s nothing here.”

“Isn’t that good?” Prompto asked.

“No.” Gladio’s voice dropped to a near-growl. “The longer we go without a trap, the more the back
of my neck itches. Something wanted us to be down here, and I ain’t gonna be happy until it shows
its face.”

Ignis hesitated. Ravus still didn’t know about the game, but the others did, and moreover Noctis
and Prompto knew much more about video games than Ignis. He needed their minds working on
this problem, too. “I think I know what’s causing it,” he said.

“Really,” Gladio said irritably. “Wanna share with the class?”

A noise caught Ignis’s attention, a soft *plink* that might have been water dripping from a broken
pipe, or the movement of a daemonified trooper in the distance. He turned his head, attention
focused on the sound, hands reaching for his daggers in the armory.

“Hear that?” Prompto asked. “Think there’s more of those troopers?”

Ignis was about to answer him when Gladio snapped, “Iggy!”, harsh recrimination in his voice.

For a moment Ignis couldn’t remember what Gladio had asked, why he was so upset - then he
realized what had just happened. Despite thinking only moments before about how the game had
once prevented him from discussing its true nature with his friends, he’d fallen for the same trick
once more. Thank the Stars for Gladio’s bullheaded stubbornness which kept him, at least, from
succumbing.

Still, it meant Ignis would have to speak very carefully. “Right,” he said. “Do you remember, ten
years ago in Zegnautus Keep while we searched for the Crystal. Doesn’t all this remind you of
what we learned then?”

There was a startled sort of pause, then Noctis swore, colorfully and viciously in language ill-suited
to a king. Gladio said, “What are you—Oh. Fuck.” Prompto didn’t say anything, but hissed
between his teeth in realization.

“That’d do it,” Noctis muttered.

“ Weird that it’s happening now, though,” Prompto said. “Like… it’s just been since we got to
Insomnia. Why would the—” He cut himself off sharply, clearly realizing he shouldn’t say the
words aloud.

Ravus folded his arms with a rustle of leather and clicks from his mechanical arm. “I take it this is
something I’m not to know,” he said, a bitterness in his voice which Ignis hadn’t heard in years, since Ravus had curbed his drinking and accepted his place among the living.

“Not at the moment,” Ignis admitted reluctantly. He hated keeping Ravus in the dark, but even now the game was trying to tug his focus away with faint, distant, attention-grabbing sounds. He didn’t want to know what it might do if he got as far as speaking the words aloud. “It’s a rather… unusual situation—”

“Careful,” Prompto interrupted. His voice was turned away from Ignis, toward a wall - another glitch?

Ignis winced. Active glitching was far worse than the game simply finding subtle ways to distract him to keep him from revealing its true nature. “We can’t risk speaking of it here,” he said to Ravus. “I’m sorry. I’ll explain later, if I’m able.”

Ravus made an unhappy noise in the back of his throat, but didn’t protest further. There was silence for a moment as the rest of them digested this revelation; then Noctis said, “Okay. So that’s what’s going on. What do we do about it?”

Choosing his words carefully, Ignis answered, “For now, the safest thing we can do is to continue as we planned. As long as we’re careful, it should grow no worse, at least. But to be honest, this is your area of expertise, not mine.”

Noctis snorted. “Well, you’re right about that. For now, we keep going. Everyone, keep your eyes peeled. If you think it’s getting worse, or start to feel like we should be going someplace else or doing something different, say something right away.”

* * *

As they made their way through the abandoned subway tunnels, Ignis found his thoughts turning back to the game, and the glitches which plagued them. Ten years ago, the game had managed to nudge Ignis and the others - or perhaps more accurately, given his status as protagonist, Noctis and the others - along its desired path without any noticeable glitches or forced redirection. Even aware of the game as he’d been, Ignis very nearly hadn’t noticed its meddling on the train in Gralea until it was too late.

So what had changed? What was causing the game to break so badly as to affect their world, and even themselves? And what would happen if it kept breaking? Ignis had deliberately avoided thinking too deeply about the implications of his entire reality being a game inside another, but now… what would happen if they pushed the game too far off-script? He wished desperately that he could discuss the problem with the others, but the game had clearly demonstrated that it wouldn’t allow them to speak of its true nature. So he held his tongue, letting his mind work while his body went through the motions of fighting off the various minor daemons which inhabited the tunnels.

Gladio’s estimate of how long it would take them to reach the Citadel had been right on target. Ignis’s inner clock - which he’d always had to some extent, but which had grown far more accurate in the ten years since he stopped being able to measure time with a glance at his watch - said just over three and a half hours had passed by the time they reached the Citadel Station and ascended from the subway. Noctis’s footsteps slowed to a halt as they approached, and Ignis and the others stopped with him.

Heavy thudding footsteps paced back and forth just ahead, rattling the pavement under Ignis’s
boots, and rough growling came from overhead. A behemoth, then, guarding the gates - though there was the leathery flap of wings which suggested this was no ordinary behemoth.

“Miniboss time,” Prompto said. His voice jumped six feet to the left and back as he spoke, and Gladio swore.

“Focus,” Ignis called to both of them, summoning his daggers and aiming one toward the behemoth’s growls. The sharp inhale, a sweep of air in the wrong direction, was all the warning Ignis had. He dove to the side, hauling Noctis with him, vaguely aware of the others likewise leaping away as the behemoth king blasted the spot where they’d been standing with a gale of frozen air.

Noctis tugged free of Ignis’s grip, summoning a weapon to hand with a crystalline crackle. “Let’s go, guys!” he called.

The behemoth king was by far the most difficult enemy they’d fought yet. Gladio had mentioned once, last year, seeing such a creature at a distance in the depths of Malmalam Thicket, but he and the hunters he’d been with had avoided the thing. Now it was clear their caution had been warranted. The beast’s steps rattled the ground, and new cracks and craters pocked the pavement wherever it pounced. Ignis struggled to keep his footing with each jarring step the behemoth took, and that was before he had to consider dodging its attacks or striking back. He had to trust his companions to guide his attacks, following their voices to find places to strike.

Ravus called his name and Ignis swept into position at his side, daggers in hand. Back to back, they lunged at the behemoth, blades slicing into its flesh. Ignis kept his shoulder blades pressed to Ravus’s, trusting him to lead them through the chaos of the beast’s legs and out the other side. Ten years ago and newly blind, even the thought of such a move would have paralyzed Ignis with fear; now, after so long fighting at Ravus’s side, the move was second nature.

Someone shouted a warning and Ravus caught Ignis around the waist, slinging him to the side as the air sang with a swipe of the behemoth’s claws, inches from Ignis’s face. “Thank you,” he panted.

“Where would you be without—” Ravus’s voice broke off with a grunt of effort and the ring of steel against claws as he blocked another swipe. “Without me?”

“Sliced to ribbons, I imagine,” Ignis answered dryly.

Then froze, as the implication of his own words caught up with him. He’d spent the entire trip through the subway tunnels trying to figure out what had changed so badly as to cause the game to glitch, when the answer had been walking beside him the whole time.

Ravus hadn’t been here in the original version of the game. Ravus had been dead for ten years, and Noctis’s return to Insomnia had been in the company of only three retainers. Not four - not Ravus Nox Fleuret.

Ten years ago, Kate had described the butterfly effect to Ignis: how the flap of a butterfly’s wings on one side of the world could spawn a tornado on the other. When they’d saved Ravus in Zegnautus Keep, and afterward through the decade of ruin, Ignis had thought Ravus’s survival insignificant to whatever meta-entity controlled the game. After all, it had fought hard against any significant changes; that it had allowed Ravus to survive had to mean Ravus didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

But Ravus’s survival had been the flap of a butterfly’s wing, and now the glitches they faced, the
breaking of the game and its inability to recover, were the growing tornado. Ravus’s survival might not have made a difference back then - but ten years of small changes, of a renewed haven here, a saved hunter there, added up. And now Ravus was with them in Insomnia.

Distracted, Ignis almost missed the telltale warning crackle of the behemoth’s ice breath, and it was Ravus - again - who hauled him out of the way, shoving him behind a low wall as frozen air blasted past overhead. “Damn it, man,” Ravus hissed. “That wasn’t an invitation to let your guard down!”

“Apologies,” Ignis said, but even to his own ears he sounded distracted, and he heard the rustle as Ravus shook his head in annoyance. With an effort, Ignis shoved thoughts of the game and its glitches to the back of his mind. “I had a realization, but it can wait.”

“Good,” Noctis said from somewhere overhead, his sudden appearance either another testament to how distracted Ignis had been, or the result of a glitch. “‘Cause this thing won’t.”

“Understood.” Ignis rolled to his feet and called his daggers back to his hands, slingling them one after the other toward the low rumble of the beast’s breaths. He was rewarded with a howl of pain and Gladio calling, “Nice shot!”, but waited for neither before resummoning his daggers and throwing them again.

Thank the Six, the beast died not long after with a final earth-shaking roar, and the plaza before the Citadel’s gates fell quiet. “That was fun,” Prompto panted. “Let’s not do it again.”

“Yeah,” Noctis agreed. “I think my eyebrows almost froze off.”

Gladio huffed a breathless laugh. “So? They’re almost as bad as Prompto’s beard.”

The dual offended “Hey!”’s drew a smile from Ignis, and he teased, “I see nothing wrong with either.” That won him a chorus of groans and a thump on the arm from Prompto, though he only half-noticed: he had already turned his mind back to the issue of Ravus and the game’s glitches. If Ravus’s presence was causing the glitches, then the logical thing to do would be to remove Ravus from the situation - but logical only if his only goal was to stop the glitches. He hadn’t missed the larger picture.

If the game was glitching because they were changing it, could they change it more? And if so, just how far could they push it before it became irreparable?

Far enough to save Noctis?

“So, Ignis,” Noctis said, in the tone of one trying to shift the subject away from potentially questionable grooming habits. “What was that revelation you mentioned?”

“It’s… complicated,” Ignis said, and hesitated. He needed to handle this just so, to bend the game without breaking it - or for that matter, breaking Ravus, who was still sensitive to questions of his usefulness. “But if you’ll recall, the prophecy, the Cosmogony, is very specific about the Chosen King’s journey.”

“What are you saying?” Gladio asked, crossing his arms with a creak of leather. His tone was neutral, not objecting yet, clearly waiting to see where Ignis was going with this.

“I’m saying,” Ignis said, then turned to Ravus and, with the soft hum of his mechanical arm as a guide, reached out and caught his flesh arm, “it’s time for us to continue unescorted.”

He felt the sudden sharp tension in Ravus’s body through his grip on the man’s arm. “You mean,
I’m no longer needed,” Ravus said, bitterness hot and raw in his voice.

“The Cosmogony indicates that the King is to be accompanied by three companions.” He heard Gladio’s intake of breath as he caught on, remembered the game’s ending, but ignored it. Instead, Ignis focused on squeezing Ravus’s arm in a quick staccato pattern.

In the years since Ignis had begun venturing out of the safety of Lestallum’s day lamps, he and the others - first Gladio and Prompto, but later Talcott and Ravus - had developed a silent language of touch to replace hand signals in the field, which Ignis couldn’t see and which were often useless even to his sighted companions in the darkest depths of caverns and forests. Out loud, Ignis continued, “The Oracle was to open the path for the King, but it is the King who must walk it.” With his hand, he said, We are watched. Circle around behind.

For a long moment Ravus was silent and still against Ignis’s grip, his body thrumming with tension like a live wire. Then he said curtly, “I understand.” His voice was still bitter, with an undercurrent of fury - but he turned his hand over under Ignis’s and tapped a finger against Ignis’s forearm: Understood.

“Ravus,” Noctis spoke up, and Ignis tensed - if Noctis protested now, he would set them back, risk breaking the game further in a way Ignis couldn’t control. But all he said was, “Thank you. For everything. I owe you and Lunafreya both a great debt.” As he said the words, a sudden rush of relief welled up in Ignis, as it had when they’d decided to use the subway tunnels: the game’s own relief, pushing them toward the ending it wanted. Noctis was letting it, and Ignis wasn’t sure whether to be relieved in his own right - or concerned.

“It is the Oracle’s duty,” Ravus said, the words clipped. “I am glad I was able to fulfil it in my sister’s stead.” He inclined his upper body in a stiff bow, then pulled his arm free of Ignis’s grip and stalked off, armor jangling, without waiting for a response.
In which Ardyn wins a battle.

Life is finally less hectic now, so I'm hoping to keep updates quick and steady through the end of the fic. Thanks again for all y'all's patience over the last few months!

“You better have a plan,” Gladio muttered, barely loud enough for Ignis to hear.

Ignis inclined his head in response, not daring to say anything for fear of giving something away. They stood in silence for a moment, the others presumably watching Ravus leave. Ignis tracked the sound of his steps long enough to know he was going far enough to at least fool any casual observers; he’d have to trust Ravus to continue to play it smart and stay hidden while he sought a way into the Citadel from the back.

Finally Noct’s footsteps turned to face the Citadel’s grand gate. “C’mon,” he said, in the voice that meant he was steeling himself. “Can’t stop now.” Without waiting for a response, he strode forward, dress shoes clicking on the tiled plaza ground.

The wrought-iron gates must have been closed; they creaked and groaned as Noctis shoved on them. They shouldn’t have opened to such a push, though - it was either a sign of the decaying of their controls, or a sign that Ardyn was welcoming them. Ignis followed his king through the gates, past the guard checkpoint, along the elegant causeway leading to the Citadel’s courtyard.

Then Ardyn’s voice rang out across the courtyard: “Ifrit, the Infernian. He doesn’t share the Glacian’s fondness for mankind.”

The four of them came to a sharp halt, Prompto hissing in a breath through his teeth, Gladio growling low in his throat. Ardyn continued, “But you can expect a… warm welcome. I shall await you above.”

Heat blazed in front of them, a hundred times hotter than the lava falls of Mount Ravatogh, and divine power laced through with the taint of daemon miasma flared in Ignis’s skull. This part was familiar from the game, and even as fire blasted them and Prompto yelled for Noct, part of Ignis’s mind flickered back to those ten-year-old memories. They were on the game’s path once more, then: a battle with the daemonified Ifrit, to be followed by the march to the throne room and Noctis’s fight with Ardyn.

Someone yelled, “Over here!” and Ignis dragged his attention back to the present, slamming his back against a low wall and hauling Noctis down with him. A moment later Prompto crashed into them, then Gladio, and they hunkered down against Ifrit’s next blast. The moment the heat faded, Noctis was back on his feet, and Ignis had the barest second to grip his wrist in reassurance before
Noct said, “Let’s go!”

Then they were in the throes of battle once again, fighting their way through Ifrit’s flames to strike at him where he sat on a conjured throne of fire. The sounds of Bahamut’s interference, when it came, were almost familiar despite the decade since Ignis had heard them in the game, and some distant part of him registered surprise that the game’s dramatic music didn’t overlay the Draconian’s strike.

But that was only the beginning of the battle. Chased from his seat of flames by Bahamut’s blades, Ifrit struck out at them with renewed fury - and claws and a sword of forge-hot iron. Ignis could think of nothing but dodging the Infernian’s attacks, of striking back where he could and supporting his friends whenever needed. By the time Shiva’s ice cut through both the literal and metaphorical heat of the battle, Ignis was exhausted, his lungs burning from smoke and heat, his body bruised and his skin singed. The wash of frozen air across the courtyard was a welcome relief, and Ignis allowed himself to sag against a column as Ifrit froze and shattered.

“Hey,” Gladio murmured, a moment before he touched Ignis’s arm. Ignis let himself be hauled upright, and followed Gladio back to Noctis’s side. The unnatural cold was already fading, but a strange sound cut across the courtyard, vibrating within Ignis’s skull. It took him a moment to recognize the voice of Shiva herself, speaking to Noctis in the language of the gods.

“What did she say?” Prompto asked uneasily, once her voice had faded.

“Noctis answered, his voice solemn.

The words were enough to silence the rest of them. If the game had its way, Noctis would bring back the light - at the cost of his life. No one spoke as they followed Noctis up the steps to the Citadel’s front entrance, as he pushed the grand doors open and entered his home for the first time since he was a twenty-year-old boy setting out to be married.

The scents of dust, decay, and death were stronger in here, trapped over the years by the building’s thick walls. The echoes of their footsteps were muffled; the elegant tapestries and rugs which had once performed that function might have moldered, but the dust and rot worked nearly as well.

“It’s all lit up,” Prompto murmured.

“Told me to bring back the Light,” Noctis answered, his voice solemn.

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“It’s all lit up,” Prompto murmured.

“They was expecting company,” Gladio answered, his voice grim.

“He wants this as bad as we do,” Noctis said, and Ignis knew he, too, was remembering the alternate reality, the conversation with Ardyn in Kate’s living room where he’d told them, even more than I want to live, I want to destroy the gods and the Crystal and everything my traitorous brother built.

“Think the elevators are working?” Gladio asked. His tone was trying for levity, a joke, but fell flat in the grim echoes of the entry hall.

“Huh,” Prompto said, his voice coming from further ahead. “Sure looks like it.”

“Noctis grunted. “It’ll save our legs the walk up.”

The elevator ride should have been uncomfortable, an awkward pause in their march to the end. But Ignis found himself grateful for the breather, for the moment to brace himself against what he knew was coming.
All too soon, the elevator began to slow. Gladio said softly, “The throne room waits outside.”

“Yeah…” Prompto whispered back. “And so does Ardyn.”

“Acting like he owns the place,” Gladio muttered.

Ignis touched his arm, felt the tension running through his muscles. “It’s time to take it all back,” he said. His voice came out grim, determined, even as his stomach churned. He recognized the feeling of the words in his mouth: lines from the game. Short as it had been, the elevator ride had been enough for the game to distract him from thinking of ways to subvert its plans.

The doors hissed open. Noctis said, “It ends here. Tonight.”

They kept talking as they followed Noctis through the halls, meaningless chatter to hold back the specter of death looming over them. The words were familiar, an echo of conversations witnessed ten years ago, and Ignis had to struggle to keep his focus against the game’s relentless drive to its destined end. He was counting, desperately, on Ravus making it around the back of the Citadel, to show up at a dramatically appropriate time as he’d done ten years ago in Zegnautus as a daemon. But Ignis had no way to know when that might be - or even if the game would let it work. The glitches they’d experienced earlier were nothing like the game’s previous subtle direction, and it might not allow such a severe change this time.

But there was nothing to be done for it. Ignis had made his gamble, and all he could do now was hope it paid off. Still, he kept his senses peeled for any other signs of change as they moved through the scenes he remembered from the game: Noctis asking to see Prompto’s photos, the little album Prompto had made eight years ago when he’d found the unexpected bounty of a photo printer still stocked with paper and ink. The gratitude in Noct’s voice when he finally selected one. The rumble of the throne room’s doors opening, Prompto’s horrified exclamation at the sight of Ardyn on the throne of Lucis.

The drawl of Ardyn’s voice as he said, “I’m afraid you’re out of luck. The throne brings you here? It seats only one.”


A whirling rustle of fabric overhead as Ardyn moved, probably into one of his dramatic poses. “Oh, Noct,” he murmured. “How I have waited for this. Longer than you could ever know.”

Gladio growled under his breath. “Spite’s all that’s kept him going.”

Ignoring them, Ardyn continued, “You sought to deny me this, but even you - especially you - should have known better than to defy the will of the gods. Tonight, the dreams of the blood royal come to an end.”

“You’re wrong,” Noctis spat. “This is my ascension.”

There was a sharp snap of fabric and the sickening sensation of daemonic power flaring around Ardyn. An instant too late, Ignis remembered that Ardyn had one final trick up his sleeve; even as he thought it, something slammed into his face. He staggered, tasting daemon miasma as Ardyn’s magic forced its way down his throat to burn in his lungs.

His last thought before unconsciousness stole him was that Noctis would win the subsequent fight with Ardyn - and cement himself on the path to his death.
The next thing Ignis knew, someone was shaking his shoulder and calling his name, a familiar voice cutting through the fog of Ardyn’s spell. Ignis fought his way back to consciousness, memory rushing back in a nauseating wave of terror and vindication: it was Ravus who had woken him. Ravus had made it into the Citadel, and the game hadn’t broken yet. Ignis rolled to his feet even as he registered what Ravus was saying: “They’re outside. Hurry!”

Groans from Gladio and Prompto told him his companions were likewise waking, and Ignis didn’t bother to wait for them. He bolted, memory steering him through the throne room’s doors, out through the antechamber, cracking his shoulder against a corner and bouncing off a wall, not caring about anything except reaching the elevator. Noctis was fighting Ardyn somewhere outside, and it would be Ignis’s last chance to change the course the game had laid out for him.

The others caught up to him as the elevator doors opened, and they piled inside, Prompto bouncing anxiously on his toes and Gladio pacing as it made its slow way down to ground level. Ignis leaned against Ravus’s shoulder, thoughts racing as he tried to work out what he could do to save Noctis.

The air outside had begun to grow heavy with the threat of rain, but Ignis barely noticed as he followed the others down the broad steps to the courtyard. He was listening as hard as he could for the sounds of battle. He had to disrupt them somehow, had to keep Noctis from going any further along the game’s path.

“There they are!” Prompto gasped.

Ignis heard them a moment later: the glittering magic of the Crystal and the crack-snap of Noctis warping somewhere high overhead. Ardyn spoke and Noctis responded, the words distorted by the distance and the speed at which they were moving. Gladio swore under his breath, then added for Ignis’s benefit, “Ardyn’s got an Armiger of his own. They’re too far up to reach.”

They had to get Noctis back down here, away from Ardyn. “Noct!” Ignis called. There was no obvious response, so he called again, “Noct!”

Noctis said, remarkably clear despite his distance, “Guys?”

Gladio swore again - not frustrated this time but suddenly desperate, terrified - and lunged forward, boots slapping the paving stones. Prompto gasped, and horror flashed through Ignis in a cold rush as he realized what he’d done. It was a rookie mistake, distracting someone occupied fighting for their life, but he’d been so focused on changing the game’s ending he hadn’t considered that Noctis was still on its path—

The wet, meaty thunk of a blade cutting through flesh echoed through the courtyard, and Noctis made a soft sound. A sound all too familiar from Ignis’s years of fighting daemons, but for a moment he couldn’t process it. Couldn’t allow himself to realize what it meant, because what it meant was the end of the world.

Then came the heavy, terrible sound of a body falling from a height, the crunch of bone and flesh as it struck the ground. Noctis cried out in pain, a strangled breathless sound. Ignis was lunging for him before he knew he was moving, but Gladio beat him to it, roaring in raw fury as he darted past Ignis with the desperate speed of a devoted Shield. Steel rang against steel and Gladio grunted with effort as he caught a blow of Ardyn’s sword.

Ignis reached Noctis a heartbeat later, falling to his knees at his king’s side, hands skating across Noctis’s body as he searched for the wound. Above him, Prompto’s gun boomed, driving Ardyn
back, and Gladio planted himself between Ardyn and Noctis with a clatter of his shield.

Ardyn cackled, his boots touching down some distance away, the crystalline chime of his Armiger all the louder for the absence of Noct’s. “Better late than never, I suppose,” he said to Gladio. “But all you’ve done is leave your king to die slowly and in agony.”

In Ignis’s arms, Noctis shuddered, gasping with pain as Ignis’s hands brushed across his ribs - he’d probably broken several in the fall. “Hold on, Noct,” Ignis pleaded. He finally found the spot where Ardyn’s blade had struck: a gaping wound in Noct’s side, just above his hipbone. Not instantly fatal, but it would become so unless they got him medical attention now. “Prompto, give me your shirt.”

A rustle of leather and the creak of Ravus’s mechanical arm as he moved to guard Prompto, but instead of stripping out of the shirt he was wearing, Prompto summoned a spare from the armory with a crackle. He dropped the shirt into Ignis’s waiting hand, then turned back to Ardyn, calling his gun with the ring of crystalline magic. Ignis pressed the shirt against Noctis’s side, his stomach knotting at Noct’s swallowed whimper.

Ardyn tutted. “Such devotion.”

“Shut it!” Gladio growled. His feet scraped restlessly across the pavement, as though he wanted to attack but knew it would do no good.

“I suppose you were right after all,” Ardyn continued, as though the interruption hadn’t happened. “It is possible to change things. Look at this! The King of Kings lies dying, while I stand triumphant.” He laughed, an edge of mania in the sound, as though he couldn’t believe his own words. “Remarkable!”

“The glitches are getting worse,” Prompto murmured, his voice turning from side to side. “If we’re right about it, what happens if…”

Ignis didn’t want to think about it. “He’s not going to die,” he insisted.

“He’s all but dead already,” Ardyn purred. “What’s a few more minutes? Then the gods fall, the prophecy fails, and I win!”

“You’re awfully confident,” Noctis rasped. He coughed wetly and added, “You haven’t won yet.”

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“Noct—” Ignis started. But Noctis squeezed his wrist, and despite the weakness of the gesture, its meaning was clear: stand down. It took everything Ignis had to swallow the rest of his words, but he managed it, throwing his focus instead into putting pressure on the wound in Noct’s side. Prompto’s shirt was already soaked through with blood - whether or not Noctis wanted to cede to Ardyn, the truth of the matter was that he was in dire straits.

Still, his voice was steady when he spoke again: “Maybe I am dying,” he said to Ardyn. “Maybe not. But even if I die, you’re just as much a failure.”

“Oh?” Ardyn said, mock-fascinated. “I’ll be alive.”

“Sure, but you’ll still be full of Starscourge,” Noct said, then had to pause for another bloody cough. “Rejected by the Crystal and the gods forever. Never dying, just stuck on a dead world with nothing but daemons for companions, knowing you’ll be alone for eternity—”

“Is that how you see it,” Ardyn cut in, his voice dropping ominously.
“It’s the truth and you know it,” Noctis said. “You’ve spent the last two thousand years undead and suffering, and you could have been free - but right before the finish line you managed to fuck it up. At least I’m not infected. You’re the one who gets to be the eternal Scourge meatbag. You’ll be stuck a daemon forever, shut out from the afterlife—”

Ardyn snarled wordlessly. There was a flurry of motion, a strained grunt from Gladio and a shout from Prompto as Gladio blocked whatever attack Ardyn had tried. Ignis curled around Noct, doing his best to shield his king with his body.

“Failed Shield, traitorous heir to my brother’s treacherous guard,” Ardyn spat at Gladio. “You cannot save him!”

“Long ‘s he’s alive, I’ll protect him,” Gladio growled back. “And he ain’t dead yet.”

“Fine,” Ardyn snarled. “Then protect him from this!”

Another whirl of motion, a snap of Ardyn’s coat and the scrape of Gladio’s boots on the asphalt as he tried to intercept whatever Ardyn had done - but it wasn’t enough. The cold stench of daemon miasma shot past Ignis, worming past his defensive hold as though he was nothing, and slammed into Noctis.

“No!” Ignis screamed. Noctis’s back arched and he cried out in pain, and Ignis felt the crawling slither of miasma flooding under his skin. “No!”

“Noct!” Prompto yelled, and fell to his knees on Noct’s other side.

“Now I won’t be alone,” Ardyn purred. “You’ll be with me, O Chosen. Infected, just as I am.” He cackled. “Oh, how you’ve fallen! The gods’ true king, no better than their sacrifice!”

Noctis’s hand tightened on Ignis’s wrist once more, though already his grip was a fraction of what it had been a few moments ago. “Iggy,” he whispered.

“I’m here,” Ignis whispered back. Tears choked him and it took all he had not to lose himself, but Noct’s grip was an anchor. Somewhere up ahead Ardyn was still crowing about his victory, but Ignis couldn’t have paid him attention if his life depended on it. “Noct, I’m here.”

“Whatever you do,” Noctis said, his voice a bare exhale. “Don’t let go. Understand?”

“Of course,” Ignis promised.

“Mean… it,” Noctis managed. “Hang on to me.”

Ignis hugged him tighter, the heavy weight of failure, of his king’s death, sinking into his bones. Noctis took a deep, shaky breath—

—and the world dropped out from beneath them both.
Ignis barely had time to register that they were falling before they landed, hard, against a surface that was somehow neither firm nor soft, neither asphalt nor stone nor any other material his fingers recognized. The stench of daemon miasma was sickeningly potent, its chill touch slithering over his skin as he moved. Silence rang in his ears, the faint sounds of distant daemons and his nearby companions both abruptly absent. Noctis was still in his arms, though, and even as he realized it Noctis reached up, his hand patting along Ignis’s shoulder to his face.

“Ignis?” Noct said incredulously.

“I’m right here,” Ignis said, but it came out confused this time, almost defensive. “Noct, what…?”

Noctis swore under his breath. “You’re not supposed to be here.” Despite the surprise in his voice, it was far stronger than it had been a moment ago, and he added uneasily, “This is going to be a problem.”

“Where are we?” Ignis demanded. His ears strained for any sign of Ardyn, of the many daemons which inhabited the city, but the only presence he sensed was Noctis. “What happened?”

Noctis rolled off Ignis’s lap as smoothly as though he hadn’t been dying a moment ago, and Ignis heard the echo of his footsteps - muffled, strange - as he turned in a circle to look around. “We’re inside the Starscourge,” Noctis said.

Ignis frowned as he climbed to his feet. “I beg your pardon?”

“So,” Noctis said rapidly, “there was a lot of time to plan while I was in the Crystal. We knew the prophecy, and the Founder King explained more about how it was supposed to work. The reason I was supposed to kill Ardyn and then die myself was to use his soul as a - a pack chocobo to get the Starscourge into the spirit realm where it would be safe to destroy it. Then I’d use my soul to carry in the power of the Crystal and the Lucii. So we came up with a plan to work around that—”

“You planned this?!” Ignis demanded, horrified. His head was spinning; too much had happened in the last couple of minutes and he struggled to follow what Noctis was talking about. “You planned being fatally wounded by Ardyn and infected with Starscourge?!”

“Wh—No!” Noctis said. “This was a backup plan. The last of the backups. The original plan involved finding a way to keep the path to the spirit realm open, so that after I went in and
destroyed the Starscourge, I could get back out. But a lot of things could go wrong, or at least not the way we expected - like Ravus being there - so I figured we should have a backup plan or two.”


“The plan wasn’t to get killed,” Noctis said, sounding exasperated. “Or at least, not this one. This plan was just in case Ardyn won, if he killed me before I could kill him and enact any of the other plans.”

“And how is ‘this’ plan supposed to work?” Ignis asked.

“It’s basically the opposite of the prophecy,” Noctis said. “Instead of sending Ardyn with the Starscourge into the spirit realm to destroy it, I’m taking me, the Lucii, and the Crystal’s power inside the Starscourge, so I can destroy it from the inside.”

“Inside the Starscourge,” Ignis said. “That’s why you provoked him into infecting you.” Noctis’s hair rustled as he nodded, and Ignis added, “That sounds… incredibly risky.”

“Well, yeah,” Noctis admitted. “Putting the Starscourge in the spirit realm like Bahamut intended would mean it would be contained in case something went really wrong - so if I failed to destroy it, the gods would still have time to come up with an alternate plan.”

“And if something goes wrong here?”

“Probably the Starscourge consumes me, the Lucii, and the Crystal’s power,” Noctis admitted. “And through us, the gods. There’s a reason this wasn’t Plan A.”

“What makes you think this has any chance of success?” Ignis demanded. “You couldn’t even have known for sure you would be able to go inside the Starscourge - especially not if you were dying. And how, exactly, do you plan to destroy the Starscourge from the inside? It’s not—”

“I don’t know, okay?” Noctis interrupted. “But… look, it’s how these things work.”

Ignis frowned at him. “What things?”


Ignis shook his head. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he remembered no more than faint blurs of Noctis and Prompto curled together on the couch, laughing and shouting as they played.

“Okay.” Noctis hesitated again, seeming to think how to explain. “So, in Ramuh, if you found a certain path in one of the dungeons, and made it all the way to the end, you got this key you could use later on a safe that you couldn’t open otherwise. Opening the safe released this major optional boss, but if you killed her, then you got a clue that told you how to get the true ending, the good one—”

Abruptly Ignis realized where Noctis was going with this. “Noct,” he said, and Noct fell silent. “You’re telling me you based your last-ditch plan, the one you would rely on when all else failed, on a video game?!”

“Um…”

“Noct.”
“Not just a game!” Noctis protested. “A lot of games do it. And we figured, since our reality is technically a video game…”

Ignis shoved his glasses up and massaged the bridge of his nose. “You intend to create a ‘true ending’ for our game.”

“Exactly,” Noctis said. “Like you said, this is my area of expertise, right?”

Ignis glared at him.

“I mean,” Noctis continued, apparently unabashed, “the original plan was to just… tweak the ending, the prophecy version, a little bit so I could come back. Going for the good ending in a game is usually really difficult, and you’re risking a lot more, which is why it wasn’t the primary plan. But now that we’re here, if we go for it, we should end up much better off.”

“What about me?” Ignis asked. “You said I wasn’t supposed to be here.”

“Well, no,” Noctis said. “This isn’t a physical realm any more than the spirit realm is. We’ll need an anchor to get back out, and I was going to use you, through your connection to the Crystal’s magic. But, uh.”

“But I came with you instead,” Ignis said, and sighed. Massaging the bridge of his nose wasn’t helping, so he resettled his glasses over his eyes. Then something occurred to him. “You’ve been saying ‘we’ this whole time. ‘We’ll need’, ‘we knew’. If I’m not supposed to be here, then who is ‘we’? The Lucii?”

“Oh,” Noctis said. “Right. Hang on, let me just…” He trailed off in the way that meant he was concentrating; a few seconds later, Ignis felt a thrum of magic from the Ring of the Lucii Noctis wore. The air shifted around him, and he was abruptly aware of the presence of another person. A scent caught his nose, subtle and floral, and memories flickered through his mind: stumbling along a train track in Tenebrae; the tiny flower bed Ravus kept under a precious sunlamp; saltwater and blood on the Tidemother’s altar—

Sylleblossoms.

Ignis realized who it must be - who stood before him - a moment before Noctis spoke. “Lady Lunafreya Nox Fleuret,” Noctis said formally, “please allow me to introduce my chamberlain and right-hand man, Lord Ignis Scientia. Ignis, this is Lunafreya, the Oracle of Tenebrae.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” Ignis said automatically, and bowed, grateful for the years of training that still lurked in his memory and kept him from embarrassing himself while his conscious thoughts were stunned.

“The honor is mine,” Lunafreya said. “Noctis has told me a great deal about you. Including that you saved my life, at significant cost to yourself. I owe you a great debt.”

Ignis felt a blush rise to his cheeks. “There is no debt,” he said. “I am…” He had to stop, take a deep breath. “I’m just glad it worked. I had thought—” He cut himself off again, his eyes burning with a memory of magical fire, of the Founder King’s warning all those years ago that even the Lucii could not guarantee success.

“Sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” Noctis said. “I didn’t know she was in the Ring’s realm until after I went into the Crystal, and then when I got back, I didn’t want to risk Ardyn finding out. Or Bahamut, for that matter.”
“I don’t… This is… I’m not sure how to react,” Ignis admitted. His mind was finally coming unstuck from the surprise, and a great many realizations slammed into him all at once. Noctis’s willingness to let Ravus leave them outside the Citadel hadn’t been because of the game’s manipulation, but because Noctis had known Lunafreya was with him the whole time. His amusement yesterday back in Hammerhead, when he’d learned Ravus sought to fulfill the Oracle’s duties, hadn’t been due to a low opinion of Ravus, but that very same knowledge.

For that matter, Noctis’s phrasing implied Lunafreya had been in the Ring before Noctis had gone into the Crystal, and abruptly Ignis remembered one other time he’d smelled sylleblossoms: on that catwalk in Zegnautus, when Noctis had called upon the power of the Crystal to heal Ravus. Except…

“You’re the one who cured Ravus in Zegnautus Keep ten years ago,” Ignis whispered. “No one but the Oracle can cure the Starscourge - it wasn’t the Crystal after all. It was you.”

“Yes,” Lunafreya agreed. “It was… somewhat of a risk, using my power so, but…” Her voice softened. “He is my brother. I could not stand by while he was so cruelly used.”

Ignis felt adrift; he had only just begun to catch his balance after Noctis’s revelation about his plan, and now this new shock. “What happened back then?” he asked Lunafreya. “You were dying in Altissia, yet you never went to the other reality - at least not while I was there - so it wasn’t Kate who healed you. How did you survive all these years? Or—” as a sudden unpleasant thought struck him—“did you not survive? Are you here as a spirit only?”

“I’m alive,” Lunafreya said. “Though in this realm I am only a spirit, as are the two of you. My body remains inside the Ring, where you hid me away ten years ago.”

“And our bodies?” Ignis asked. Just a few minutes ago, Noctis had been dying in his arms, yet he sounded whole and healthy now.

“Where we left them, I think,” Noctis said with the rustle of a shrug.

“You mean, within arm’s reach of Ardyn Izunia, surrounded a city’s worth of daemons and, let’s not forget, dying,” Ignis said. Worry knotted his gut anew - what would happen if they spent too long in this realm? Would Noctis bleed out? Or was this realm like that of the Lucii, where time passed slowly if at all?

“The guys are out there,” Noctis said. “They’ll keep us safe. And… I can kind of feel my body. I’m not dead yet.”

Ignis sighed. “Ah, yes, very reassuring.”

“I told you this was the last-ditch plan,” Noctis said, sounding irritated.

“I understand you have questions, Ignis,” Lunafreya cut in gently, “but we should move as we talk. Chancellor Izunia will follow us here as soon as he realizes what we’ve done.”

Ignis bit his tongue to stop himself asking more questions anyway. “Of course,” he said.

“Yeah,” Noctis agreed. Then, “Um.” There was a shuffle of steps, tentative and unsure, as though Noctis couldn’t decide which direction to go. Abruptly Ignis remembered how Noctis had patted Ignis’s face earlier, when he’d first realized Ignis had come with him.

“Noct?” Ignis prodded.
“Don’t laugh,” Noctis warned, “but… well, this whole place is pitch black - it’s basically raw Starscourge, and the Scourge doesn’t exactly like light - and...”

“You can’t see,” Ignis said dryly.

“Not really,” Noctis admitted. “Luna’s trident is glowing a little, but I can’t see beyond it. And I don’t think there’s a lot by way of landmarks in here, anyway.”

Ignis had to hide a smile. “I suppose it’s fortunate, then, that I came with you.”

Noctis gave a soft, rueful laugh. “Something like that. I mean, I’d rather you weren’t in danger, but...”

“I told you, you won’t do this alone,” Ignis said firmly, then, remembering, added belatedly to Lunafreya, “Apologies, I didn’t mean—”

“I understand,” Lunafreya said, a smile in her voice.

“I think we need to go this way,” Noctis said, his voice moving away as he spoke. “It’s vague, but I sense… the Starscourge feels stronger in this direction.”

“I feel it too,” Lunafreya said. “We should hurry.”
Inside the Starscourge

Chapter Summary

In which Lunafreya explains, and the final battle begins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ignis followed Noctis and Lunafreya through the Starscourge realm. The world around him felt strange, blurry in a tactile sort of way. The ground beneath his feet was neither soft nor hard, a bit like his memories of walking on the padded floor of the Crownguard training gym in the Citadel. The air was heavy with daemon miasma, brushing across his exposed skin with every movement and sticking to the inside of his nose and mouth like smoke. Sounds rustled in the distance, erratic movement and choked-off howls. At one point Noctis inhaled sharply and summoned a weapon, the crystalline sound of its appearance loud and strange in the oppressive atmosphere.

“A daemon,” Lunafreya murmured. “One which has not yet taken a mortal host.”

“It’s disgusting,” Noctis muttered back, and Ignis decided not to ask for details.

Thankfully, though the sound of movement was near-constant, nothing approached close enough to be a threat. Perhaps Lunafreya’s Oracle magic was keeping them at bay, or the power of the Lucii which Noctis bore. Ignis kept one ear tuned to the movement nevertheless, even as he asked, “So, Lady Lunafreya—”

“Please,” Lunafreya interrupted gently. “There’s no need for titles. You’re Noctis’s brother.”

Ignis wasn’t sure he was ready for such familiarity with the most famous and well-loved woman in the world - never mind that ten years ago he’d been on his way to see Noctis marry her - but said anyway, “Of course. I was only going to ask what happened in Altissia that led to you being here, alive.”

He heard a soft rustle of hair as she nodded. “Noctis mentioned you do not remember the events of that day.”

“I’ve wondered if my lack of memory wasn’t caused by the nature of the… not time travel, exactly, but certainly some unusual magic which enabled the Lucii to interfere,” Ignis said.

“Like that one comic series In the Time of Solheim,” Noctis said. “Where the main character could time-travel, but couldn’t change anything anyone remembered.”

Ignis chuckled. “Prompto said the same thing when I discussed it with him.”

“I do not know what caused the loss of your memory,” Lunafreya said, “though I witnessed three men before you attempt to use the power of the Ring, and even the one who survived did not emerge unscathed. Your memories may have been as much a sacrifice as your sight.”

Ignis thought about Ravus’s missing arm, the way the magitek port embedded in his shoulder bit into his skin and caused him pain no matter Prompto and Cindy’s attempts to improve it, and
nodded. “The last clear memory I have is of planning with Noctis and Secretary Claustra the night before,” he said. “Then naught but flashes and phantoms until I awoke in the alternate reality.” He hesitated, realizing something. “I take it Noctis has explained the alternate reality to you?”

“Yes,” Lunafreya said. “As well as the nature of our reality within that one.” She sounded like she was hiding a smile as she added, “Noctis’s knowledge of the medium was very helpful as we planned for our eventual return.”

“See, Specs?” Noctis teased. “Turns out all that time playing video games wasn’t a waste after all.”

Ignis smiled. “I suppose not. But I’m still curious about the events in Altissia. Ravus told me he and I worked together to reach the Tidemother’s altar, and that he and I fought when he tried to attack Noctis—”

“Really?” Noctis interrupted. “I didn’t know… I didn’t think he’d…” He trailed off uncertainly, his voice turning slightly toward Lunafreya as though remembering he was talking about her brother.

“He was distraught,” Ignis said carefully, and resisted the urge to raise a hand to touch the small scars on his lip, his nose, his brow. Scars from a blade, not the Lucii’s flames; Ravus had admitted to being the cause of those injuries and apologized for them. “I rendered him unconscious, apparently, so he too has no memory of what happened between then and when he awoke to Gladio and Prompto’s arrival, after Lunafreya and I had already vanished.”

“I remember little myself,” Lunafreya admitted. “I remember being stabbed, and seeing Noctis defeat the Tidemother, but he’d burned too much power. I tried to heal him, but…” A hesitation and a rustle of hair as she shook her head. “I was weak myself. I did not have the power to perform such a healing. The next thing I knew, I was in the realm of the Lucii, inside the Ring. The Lucii had lent me their own energy, bolstering my life force with theirs until I was able to heal myself from the wounds I’d sustained.”

“I see,” Ignis murmured. From the sound of it, the Lucii had done for Lunafreya what Noctis’s magic-infused energy drinks had once done for the four of them on the battlefield: provide an extra energy boost, an additional reservoir of strength from which to draw when all others were exhausted.

“But that took a while,” Noctis said. “And the Founder King was worried about what would happen if Ardyn knew she was alive.”

“Or, for that matter, if the gods did,” Lunafreya said. “The Cosmogony is their work, the prophecy their plan to purify the world of the Scourge. The Kings feared - and I agreed - that Bahamut especially might interfere were he to learn I was not only alive, but plotting with Noctis to thwart the prophecy.”

Ignis nodded. “You could not have known it at the time, but the game itself almost certainly would have done something as well.” He waved a hand vaguely, trying to indicate what had been happening throughout their walk to the Citadel. “It’s been trying to force us back to its path ever since Noctis returned.”

“We were hoping to make a more, uh, subtle change to the ending,” Noctis admitted. “You’d mentioned how the game tried to keep you on track when you first came back from the other reality, so I figured we’d probably have an easier time with smaller changes. But then Ardyn—”
Ignis lost the rest of the sentence as something caught his attention, instinct screaming danger at him. He called his lance to hand and darted in front of Noctis even as something slammed hard into the lance. Ignis staggered, caught his balance, and managed a swipe at the attacker to drive it back.

Noctis yelled in surprise, crystalline crackling indicating the appearance of his own weapon. Ignis dismissed the lance and called his daggers instead, following the sound of Noctis’s movements to attack whatever had struck him. The blades bit into something with roughly the consistency of a flan, barely solid enough to touch; the creature gave a bubbling, unearthly howl and fell back. Noctis warped after it with a sharp crack, and the howl changed to a death rattle.

Ignis kept his daggers raised, ears straining for any further threats. Noctis appeared at his elbow, panting. “Looks like that one got bold.”

“And it’s emboldened others,” Lunafreya added, her voice turning as she looked around them. The constant background rumble and hiss of daemonic movement was growing rapidly closer, and ominous howls echoed around them.

“Break time’s over,” Noctis said. “Let’s move!”

He took off running, and Ignis followed at his heels. Lunafreya kept pace with them easily, despite the cadence of her footsteps suggesting she was wearing the same heeled dress boots she’d worn in Altissia for the summoning ceremony. Ignis shifted so she was between him and Noctis; she might have her trident, but he didn’t know how skilled a fighter she was, and didn’t want to leave the Oracle unguarded.

More unformed daemons struck at them as they ran, often with little more warning than a hiss of miasma. Ignis blocked or deflected what he could, but one blow slipped past his defense - something jagged and sharp which tore through the leather of his Kingsglaive jacket to bite into the flesh of his shoulder. He hissed in pain and slashed back with a dagger, feeling the satisfying bite of the blade into daemonic flesh.

“Iggy!” Noct yelled.

“I’m fine,” Ignis panted.

Lunafreya’s hand gripped his elbow. “No,” she said, concern in her voice. “The bodies we wear may be no more than representations of our spirits, but that means any wound here will drive the Starscourge straight into your soul.” Warmth blossomed from her hand, spreading through Ignis’s bones: the power of the Oracle, driving back the Scourge.

“Thank you,” he said. A hiss of miasma caught his attention and he lunged, daggers intercepting a blow uncomfortably close to Noctis’s back. “Noct!”

“Appreciate the save,” Noctis said, then grunted as he blocked an attack and struck back. “I don’t want to sound alarmist, but I’m…” He hesitated, then admitted, “I’m getting weaker. I don’t know how much time I have before…”

Fear twisted Ignis’s gut. “Then we hurry,” he said. “Are we close?”

“Yes,” Lunafreya said. Her heels thudded against the strange ground as she pulled ahead of them both. “This way. Quickly!”

They ran, dodging half-formed daemons, miasma thick in their throats. It was nearly a solid thing by now, coating Ignis’s mouth and lungs and making every breath an effort. He thought he could
sense what Noctis and Lunafreya were following, now: a shuddering, crawling sense of wrongness up ahead, throbbing in time with the shifting of miasma. It grew to a pounding shriek in his senses as they approached, until Lunafreya jerked to a sudden halt.

Ignis barely managed not to step on her as he skidded to a stop himself and tried to listen for what had caught her attention. Focused on that, it took him longer than it should have to realize what was unusual about this spot.

He could see it.

Not with his ruined eyes, but the same way he’d seen the Lucii inside the Ring all those years ago, through the magic which bound him to Noctis. Except this time it wasn’t the blue-white light of the Lucii’s power, but a roiling purple-green swelling like a bruise. “The heart of the Starscourge,” he breathed aloud.

But it wasn’t Noctis or Lunafreya who answered. “Indeed,” Ardyn Izunia said, in a cheerful tone that did nothing to hide the razor-edge in the words. “The very core of the plague which infects our world. All compressed into one neat package, here for the killing. I did my job well, don’t you think?”

Ignis strained his ears, struggling to pinpoint Ardyn’s location. Disconcertingly, the magic vision which allowed Ignis to see the Scourge’s core didn’t register Ardyn, though as best Ignis could tell, the man stood directly between them and the core. His long jacket rustled as he moved, his boots thudding against the ground with deceptive lightness.

“You did,” Lunafreya answered him, her voice gentle. “You did admirably. Now it’s time to release that burden. Let us destroy the Starscourge so you can rest.”

Ardyn laughed. “Now why would I do that?” he purred. “I need but delay you a few minutes longer, and the gods’ Chosen King dies an inglorious death. You and those petty gods lose. I win.”

“You’d really let the whole world die just to claim an empty victory,” Noctis said, disappointment thick in his voice.

“What has this world ever done for me?” Ardyn asked. His voice glittered like the blade of his knife. “I want it to burn.”

“You used to call yourself a healer!” Ignis protested. He would have said more, but Noctis put a hand on his arm, warning him to silence.

“The prophecy is already broken,” Noctis said to Ardyn. “You don’t have to be the villain any more. You can make it a redemption story instead of a tragedy.”

It was the same plea they’d made a decade ago in Kate’s reality: help us change destiny. Defy the gods. But these last ten years must have changed Ardyn, too. He laughed again, bright and loud. “We made an alliance once, yet nothing changed. If I want to change destiny, I have to do it myself.”

“Chancellor—” Lunafreya tried.

Ardyn cut her off, calling his Armiger in a crystalline storm, his voice turning vicious. “I’m too close to victory to alter my plans now, my dear,” he said. “It’s time for you all to die.”

Chapter End Notes
Assuming no more dramatic changes, we only have about four more chapters after this one. The end is nigh!
Chapter Summary

In which the prophecy of the Chosen King is fulfilled.

Ardyn was a Lucis Caelum, with all the powerful magic that implied; he was also Adagium, the immortal daemon who had lived for two thousand years. Ignis was mortal, and only had ten years of pent-up frustration and fury driving him, but he channeled all of it into the battle. The steel of his daggers rang against the crystal of Ardyn’s swords, and the glittering sound of more weapons sent him rolling to the side. Noctis took the opening, warping in with a shout; Ardyn grunted and staggered, his boots thudding against the strange ground.

Lunafreya fought with remarkable skill for someone supposedly an icon of peace and healing, but then, she’d survived crossing the Lucian countryside alone after the fall of Insomnia. Her trident sang as it struck past Ignis at Ardyn, harrying him back toward Noctis. Ardyn snarled, his sword hissing through the air in response, and Ignis lunged forward, catching and deflecting the strike with his daggers. As Lunafreya had done, he pushed Ardyn toward Noctis, but stayed as close as he could. While both Ardyn and Noctis had summoned their respective Armigers, neither had taken to the air yet, and Ignis could only pray neither did. If that happened, he and Lunafreya wouldn’t be able to help Noctis.

Noctis struck at Ardyn again, crystalline blades clashing, and Ignis followed up with a blow of his own - but one of Ardyn’s swords slipped past his guard and sliced a long line down Ignis’s leg. A cold wash of daemon miasma slithered in its wake, but almost before the pain registered, Lunafreya’s warm magic flooded him. When he took his next step, his leg was whole and functional. “My thanks,” he called.

“Heal them all you want,” Ardyn jeered, presumably to Lunafreya. “Their spirits will only last as long as their bodies, and their friends outside cannot defend them forever.”

Fear trickled down Ignis’s spine. Prompto, Gladio, and Ravus were still out in the real world, defending Noctis and Ignis’s bodies from the hordes of daemons that filled Insomnia. While Ardyn’s presence here in this Starscourge-realm hopefully meant he wasn’t also threatening them, it meant too that Ardyn was free to stall Noctis as he’d said. It wouldn’t matter if daemons reached Noctis’s body in the real world if he bled out first.

“They’ll defend us long enough,” Noctis snarled from somewhere on Ardyn’s other side. The crack-hiss of a warp heralded his next attack and Ignis darted in on his heels. Ardyn’s Armiger blades whirled past Ignis’s head; he ducked, slashing low, trying to knock the man down.

But Ardyn was not so easily tripped. He staggered, planted one boot in Ignis’s shoulder, and kicked out in return. Ignis let the blow knock him into a roll; felt the brush of air as Noctis warped over him. Noctis hit Ardyn with a grunt and Ignis lunged to his feet as Lunafreya darted past him. He followed her in as he would have followed Ravus, and was gratified when she understood the maneuver he intended; clearly she and her brother had had similar training. Ignis and Lunafreya split to either side of Ardyn to strike simultaneously at his back while he was occupied holding Noctis off. Ignis’s lance caught Ardyn’s Armiger blades while Lunafreya’s trident landed a solid blow. Ardyn cried out—and something thick and heavy lashed at Ignis from out of nowhere,
sending him flying backward to crash into the semisolid ground.

The blow knocked the breath from him. Momentarily stunned, Ignis struggled to rise, hearing Lunafreya likewise gasping somewhere nearby. Armiger blades sang with a crystalline hiss as Noctis and Ardyn clashed once more, then there was a heavy thud of impact and Noctis cried out in pain. Ignis managed to shove to his feet and lunged for his king, catching Noctis as he flew backward and steadying him onto his feet.

“Damn it,” Noctis panted. “He’s shaping the miasma.”

“I wondered what that was,” Ignis said. The blow that had knocked him backward hadn’t felt like any of Ardyn’s other weapons.

“I can’t see it, either,” Noctis muttered. “Everything’s pitch-black already and it just comes out of nowhere. Tough to fight a guy who can make weapons out of thin air.”

“Says the man who wields the magic of the Armiger,” Lunafreya teased, coming up beside them. Her boots thudded against the ground, her hands sliding over the grip of her trident with a soft hiss.

“I don’t see the problem, either,” Ignis added. “They both look the same to me.”

“Oh shut up,” Noctis grumbled at both of them, but it was good-natured even through the exhaustion that weighed down his words. “C’mon, we’ve got this.” He lunged for Ardyn once more, and Ignis followed, aware of Lunafreya likewise on Noct’s other side.

“You’re awfully confident, Noct,” Ardyn purred. The blades of his Armiger sang and Ignis blocked the blow with his daggers - but something hard slammed into his ribs and he gasped, staggering. Another blow took his knees out from under him, miasma hissing and groaning as Ardyn manipulated it, and Ignis rolled to the side, trying to get away. Once more Noctis and Ardyn’s magical glaives clashed as Noctis tried to distract Ardyn from attacking Ignis, but solid miasma still battered Ignis from all sides, leaving him stunned and bruised.

Lunafreya shouted, her trident whistling as she slashed and stabbed at the miasma, giving Ignis a moment to catch his breath and roll to his knees - just in time to catch Lunafreya in turn when miasma slammed into her.

Somewhere behind them, Ardyn called, “This rabble only interferes with our prophesized battle, O Chosen. Shall we leave them behind?”

As he spoke, his voice launched upward, and Ignis cursed under his breath - Ardyn had taken to the air, exactly the scenario Ignis was hoping to avoid. Noctis followed Ardyn with a wordless snarl, but there was a roughness to his voice that twisted Ignis’s gut. Time clearly operated differently in this realm - if it didn’t, Noctis would have died of the wound in his physical body twenty minutes ago - but even so, it was obvious to Ignis that he was running out of strength. Which was very likely why Ardyn had taken the battle upward, where Noctis couldn’t rely on Ignis and Lunafreya to cover for his growing weakness. They needed to end this fight now.

Ignis managed to regain his feet, pulling Lunafreya with him. “Noctis won’t last much longer,” he said, too low for Ardyn to hear. “Is there anything you can do?”

Lunafreya’s hair rustled as she shook her head. “I can’t heal him, if that’s what you’re asking. Not from in here.”

Overhead, Noctis and Ardyn shouted at each other, their swords clashing with a crystalline shriek.
Ardyn’s voice was smug, Noct’s tinged with desperation, and Ignis heard the ugly crack of impact as miasma struck him. Forcing down the growing panic, Ignis ran options through his mind: what resources they had, what possible strategies they could deploy—

Oh. “Noctis said your trident was glowing,” he said to Lunafreya. “How bright can you make it?”

There was a pause while Lunafreya followed his line of thought. Then, with a smile in her voice entirely too vicious for the kind-hearted Oracle, Lunafreya said, “Very bright. On my mark.”

She pushed him away and Ignis followed the direction of the nudge, ear tilted toward the battle above them. Noctis and Ardyn were swooping up and down as well as moving along the horizontal plane; Ignis would have to time this very carefully or he’d blow their only chance. His heart pounded in his chest as he circled wide, building up the speed he’d need for such a maneuver.

Just as Noctis and Ardyn began another low dive, Lunafreya shouted, “Go!”

Calling his lance to hand, Ignis planted it in the ground and leaped as hard as he could, vaulting up into the air. Miasma groaned around him as Ardyn called it to strike at Ignis from all sides. But Ignis had planned for that - had hoped for it, had banked on it.

Ten years ago, he’d barely been able to cross Kate’s living room without tripping. He’d been terrified of walking outside alone, unable to parse the sounds around him, to use them to steer himself. But ten years in darkness, fighting blind and alone, had made him ready for this in a way he never could have imagined. The soft sounds of miasma gathering to strike him were like thunder in his ears, all his attention focused on those subtle noises.

He dismissed his lance, grabbed the closest block of miasma, and used it as a handhold, swinging himself upward even as he dodged its attempt to hit him. Another solid block was forming to his left and he kicked off it, then grabbed a third and pushed himself still higher. His blood pounded in his skull; he was holding his breath for fear that even such a soft sound would drown out the noise of the miasma.

Another block, grab and swing and kick off, hauling himself upward to where Ardyn and Noctis floated in the air. Scents caught his attention now, worming into his awareness: Noctis’s sweat and the wool of his suit, the ugly stench of decay that hovered around Ardyn like a cloud. Ignis grabbed Noctis’s shoulder and shoved him aside, and as he did so, a sudden brilliant heat blossomed below them. The Oracle’s magic, flaring with what must have been blinding light, and Noctis and Ardyn both cried out in surprise.

Even caught off-guard and blinded, Ardyn was no fool: his Armiger sang as he called his weapons to defend himself. But he was too late. The push off Noctis’s shoulder had given Ignis the last bit of necessary height - and he plunged both his daggers into Ardyn’s chest.

Ardyn howled with pain and rage, and a blow struck Ignis’s shoulder, hard enough that he gasped. But he clung to the daggers, his full weight hanging off them now, slowing Ardyn down and keeping the man’s attention on him. The howl changed to a growling roar, Ardyn’s daemonic essence revealing itself. Ignis braced for another blow, his gut churning - where was Noctis? If he couldn’t use this opening—

From behind Ardyn came the crack-hiss of a warp, and Ardyn jerked, grunting. The tip of a sword brushed Ignis’s chest: Noctis’s blade, impaling Ardyn from behind.

Ignis pushed away from Ardyn, letting his daggers vanish into the armory as he fell to the ground. It was further than he’d thought and he landed hard, rolling to absorb the momentum before
coming to his feet. Crystal sang overhead as Noctis struck again and again: one blow for each glaive in his Armiger, the distinctive sounds of each weapon still familiar even after all these years. Ardyn’s cries of pain grew weaker with each hit, until at last the crystalline crackle of his own Armiger faded and vanished.

“So,” Ardyn said, his voice little more than a daemon’s growl. “That is how you would end it.”

The tail end of his words were blurred as he fell from the air, landing near Ignis with an ugly thud. Noctis warped down a moment later; Ignis heard the rustle of cloth as Noctis knelt beside Ardyn, and went to join his king, distantly aware of Lunafreya likewise hurrying to Noctis’s other side.

Ardyn whispered, “Now it is over, Majesty. What will you do? Banish the daemons and bring peace? Erase me from history once more?”

Noctis shook his head in response. “This time you can rest in peace,” he said gently. “Close your eyes. Release the burden placed on you by the gods.”

Ardyn chuckled, low and wet with blood. “Honorable… until the end. Goodbye, dear Noct.”

“Be at peace,” Noctis murmured.

Ardyn breathed out, and did not breathe in again. The three of them knelt there for a moment, a silent vigil over the end of the creature called Adagium and the man once known as Ardyn Lucis Caelum.

Then Lunafreya said, urgency in her voice, “Noctis, the Starscourge—!”

Noct’s head jerked up, his hair brushing Ignis’s shoulder as he looked toward the core. Ignis tilted his ear, listening, before he remembered he could see the core after a fashion.

But when he turned to look, his gut clenched. What had been a dense, solid mass of purple-green daemon miasma was now dissipating, its edges turning hazy. Ardyn had been what was containing it, and now that he was dead, it sought to escape.

Lunafreya moved, her trident thudding against the floor and warm Oracle magic reaching out toward the core. The hazy edges tightened once more as her magic contained it, but even Ignis could see the way the Starscourge pulsed and roiled against her grip.

“Hurry, Noct,” Ignis said. But Noctis hadn’t moved from where he knelt beside Ardyn, and when Ignis put a hand on his back to encourage him, he felt fine tremors coursing through Noct’s body. Ice shot through Ignis’s gut. “Noct?”

“I’m fine,” Noctis said, but his voice was little louder than it had been when he’d spoken to Ardyn, and there was a breathy, exhausted quality to it that sent more stabs of ice through Ignis’s heart. Noctis took a deep breath and struggled to his feet - but it was obviously a struggle, and Ignis rose with him, slipping an arm around Noctis’s waist. Noct leaned gratefully on him, breathing hard. The wound his physical body had sustained was catching up to him.

He staggered two steps closer to the Scourge-core before his legs gave out and he would have fallen if not for Ignis’s arm around him. “Hold on, Noct,” Ignis pleaded. Willing strength into his king. “You can do this.”

“Yeah,” Noctis agreed, his voice determined. He steadied himself, then pulled gently away from Ignis. “Get back.”
Ignis hesitated, afraid Noctis would collapse again, and Noctis added, “I don’t want you in the firing line. Please, Ignis. Trust in me.”

Ignis couldn’t argue with those words, a sickeningly familiar echo to the ending of the game he remembered. He moved away, giving Noctis space, though each step was an almost impossible effort. There was the crystalline sound of a weapon being summoned, then in a voice like iron, Noctis called, “Kings of Lucis! Come to me!”

Crystal sang overhead and the brilliant blue magic of the Lucii flared to life, seen not through Ignis’s useless eyes but, just like a decade ago, through the power that bound him to Noctis. The thirteen glaives of the Lucii slammed down in a semicircle around Noctis, and the massive forms of the thirteen ancient kings and queens rose up from the ground to meet them.

Ignis could hardly breathe, a memory of listening to the game’s end loud in his mind. Would the Lucii still strike Noctis down, even here in this realm? Everything in him ached to return to his king’s side, to protect him - but he gritted his teeth and made himself stay back.

As though it could feel the Lucii’s presence, the Starscourge core pulsed violently, miasma rippling against the edges of Lunafreya’s power. She cried out, bootheels clicking against the ground as she struggled to contain the core. Closer by, Noctis took another deep breath, as though to steady himself - then the breath left him as though he’d been struck.

Ignis was moving before he even registered that Noctis had collapsed; he caught his king before he fell, slinging Noct’s arm around his shoulders. Noct’s skin burned, hot as Ifrit’s fire despite the layers of leather and fabric between them; Ignis had a sudden clear memory of Kate saying, ten years ago, *when Noct uses the Ring’s power, his arm starts to charcoal.* The weight of the Lucii’s regard was a physical thing against Ignis’s back, as though the Kings of Yore were judging him - judging Noctis, and questioning his worth.

Noctis struggled upright once more. His head turned, his hair brushing Ignis’s cheek as he looked over his shoulder at the Lucii. No, Ignis realized. Not at the Lucii as a whole, but at one in particular, who stood slightly apart from the rest at the edge of the semicircle. Its head was bowed, but Ignis recognized the shape of its cloak, the ornaments decorating its vest.

“Dad,” Noctis whispered.

The thirteenth Lucii seemed almost to flinch. Its head lifted, and Ignis thought it might be meeting Noctis’s gaze. “I walked tall,” Noctis hissed, the words breathless and strained and fierce. “I walked tall, and I won’t fail now.” He turned back to the Scourge-core and his body twisted, his right arm - bearing the Ring - raising up and back.

The Lucii moved as one in response, lifting their weapons, their arms drawing back in imitation of Noctis’s pose. The fire under Noctis’s skin grew even hotter, and Ignis caught the sickening stench of burning flesh. Lunafreya staggered again, her breath coming in strained gasps. *Please,* Ignis prayed silently, not even sure who he was praying to. *Please!*

Brilliant blue light erupted from the Ring, burning hot behind Ignis’s eyes.

Noctis flung his arm forward.

The Lucii attacked.

Spectral figures darted past Ignis and Noctis to strike at the core of the Starscourge. One after the other, impossibly fast, glaives biting deep into the roiling mass. The Scourge pulsed as each blow
landed, angry purple-green malevolence straining against the bonds of Lunafreya’s magic. Ignis held his breath - if it escaped now, if all if this was for naught—

But the Oracle’s power held. As the last of the Lucii struck, the Starscourge flared one final time, then dissolved, miasma crystallizing into blue shards of the Lucii’s power. The crystals sparkled as they fell, fading into nothingness. Ignis started to breathe again.

Then Noctis whispered, “It’s over,” and collapsed, his body dead weight against Ignis’s side.
The True Ending

Chapter Summary

In which the game ends.

Chapter Notes

The game ends, but the fic does not. :) Two more chapters to go!

“Noct!” Ignis yelled. Noctis’s body was utterly limp, lifeless, and Ignis barely managed to control his fall to the ground. He pulled Noctis onto his lap and cradled him close, the flood of relief at the destruction of the Starscourge evaporating in an instant. Noct’s skin was shockingly cold, especially compared to the heat of the Ring from a moment ago. Ignis could feel his heart fluttering, unsteady and faltering, and his own heart all but stopped.

“Is he—” Lunafreya ran up to them. “Noctis!”

The ground beneath them lurched sickeningly; Lunafreya grabbed Ignis’s shoulder for balance. “What’s happening?” he demanded.

“This realm is of the Starscourge,” Lunafreya said, her voice turning as she looked around. She didn’t quite manage to hide the fear in it. “The Scourge is destroyed, and now this realm, too, is fading.”

“How do we get out of here?” Ignis demanded.

Lunafreya’s hair rustled as she shook her head. “I don’t know. Noctis was going to—”

The ground lurched again, dropping them several feet in a nauseating plunge. Lunafreya tightened her grip on Ignis, bracing both of them. Ignis gritted his teeth, thinking furiously. Noctis had said he’d intended to use Ignis as an anchor to get back, but Ignis was here, and Noctis was too weak to move, much less call on the Crystal’s power.

But Gladio and Prompto were still out there. Could Ignis reach them? Could he use them as an anchor, as Noctis had intended to use Ignis? It would be just like summoning his weapons from the armory, except instead of calling them to himself, he had to send himself to them.

He bowed his head, reaching deep within himself for the thread of magic which bound him to Noctis - and through Noct, to Gladio and Prompto. It was a nearly impossible effort to calm his mind enough to find it; he was all too aware of the Scourge-realm falling apart around them, of what might happen if he didn’t succeed in time. He gritted his teeth and focused, and finally he found it: the soft hum of royal magic, and an answering hum from somewhere… else.

Reach. Grab, the fingers of his mind closing around the dual sensations of a solid wall and a flicker of light. Pull.
The ground plummeted away. Ignis clung to Noctis, and Lunafreya clung to Ignis, and suddenly the whole world shifted.

Rain pattering on his face, his hair. The scent of sweat and blood and concrete. Someone yelling his name, and Noctis’s. They’d made it back.

Lunafreya still clung to Ignis’s arm, her body solidifying against him even as he recognized her presence. There was a startled gasp - Ravus, recognizing his sister - but Ignis ignored him and shouted at her, “Heal him!”

He was dimly aware of Ravus running up to them, of Prompto and Gladio’s frantic questions, as Lunafreya flung herself to her knees on Noctis’s other side. She shouldered Ignis out of the way, bending close over Noct’s body. “O blessed stars of light and life…!”

But the warm magic of the Oracle did not appear, did not engulf Noctis. He was growing colder still, his heartbeat too faint to feel. “Lunafreya, please!” Ignis begged.

“It’s not work—” Lunafreya broke off sharply and sat up, her braids clattering as she spun around. Ignis tilted his head, belatedly realizing Gladio, Prompto, and Ravus had fallen silent as well. Something was descending from the sky, a presence vast and powerful and overwhelming. Ignis tasted steel in the back of his throat, and abruptly recognized the presence: Bahamut.

The other gods were gathering behind Bahamut, somewhere high overhead, divine bodies filling the sky. Ignis remembered the vast, crushing saltwater sense of Leviathan from Altissia; that scent of ozone and the bite of lightning along his back teeth was Ramuh. The groan of rock was Titan, and a whirl of frozen air, threaded through with a single wisp of heat, marked Shiva’s presence.

The Draconian’s voice rumbled around and through them all, vibrating Ignis’s bones. Lunafreya gasped in horror, and Ignis demanded, “What did he say?”

“He said the prophecy is incomplete,” Lunafreya answered. “Our world is coming apart, and he believes it’s because the Chosen One is still alive.”

“He’s what’s stopping you from healing Noct?” Gladio growled. He sounded like he was about to take on Bahamut himself.

Shiva’s cold intensified, then vanished; high heels clicked against the pavement and the level voice of the messenger Gentiana spoke next. “The Draconian believes the shattering of the world is caused by the Chosen One’s defiance,” she said, her voice maddeningly calm. “The only way our Star can be repaired is to fulfill the last of the prophecy.”

“No!” Prompto yelled. “No, that’s not—we can’t—”

Noctis had stopped breathing. No, Ignis thought in horror. No, it can’t end this way, not after everything, not after all we did to get here!

Lunafreya was talking again, the words rapid but her voice controlled and steady: the calm of the Oracle even in the face of the gods’ might. “The prophecy is fulfilled!” she protested. “The Scourge has been eliminated. Our Star is saved.”

Bahamut’s voice growled something sharp and harsh, his anger scraping Ignis’s skin like steel. Gentiana - Shiva - translated, “Our Star is dying. The Oracle must look around. She must see what happens to our Star as she makes her plea.”

“She ain’t wrong,” Gladio muttered, his voice pitched low as though he didn’t want Shiva to hear.
His fingers gripped Ignis’s shoulder; Ignis could feel the tension thrumming through his body where he stood behind him. “The whole world’s glitching now - even the Citadel’s flicking in and out of existence. We’re solid still, but I don’t know for how long.”

“I won’t let him die,” Ignis insisted. “Not like this. Not after all he’s done.”

“Iggy…” Gladio said, and for a horrible wild moment Ignis almost thought he was going to give up, was going to tell him they had no other choice. But Gladio’s fingers tightened on Ignis’s shoulder, a silent warning to stop talking. Above them, Bahamut’s presence loomed sharp and glittering against Ignis’s senses; he must have reacted to Ignis’s words.

Gentiana said gently, “It is the cost. The life of the Chosen for those of his people.”

Ignis shook his head. She kept talking, something about the prophecy and destiny and it didn’t matter, it didn’t matter because Ignis would stop it. He just had to think.

Noctis had mentioned that he and Lunafreya had had other plans, including one involving a way to keep a path to the spirit realm open so Noctis could escape. But the gods were unlikely to stand by and allow such a thing, even if Ignis had the first idea how to make it happen. If the looming threat of their presence here wasn’t enough, Ignis still remembered listening to Bahamut’s voice on the tinny speakers of Kate’s phone, the Draconian’s insistence that the prophecy was unchangeable—

Kate. Ignis grabbed for Noctis’s hand, reaching for the Ring of the Lucii - but the brief moment of hope that he could carry Noctis to the other reality faded when he found Noctis’s hand bare. No, Kate had described how the Ring had shattered in the game, after Noctis had spent its power destroying the Scourge. There was no return to Kate’s reality, no convenient rescue by her and her hospital team. Ignis had to figure something out on his own. He ran through his memories of his conversations with Kate, looking for anything, any little clue that could tell him how to save his king.

You being gone is the butterfly wing flap causing a tornado, okay? If I tell you everything that happens next, it might cause an apocalypse that destroys the world.

It’s pretty uncompromising. The King’s life for those of his people.

Noctis’s destiny is what it is. Ardyn and the Lucii spent two thousand years arranging this in opposition to one another. The gods spent longer.

No, wait, that last one had been Taku, not Kate. The developer who had arranged this, whom Ignis had later accused of being responsible for his inability to change anything.

Then he remembered the rest of that conversation, what Kate had said after Ignis had blamed the developers, and something flickered in his chest that almost felt like hope: Look, I really don’t think Taku or his team are trying to thwart you. They care less about things proceeding exactly as they planned than about things proceeding at all.

Ten years ago, the game had forced its plan upon them by reviving Ravus as a daemon - but Prompto had managed to subvert that plan by giving the game an alternate path to follow. Just like a video game, right? If you don’t see the bad guy die, he’s not dead, and he’ll show up later at the worst possible time. The game had allowed their change to proceed once they gave it a path to follow - one which, as Prompto had noted, was an acceptable alternative for a video game.

And half an hour ago, in the Scourge-realm, Noctis had said, Trying to get a good ending in a game is usually really difficult, and you’re risking a lot more, which is why it wasn’t the primary
“The true ending,” Ignis whispered, and snapped his head around toward Bahamut and Gentiana. Gentiana was still talking about the prophecy and he shouted over her, “You’re wrong!”

There was an incredulous pause; Ignis didn’t wait for either of them to respond. “The game - our world - isn’t breaking because Noctis is alive, it’s breaking because he’s dying!”

The others were exclaiming in surprise, but Ignis ignored them all as Bahamut spoke, his voice an aggrieved growl. “Such words are nonsense,” Gentiana translated. “The Chosen One must die to save the world.”

Ignis shook his head fiercely. “No. The Chosen One risked all, and did far more than the prophecy required to restore peace and heal our Star.” He gestured at Lunafreya, alive and whole at his side, and Ravus behind her, whose blood had sustained the havens during the ten years of darkness. “If you kill him now, the game will not have a satisfactory conclusion.”

Bahamut started to speak again, but Ignis interrupted him, too reckless with fear for his king to care about deference to a god: “If I’m wrong, you’ll still be able to kill him. But if I’m right and you let him die, there’s no hope of recovery.”

A long, long silence as Bahamut considered this. The others had fallen silent as well, hardly daring to breathe. Ignis tried not to think how cold and still Noctis was in his arms.

Finally Bahamut spoke, short and abrupt. Before Gentiana could translate, Lunafreya gasped, “Thank you,” and lunged for Noctis again. She bowed her head over his, her braids brushing Ignis’s shoulder, and this time Ignis felt the blessed warmth of the Oracle’s magic as it flowed through Noctis. He held on, willing strength into his king, praying they weren’t too late.

Then Noctis drew a breath, his heartbeat thudding to life under Ignis’s hand. Relief choked Ignis and for several seconds all he could do was cling to Noct, feeling the beating of his heart, the shaky breaths as he gasped air back into his lungs.

“It worked,” Prompto whispered, sounding awed. “Look, the glitches are stopping!”

Gladio made a choked sound, falling to his knees behind Ignis, his hand still on Ignis’s shoulder. Prompto bounced past and crashed into Gladio, leather creaking as they embraced. “It worked,” Prompto shouted. “Noct’s okay, he’s alive, it worked!”

Ignis lifted his head, focusing on the presence of the gods above them, around them. Waiting, his breath stopped in his throat, for them to decide whether they would accept the subversion of the prophecy.

Gentiana said, “The companion of the Chosen has done well. Our Star is saved. The guidance of the gods is no longer needed.”

“Gentiana…” Lunafreya murmured.

“The girl and the boy are together, as they both once wished,” Gentiana said gently. “May they live happily.”

Cold blasted Ignis then, a frozen wind whipping around them all. There was a sound of crackling ice fading up toward the sky, and as Shiva departed, so did the presence of the other gods fade. Ignis was dimly aware of the others crowding close, Ravus wrapping Lunafreya in his arms while Gladio and Prompto disentangled themselves to take her place at Noctis’s side, but it wasn’t until
Noctis stirred that the vise of terror around his chest began to ease.

“...Ig?” Noctis whispered.

…and suddenly it was too much, it was all too much, the grief and the terror and the unexpected relief an overwhelming tide that threatened to drown him, and Ignis curled close around Noctis and finally, finally sobbed.
Chapter Summary

In which they finally get to sleep, and an unexpected visitor arrives.

They ended up retreating to Noctis’s old apartment in the Citadel, clinging to one another in
desperate relief. Ignis’s gamble had worked: the game had accepted its new, “true” ending, and the
 glitching had stopped. The daemons haunting Insomnia had vanished along with the Starscourge,
and the city was empty and silent save for the soft patter of rain around them as they made their
way back to the Citadel.

“It’s still dark out,” Prompto said uneasily as they walked. “Shouldn’t the sun be back?”

“In a few hours,” Gladio said. “Pretty sure it’s almost midnight. If it wasn’t raining we’d see the
stars.”

“The sun will rise,” Noctis said, then teased, “Don’t you trust me?”

“You? Yes,” Prompto agreed. “But the sun? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The inside of the Citadel was just as they’d left it less than an hour ago, though it felt far longer:
dusty and quiet, but with working electricity. An elevator carried them up to the residential wing of
the building, which turned out to have survived the invasion and the subsequent decade of
abandonment surprisingly unscathed. Ten years ago the palace staff had prepared Noctis’s old
apartment for his return from Altissia, but they hadn’t yet removed the dust covers and other
protections from disuse before everything went wrong. Ignis was more than a little surprised Ardyn
hadn’t defaced the rooms, given his hatred for Noctis, but the suite was unmolested, and as
comfortable a place as any to retire and recover themselves after all that had just happened.

The furniture in the outer receiving area and inner sitting room was a mix of antique pieces from
the reigns of past kings and sleek modern designs, meant more for impressing visitors to the
prince’s private chambers than for comfort. Noctis bypassed all of it for the bedroom, and with
some effort they managed to remove the dust cover from the bed without spilling the accumulated
dust everywhere.

The work was hampered by Ignis’s utter, physical inability to let go of Noctis. The few minutes
when Noctis had excused himself to the bathroom of the suite to change out of his rain-soaked,
bloodstained clothes had very nearly been enough to send Ignis into a panic attack, and then again
when it was Ignis’s turn in the bathroom to change. Logic be damned: the others could see Noct,
could be reassured of his presence and safety with a glance, but Ignis couldn’t. He couldn’t bring
himself to trust only his ears - he needed the comfort of touch, a hand on Noct’s wrist with his
fingers over Noct’s pulse. Noctis tolerated it without complaint, and occasionally turned his hand
in Ignis’s grip to squeeze his wrist in return.

Finally, though, they were all cleaned up and changed into dry clothes pulled from the armory, and
they piled onto the bed in a heap: Noctis and Lunafreya at the center, Ravus beside his sister and
Ignis pressed against Noct’s other side, still holding his wrist. Gladio sat just in front of them,
where he could rest a hand each on Ignis’s and Noctis’s knees; while Prompto settled into Gladio’s
lap, his legs tangled with Noct’s, his fingers tapping a rhythm on Ignis’s calf. They were going against all rules of propriety and decorum, and at that moment Ignis would have gladly punched in the face anyone who dared complain about it.

“Guys,” Noctis said, once they were settled. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t tell you about… about everything. Luna, our other plans... I—I knew what it was doing to you to think I was going to—but we couldn’t risk Ardyn finding out early. And then the game started breaking...” He shook his head.

“I think we can forgive you,” Gladio said. “But you wanna explain now?”

“Yes,” Ravus jumped in. “Please do explain. This is the second time someone’s mentioned a game.” That last was aimed pointedly at Ignis.

“I told you, we would explain later when we’re able,” Ignis said. “The game wouldn’t let us speak of it before now.”

“But why now?” Prompto asked. “D’you think it’s… it’s really over?”

“It’d better be,” Gladio growled. “Any more gods or devs show up with any more deadly prophecies, I’ll kill ‘em before they get more’n two words out.”

“I believe it is over,” Ignis said. “The original version of the game ended at the point of the Starscourge’s destruction. We’re most likely past the end and therefore free of its influence.”

“None of this is an explanation,” Ravus snapped.

There was a rustle of cloth and Ravus subsided; Lunafreya had probably made a gesture to soothe him. “Be patient,” she said, with a gentleness that didn’t quite hide a note of amusement.

“No, he’s right,” Ignis said. “We should start at the beginning, on the Tidemother’s altar in Altissia.” He went on, explaining how he’d been transported to the alternate reality, the nature of their world as a game within it, the discovery he had made of Noctis’s destiny. His return to Eos, his failure to change the game until that fateful moment in Zegnautus that had nearly cost Prompto’s life. Their return to Kate’s reality, the bargain they made there with Ardyn Izunia.

He turned the story over to Noctis after that, to explain the deal with the Lucii to save Lunafreya’s life, and Noctis and Lunafreya’s scheming during the ten years Noctis had spent inside the Crystal. “It was tricky,” Noctis admitted. “She was in the Ring, so I could hear her, but I had to be really careful to avoid Bahamut noticing when I was answering her.”

“I thought the gods were supposed to be on humanity’s side,” Prompto said. “Why wouldn’t they want the Oracle to survive?”

“They are on humanity’s side, yes,” Lunafreya said. “They were doing what they believed best for the survival of all mankind, and the prophecy was the only way they had to ensure that. Any deviation from that path risked the utter destruction of our Star and all the people on it. My life, and Noctis’s, were but small sacrifices when weighed against such a risk.”


“It’s over,” Noctis said firmly. “The prophecy is done. The Starscourge is gone for good.”

“That’s the last part you ain’t explained yet,” Gladio reminded him. “We saw you taunt Ardyn into infecting you - which, by the way, you ever do something that fucking stupid again, I’ll kill you
myself—"

"Sorry," Noctis muttered.

"—then all of a sudden you and Iggy kinda went limp. We thought—" He broke off, his voice rough.

"Sorry," Noctis said again. "We had to go inside the Starscourge." He told them the rest of it, though Ignis had to step in to cover the last bit after Noctis had collapsed. "So... you guys know the rest," Noctis finished.

"It really is over," Gladio said in a tone of disbelief. "All these years and just..." His hand lifted from Ignis’s knee to gesture. "That’s it."

"That’s not the only thing which is difficult to believe," Ravus said. "You’re telling me all this time, we’ve been part of some sort of game?!"

“I had much the same reaction,” Ignis admitted. “Impossible as it seems, it’s true.”

“It’s too bad we can’t go back to the other reality anymore,” Prompto said. “Kinda wish we could’ve said thanks to Kate one more time. Without her...”

“Many things would not have gone so well,” Ignis agreed.

“I wish we could too,” Noctis said quietly, “but the Ring is gone.” He raised his hand; Ignis felt his wrist twist and turn, as though he was studying the spot where the Ring had once sat on his finger. “It shattered when I called on the Lucii.”

“Good riddance,” Gladio grumbled. “Thing was nothing but an omen of death.”

“My ancestors can finally rest,” Noctis added. “The duty of the Lucis Caelums is fulfilled. As is the duty of the Oracle.”

“We all can rest,” Lunafreya said. “We’ll rebuild the world in the morning.”

* * *

Ignis awoke some time later to a soft but insistent pulse of magic through his bones, and a man’s voice murmuring, “Wake up, child.”

There was something naggingly familiar about the voice, but Ignis couldn’t place it right away. He stretched out an arm carefully, finding first Noctis, then Lunafreya and Ravus past him, breathing deep and calm with sleep. He checked Gladio and Prompto next, but they, too, were sound asleep. He was half-convinced he’d dreamed the voice when it spoke again. “Wake up, boy. I would speak with you.”

This time Ignis realized the voice came from the foot of the bed. Turning his head, following the gentle tug of magic, he caught his breath. A figure of glowing blue power stood there, hazy in the strange magic vision but enough for Ignis to recognize him: the Founder King of Lucis, not in his towering, armored Lucii form, but the smaller form of the man he’d been in life, as he’d once appeared to Ignis and the others.

“Your Majesty,” Ignis said, keeping his voice low to avoid disturbing the others. He eased away from Noctis, fighting down the flash of irrational panic that Noctis would vanish, and slipped off the bed. He bowed to the Founder King. “How may I be of service?”
The ancient king was silent for a long moment, seeming to study Ignis. Finally he said, “I wished to thank you. You have done a great service to my heir and to the world my family is sworn to protect.”

Ignis bowed once more. “It was no more than my duty,” he said. “Noctis is my king, and I would and always will do all in my power to protect him.”

“So you did,” the Founder King agreed. “I see now why you worded your vow to us as you did, when you bartered for the use of our power. You fulfilled it to the letter, despite my doubts.”

*I swear to aid Noctis in saving our Star,* Ignis had said, all those years ago, rejecting the Lucii’s wording about helping the Chosen King fulfill his destiny. “It was my duty and my promise,” Ignis demurred. He wasn’t at all sure how he felt about being praised by the Founder King himself.

Then something occurred to him. “If you don’t mind my asking… Noctis said the Ring was destroyed along with the Starscourge. How are you here?”

The Founder King seemed to smile. “I am not called the Mystic for nothing, boy. I know a thing or two about magic.”

“Then perhaps the better question is, why are you here?” Ignis asked. He couldn’t imagine this ancient king had stayed behind after his duty was discharged only to have a chat.

“Call it curiosity,” the Founder King said. “I would know the resolution of this ‘new ending’.”

Ignis must truly have been tired, because it took him several seconds to realize what the Founder King meant. “Kate’s reality,” he said. “The ultimate fate of our game.”

The king’s hazy form nodded. “I can send you there, if you wish.”

“If I don’t wish, would you still send me to assuage your own curiosity?” Ignis asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

The Founder King’s smile became a laugh. “You think so little of me, child? No,” he continued before Ignis had to come up with a response to that. “I would not send you if you did not wish to go. I had only hoped that you might share my curiosity.”

Ignis hesitated. He was still exhausted to the bone, and the thought of leaving Noctis even for a moment remained terrifying. But the Founder King had read Ignis all too well - he was curious, and moreover he liked the idea of meeting Kate once more on its own merits. She had been a good friend at a time when he’d badly needed one, and she had helped all of them in many ways. “I’ll go,” he said.

“I’m glad,” the Founder King said. “Be warned, my power wanes quickly - I cannot leave you there for long.”

“Understood.”

The Founder King lifted a hand, and for the third time that day, the world dropped away from beneath Ignis’s feet.
As the world came rushing back, the scent of Kate’s favorite dark roast surrounded Ignis, heady to the point of intoxicating after nearly ten years without coffee. He swayed, caught his balance, trying to work out where he was in her house. The scent of coffee was strong, but so was the slightly musty smell of old, well-loved furniture. Under his feet was a thick soft area rug, and he could hear Kate humming to herself, off-key, in a nearby room. Her voice echoed faintly off the hard surface of tile, which meant she was in the kitchen, and therefore he was in her living room.

Nostalgia hit him in a sudden wave. He’d only spent a few months in this house, ten years ago, but he still remembered it. The couch would be over there, the TV on the wall facing it. The front door to his left, and the gentle rumble of a car on the street outside. This house where he’d learned to be blind, where he’d told Noctis the truth of his destiny. Strange, how familiar it remained after so long, yet not strange at all, after so much had happened here.

He was about to call Kate’s name when her footsteps pattered softly across the wooden floor toward him, and she yelped in surprise. “What—Ignis?!?”

“Hello, Kate,” he said, and smiled. Her voice, too, was familiar and comfortable. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d missed her.

“You scared me,” she chided, though he could hear the smile in her words.

“Apologies,” he said. “Inter-reality travel does not allow for knocking, I’m afraid.”

She laughed. “I guess not. It’s good to see you again.”

“Likewise.” He held out his hands as she approached; she gripped them and then pulled him into a quick hug.

When she let go, she just stood there for a moment, most likely looking him up and down. He knew he didn’t look especially well-put-together - he’d traded his rain- and blood-soaked Kingsglaive uniform for the comfort of a pair of well-worn slacks and a soft button-up - but he also knew Kate wouldn’t care. “Look at you,” she said. “You’re all grown up.”

“I was hardly a child before,” Ignis protested mildly.

She laughed again, a more rueful sound this time. “You aged ten years in the four months since I last saw you, but I’m still older than you. Not by much anymore, I guess, but still.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Point taken. Ten years makes rather a difference.” In truth, from the vantage point of the vaunted old age of thirty-two, he had been little more than a child when he’d first met her. Then the rest of her words caught up to him. “You said it’s been only four months for
“Around that,” Kate said. “Episode: Ignis came out two days ago, along with a whole bunch of changed stuff and a new ending where Noctis lives.” She hesitated. “Is he… Did it…”

“Yes,” he said. The words still felt strange, nearly as heady as the scent of coffee. The prophecy was fulfilled, and Noctis was alive. “We succeeded.”

She blew out a sigh of relief. “Good. I’m glad.” A hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “I knew you could do it.”

“We couldn’t have without your aid,” Ignis said. “Thank you, Kate. Truly.”

“It’s fine,” Kate said, embarrassment clear in her voice; from the angle of it he thought she’d ducked her head. “Coffee’s just about ready. It’s decaf because it’s after midnight and I have a noon shift tomorrow, but I can pour you a cup and you can tell me all about it?”

“Please,” Ignis said, then as her footsteps padded away, added, “Though I don’t know how much time I have. The Founder King sent me here, and he said his power is fading.”

“The Founder King?” Kate repeated, surprised, her voice raised as she called back from the kitchen. “Okay, you really do have a lot to tell.”

“He’s curious about the resolution of the prophecy as portrayed in the game,” Ignis admitted. “As am I. It was… quite the experience from our perspective.”

Kate returned and bumped his arm lightly with her knuckles; he took the mug of coffee she held and cupped his hands around it, allowing himself a moment to just enjoy the scent. Kate was settling onto one end of her couch, her own mug clinking as she set it on the table, and Ignis sat down on the other end. “Why don’t you go first?” he suggested. “Then I’ll only have to tell you what happened differently.”

“Sure,” she said. “So, after you guys left last time, Square Enix figured out a way to just… stop the game from playing on profiles where it was actually tied to your reality. People who’d had the game before could still play the original version, but new players couldn’t play at all. Which sucked and they took a lot of flak for it, but Taku said it was better that than the stutter-forward. And he wasn’t sure if they’d have to wait ten years for the World of Ruin to happen.”

“That would have been quite the wait, for one video game,” Ignis said.

Kate snorted. “Yeah. So they were also working on Episode: Ignis in parallel, and according to Taku, one day they came in to work and there was a whole new version of the episode.” She chuckled. “His whole team flipped out - he never told them about you, because he knew they wouldn’t believe him, but I guess it’s not exactly easy to convince a bunch of hard-working devs that it’s not a bad thing that all the work they’d been doing got wiped out and magically replaced overnight.”

“I suppose not,” Ignis agreed.

“They couldn’t do much about it, though,” Kate continued. “Just some minor fixing and integrations. I really didn’t follow most of what he was talking about - I’m a doctor, not a programmer - but they managed to get it working with the original game and everything.”

“With what really happened,” Ignis said. It was surprisingly nostalgic to sit like this with Kate, and he had to hide a fond smile.
She nodded. “So now when you play Episode: Ignis, if you just play normally, you get the original ending of the game. But if you play it on a profile that qualifies for the changed version, and you haven’t advanced to Chapter Ten before playing it, you have the option to get the secret ending.”

Noctis’s words in the Starscourge realm echoed in Ignis’s mind. “How so?”

“It’s really annoying,” she said, and he couldn’t hold back the smile anymore. He’d forgotten her fangirl tone, the passion in her voice as she spoke of the game. “Basically you have to select a specific dialogue option with Ravus at a couple of points, and then pick up on a hint that he wants to take a different route that turns out to be a shortcut, and then get out to the Tidemother’s altar within thirty-five minutes - which is freaking hard, by the way, normally it takes around fifty minutes. But if you manage all that, you get the option to knock Ravus out during the fight—”

“And if you don’t?” Ignis asked, curious.

“Then everything goes back to the original ending version,” Kate said with a shrug. “Wait, do you even know what I’m talking about with all this - what happened in Altissia? Did you get your memories back?”

He shook his head. “Ravus told me what he remembers. Though as you say, I knocked him out, so that’s as far as he knows, too.”

“Ah, okay.” Kate paused to take a sip of coffee, then continued. “So if you knock out Ravus, then you go to Noctis where he’s being healed by Lunafreya, and that’s when Pryna shows up. In the original version she’s lying at the base of the altar and you run into her before going up to where Noctis and Lunafreya are, but if you get to this point of the secret ending, she turns up after the Ravus fight and shows you the vision of Noctis dying then. That’s what prompts you to grab the Ring out of Noctis’s hand. You hear King Regis’s voice, and then have a conversation with the Lucii about refusing to let Noctis die. They make you an offer, but Ardyn shows up before they can explain it. He takes you prisoner and threatens to kill Noctis, but you put on the Ring, and get two options: accept the Lucii’s bargain, or kill Ardyn yourself.”

“I take it ‘accept the Lucii’s bargain’ is the correct option for the, ah, secret ending,” Ignis guessed.

Kate nodded, her hair rustling softly. “If you pick that, you and Lunafreya both vanish in a burst of golden light, and the Episode ends with a note, ‘to be continued in Final Fantasy XV: Chapter 10’.”

“At which point one returns to the main game, which shifts to the changed version, the events which actually happened in my reality,” Ignis said.

“Yep,” Kate agreed. “After you guys left here last time, the next big change was during the daemon-Ravus boss fight in Zegnautus. Ravus tries to attack you, and there’s a quick-time event to have Noctis warp in and save you. You actually have to deliberately fail that event - which took people a while to figure out, but it auto-fails if you’re in Stasis or a certain distance away so eventually they got it - and that triggers a cutscene where Prompto pushes Ravus off the edge.”

They went back and forth in that manner, Kate describing the game’s perspective and Ignis concurring or correcting regarding what had actually happened, all the way through the ten years of ruin and Noctis’s return, up to their journey through Insomnia. “There’s one last test there,” Kate said. “In the original version, you hit a wall of debris that forces you to go underground, through the subway tunnels. But in the changed version, Ravus suggests going over the top. You have to take him up on that offer, or when he leaves the party at the gates of the Citadel, he doesn’t come
back and the ending reverts.”

Ignis thought about how upset Ravus had been when he’d thought Ignis was telling him he was no longer wanted, how hurt he’d sounded even after acknowledging Ignis’s hidden message. Had it really been the simple gesture of Noctis trusting Ravus at that moment in the debris-ridden streets that had made the difference between success and failure? But then, from what Kate was describing of the game, there were many, many such small moments along the way that had been equally critical. So many points when they could have failed, when Noctis’s destiny could have become set irrevocably in stone - yet they’d succeeded. The relief of it was still a brilliant, aching thing in Ignis’s chest.

Kate kept going. The rest of the game’s new ending was more or less what Ignis had experienced, minus the conversations regarding the game itself. The confrontation with Bahamut had happened in the game, but as a cutscene only, with no mention of glitches or true endings. Ignis and Lunafreya’s game avatars had simply persuaded Bahamut that Noctis’s death was no longer needed, that the Starscourge was gone and their world safe.

“The game ends with the same cutscene as the original, of Noctis and Lunafreya on the throne of Lucis on their wedding day,” Kate finished. “Except the throne room’s been repaired, and you and Gladio and Prompto are there with them.”

“That’s… somewhat further along than I am,” Ignis said. “It’s only been a few hours since we destroyed the Starscourge.”

“Well, it looked like a good time, so enjoy it when you get there,” she said lightly. A hesitation, then, in a more careful tone, “Are you… I mean, your… The Lucii’s bargain…”

His eyes. Even after ten years to come to terms with what he’d done, what he’d lost, he still felt a little shard of pain in his heart when he thought about it. But this time, more acutely than the pain he felt relief. Noctis’s heartbeat under his hand, Ravus’s arm around his shoulders, Lunafreya’s laughter. “It was worth it,” he said fiercely. “I would do it again. Noctis is safe, and for that I would do anything.”

Kate nodded. “I know I’ve said this before, but, Ignis… I’m proud of you. Proud as hell. You did something no one else could do. No one else would have even tried.”

He felt a blush rising to his cheeks. “For Noctis, I would do anything,” he repeated.

A faint thrum of magic pulsed behind his eyes: the power of the Lucii. “The Founder King is calling me,” he said reluctantly. “It’s time for me to return home.”

“Okay,” Kate agreed. She stood up when he did, then came around the coffee table to hug him once more. “Tell the guys hi for me, and that I’m really proud of them, too. And congrats to Noctis and Lunafreya when they get married.”

“I’ll tell them,” Ignis said. He hugged her back, his throat unexpectedly tight. “Thank you, again, for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” She let go, but squeezed his hands one final time. “Take care, Ignis.”

He smiled. “Goodbye, Kate.”

The Founder King’s magic swirled around him once more, and his next breath was the still, dusty air of Noctis’s old room in the Citadel. The Founder King’s glowing blue form stood before him, though it seemed fainter than before. “I was listening,” he said before Ignis had to ask. “It seems as
though this ‘game’ is satisfied.”

“Indeed,” Ignis said. “Perhaps we are finally free of its influence.”

“So we must hope,” the Founder King agreed. He seemed almost to hesitate. “There is one last thing I would offer you, before my power fades entirely.”

Ignis frowned. “Offer?” he asked cautiously.

“Yes,” the Founder King said. “A gift freely given, for it is not the costly power of the Lucii I offer, but that of a single Lucis Caelum in thanks for what you have done.” He stepped closer, his arm lifting; Ignis felt a strange pressure against his temple, not quite touch.

But then he forgot about the sensation altogether, because suddenly he could see.

His breath caught in his throat, his heart stuttering in his chest as his mind struggled to process a sense he hadn’t had for a decade. He could see Noctis’s room laid out before him, the elegant silvers and blacks of the Lucis Caelum crest gleaming under the layers of dust. Everything seemed slightly off-center and it took him a moment to realize it was because he was seeing through the Founder King’s eyes, not his own ruined ones.

But then he forgot about that, too, as he realized the light in the room, shining off the marble floor and sleek wooden furniture, was sunlight. It poured through an uncovered window, bright and warm, and without meaning to Ignis found himself staggering toward it, his hands outstretched. He was distantly aware of the Founder King moving with him, maintaining the touch against his temple, but ignored it as he leaned against the window, looking out over Insomnia shining beneath the rosy light of its first dawn in ten years.

Ignis’s chest ached and for a moment he couldn’t breathe at all. They’d done it, they’d won, the sun had returned. It hadn’t seemed real until that very moment, but now, with sunlight warm on his skin, the enormity of it hit him. They’d brought back the dawn.

He turned, then, the Founder King moving with him, until Ignis could see the big bed in the middle of the room. Noctis lay in the center, his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling as he slept. His black hair was long and shaggy, a scruff of beard dusting his chin, and Ignis almost laughed because Gladio hadn’t been wrong about Noct’s eyebrows. Gladio himself was sprawled across the end of the bed, half on top of Noctis’s legs, with Prompto stretched out beside him and using one of Gladio’s arms for a pillow. They looked so different from Ignis’s memories of them, yet not unfamiliar; Ignis knew the lines and angles of their faces from the way they’d felt under his fingertips.

Lunafreya was curled beside Noctis with Ravus on her other side. Even in sleep, the relief on Ravus’s face that his sister was alive was obvious, and his flesh hand circled her wrist in much the same way Ignis had clung to Noctis. Lunafreya wore an old T-shirt of Noctis’s and what were probably a pair of Prompto’s jeans, her unbraided hair falling in messy locks around her shoulders. She didn’t look like the elegant, untouchable Oracle of Ignis’s memories, just an ordinary woman sleeping peacefully surrounded by friends. Noctis held her other hand, their fingers threaded together.

Ignis kept staring at them, at Noctis, as his vision began to darken once more around the edges. The Founder King’s power was fading, taking his last gift with it, but even these few moments were enough. Ignis had accepted the loss of his sight ten years ago, when he’d made the bargain to save Noctis; had spent the last decade rebuilding himself without it. The darkness which closed around him once more was familiar, no longer terrifying, and though he would forever mourn what
he’d lost, he was no longer a prisoner to that grief.

The faint pressure of the Founder King’s hand dropped away from Ignis’s temple. The blue glow of his magic was gone, and only the vaguest sense of his presence remained. “Thank you,” Ignis whispered to him.

“I leave my heir in your capable hands,” the Founder King said, his voice distant and fading. “Our Star is safe, and he is free of our curse.”

“I will take care of him,” Ignis promised, and bowed deeply.

“Thank you, Ignis Scientia,” the Founder King said. The gentle hum of his magic vanished, and when Ignis straightened from his bow, the Founder King - the last of the Lucii - was gone.

For a moment Ignis just stood there, allowing himself to take in everything that had happened. But exhaustion tugged at him, the warmth of the sunlight permeating the room like a lullaby. He sank down onto the bed, settling back into his place at Noctis’s side and resting a hand on his chest.

The last thing Ignis was aware of was the steady beat of Noctis’s heart.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all of you who stuck with me through nearly 140,000 words of crack taken seriously! I had no idea when I started writing that this crazy fic would get so much love, and I'm forever grateful to all of you who've left comments, kudos, bookmarks, recs, Tumblr tags, and all the other encouragement you've shared with me. You're all amazing, and I couldn't have done it without you. What can I say?

You guys are the best. <3

Works inspired by this: [What's In A Name](http://archiveofourown.org//works/14193709) by avianscribe, [The Basis of Virtualization](http://archiveofourown.org//works/14070452) by Data_Crystals

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