Ignis stopped walking. "This is it, we finally made it" he said.  
"This is what?" Prompto asked looking around. Nothing in the scenery had changed in the last two hours.  
"This is where you prove to us that your reputation was well earned."  
Prompto frowned at the river and rocky soil that stretched to the horizon. As far as he could tell there was nothing to steal, nothing at all. It didn't take an idiot to realize that this had been an elaborate set-up from the beginning. Take him out to steal some magical ring, have him fall in love with these beautiful idiots, then kill him. It seemed a little extreme for Ardyn to set up the prince of Lucis to do it so far away when a public execution would have worked just fine. Prompto sighed, King Ardyn was nothing if not extreme.
You're Free Now, Somehow

Chapter Notes

Hello and welcome to my super self indulgent fic where I take my favorite series, The Queen's Thief and throw all our boys into it! This will have major spoilers for the book series but for the most part a lot will be different! I hope you enjoy and a million and one thank you's to the three people who made this possible. THANK YOU to my beta Mils, for literally just being there for me nonstop through it all and spending so many days editing with me. This would be a total mess without you. THANK YOU to Recipeh-for-success for encouraging this idea of mine and helping to make sure the story actually makes sense. THANK YOU to my wonderful fiance who told me to buck up and stop whining about this story and to write it lol and finally, THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO READS THIS!!! I love you all <333

Chapter title comes from the song Aloha by MOME

Prompto wasn't sure how long he had been in the king’s prison. Each day blurred in a confusing mess of what was and what could be. The cold dampness stayed the same, as did the food. The only thing that ever changed was as each day went by he was dirtier and weaker than he was the day before. Every morning the light in his cell would change from a weak flickering glow coming from outside his door to the dim but steady luminescence of the sun outside. As each day came to a close and Prompto found himself with his head in his hands, he promised the next day would be his last in there. To pass the time, he would think of the happier moments in his life. He did it so often he could lay them out like a story waiting to be told to an eager ear, ready to tell of the days when youthful innocence was a bliss all of its own.

When he wasn’t living in the past, Prompto reviewed plans which had seemed so straightforward and so simple before he was thrown in prison. He swore to himself and every god, he would never do something so stupid ever again as long as he lived. No more stupid plans, ever. That is, if he got out of this cell alive.

Prompto was thinner than he had ever been, which was the easiest way to know time had passed since being in prison. He wore a large iron ring around his waist, but despite the weight he had lost, the ring wasn’t loose enough to fit over his hip bones. If it wasn’t for the chain, he could have escaped he was sure. Few prisoners in Tenebrae wore chains, only those the king particularly disliked seemed to wear them, while others he had executed or forced into his army. Prompto didn’t know if he counted himself lucky to be wearing chains, to go so long without any judgment or punishment seemed almost worse. Prompto also had chains on his wrists and ankles, which he could slip out of, but with the sudden appearance of guards, Prompto often found himself working his wrists into a bloody mess trying to shove them back on with little regard to the pain. After awhile, it was less painful to leave them on regardless the jangling which came from the pacing he did hours on end through the day. He walked to keep his muscles up and he walked for something to do. Prompto made a game of it, practicing walking without making a sound. He was somehow not a graceful person until he applied his skills where he needed them to be.

When he was first thrown in his cell, beaten bad enough to make moving hard, Prompto had still kept his head up. Spitefully. When guards looked in at him as they passed, he would glare and spit
curses at them. Prompto wasn’t really surprised so many chose to look in on him, it had been in his plan for greatness to stop in every wineshop in the town to brag without shame about his skills. Prompto wanted everyone in the world to know he was the best thief since mortal men were made. Though he hurled insults and spit curses, Prompto couldn’t lie. He was a little pleased he had succeeded in making a name for himself, though all it got him was a prison cell. Still, with nothing to do but pace and think, Prompto thought often of home.

There was a guard, Loqi, who always seemed to catch Prompto with his tears threatening to spill over. He always laughed and leaned into the bars, asking why Prompto hadn’t broken out yet.

Prompto would turn his head and glare out the small window. He ached with cold and bruises and everything else horrible that had come of this prison. He had been arrested in spring, dragged out into the street with little care to who was watching, but it must have been late summer now, heat soaking into the stones of the road. Prompto wanted nothing more than to go soak up the sunshine. He could spend hours daydreaming of sunshine, thinking of the way it would spill out like liquid gold. Prompto craved warmth, the way it danced on dust motes like the rare celebrations to the gods.

He was laying on his back, his foot wrapped up in the chains hooked from the ceiling to his waist when Loqi appeared at his door with an unreadable expression. It was late at night, leaving Prompto to wish for a comfier bed and debating the merits of clean clothing versus better food. Wrapped up in both chains and thoughts, Prompto was not paying attention to the sounds outside his cell and therefore was unprepared when torchlight flooded his room. Nearly blind and caught completely by surprise, Prompto fell off his bed with a jarring thump, one leg awkwardly in the air.

“Let’s go.” The guard was at least someone he was used to, though knowing Loqi was about to escort him somewhere in the middle of the night was less than reassuring. Detangling his leg from the chain, Prompto stood hesitantly. Usually if he was going to get beaten the guards had no issue doing it in the cell.

“Where are we going?” he asked as Loqi unlocked the manacles on his wrists and bent to do the ones on his feet. Loqi didn’t answer, but his glare was enough for him. For a moment anyways, it wasn’t long until the band around his waist was thrown aside and Prompto was opening his mouth again. “You sure it’s cool to let me out of those? I could try and kill you, you know. Or escape.”

The man snorted and smiled unkindly, “Really? Because I think you’re as weak as a kitten right now. Let’s go before your legs give out. I assure you, I will drag you by your hair before I carry you.”

Prompto didn’t answer, what could he say in the face of truth? Loqi kept a firm grip on his arm as he lead him to the hall and any sense of balance Prompto had went against him. He walked like a true soldier, brisk and heavy all at once, and Prompto found himself walking with all the grace of a sick cat.

The prison cell was in a tower spire near the top of the castle, probably to discourage any who were trying to break out, and it took a long time to get to the bottom of the stairs. By the time they reached the bottom, Prompto was trying his best not to lose what little he had eaten that day. Heights and the added feeling of having climbed to the top of a mountain was a miserable mix. He was more out of shape than he had realized. Loqi had no sympathy, only crossing the small courtyard they had found themselves in and going to a door.

Pushing Prompto inside and following after, Loqi almost tripped when he turned back from closing the door and found him dropped to a crouch, holding his arms over his eyes, cursing quietly.
“Get up, what’s wrong with you?” Loqi snapped grabbing Prompto’s arm and shaking him.

Feebly Prompto stood but kept an arm over his eye. The lights were a physical dagger to his eyes, burning and causing tears to well up and stream down his face.

Loqi shook him once more before letting him get used to the pain for a minute. Then he was pushing Prompto through another door and down several hallways until they reached a plain door. Loqi knocked twice before shoving Prompto through the door and shutting it quickly behind him. Prompto glanced around the dim room and was immediately set on edge by who he saw.

“Come now, sit please. You look like you are ready to fall over at any moment,” the king said, his voice smooth, warm, and even all at once. It was infuriatingly unsettling. Prompto was unable to argue with the direct order, not when he barely had the strength to walk to the chair the king was gesturing to. Legs shaking and out of breath, Prompto all but collapsed into the chair when he finally got to it. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a desk the king was currently leaning against, the picture of nonchalant composure. Something in Prompto instinctively recoiled when the man leaned forward hand outstretched, as if to touch his face. “Oh, don’t look so scared. I’ve brought you here to talk.”


The king’s eyebrows jumped up and he let out a loud laugh. “Kill you? Oh no dear boy, honestly I might just be saving your life. In fact, I brought you a friend!” There was a soft click behind Prompto and he resisted the urge to look behind him, barely.

“This is the one?” a hard voice asked. Accented, Prompto noticed. Whoever it was, wasn’t impressed with what they saw. Prompto payed the displeasure no mind. He was used to being something of a dissapointment. The king only smiled and Prompto risked talking.

“Your Highness-”

“Please call me Ardyn, that is what my friends call me.”

Prompto blinked, not bothering to hide his surprise. “I wasn’t aware we put friends in prison cells.”

The man who entered the room behind them came into view, standing far enough away from the king as was polite. “You stole his crown which was under extreme security while he slept. I do not think you are friends,” he said. There was a tightness to the way his brows came together, like he didn’t want to be there and Prompto didn’t blame him. He didn’t want to be there either, not with a king who insisted on being called by his name and whose hands looked like they wanted to roam. Instead he forced a grin to his face and tore his eyes away from the young man and back to the king.

“I can steal anything.” He said, a hint of pride touching his voice.

Ardyn nodded slowly. “I am aware of that. It is what you said at your trial, many times. And in all those wine shops you went bragging to. That aside, you did manage to do something impressive. Which is why I’m offering you as a gift.”

Surprise number three of the night. “So I’m that kind of gift.” Prompto turned to the man and frowned. “Oh man, what did you ever do to deserve me? Don’t you know fame made me kind of high class? What is it about the beaten and scrawny ones you like so much?”

In a flash the man was over him, pressing his face very close to Prompto’s. “Someday, you and I might achieve some form of mutual respect for each other. That will not be tonight or any time
soon, not if you insist on thinking you know me when you do not. You are a tool and nothing more at the moment.” If for the next few seconds the man noticed Prompto not breathing he said nothing, only stared intently to get the message across. “For now, I will have your obedience and your silence. Do you understand?”

Prompto nodded slowly, watching his own eyes blink in the reflection of his glasses. Prompto’s blue eyes were wide - there was no hiding his fear.

There was a loud clap and the man backed away, returning to his spot near the king. The king, Ardyn was grinning broadly. “Oh how I wish I could go with you and see this relationship play out! Ignis, I think the fact our dear thief has quite the tongue on him will be most amusing to watch.”

The man, Ignis, did not so much as twitch at the implications and stared only at Prompto, his green eyes flashing was the only sign he was still angry.

“Can you really steal anything?” he asked after a moment and Prompto nodded carefully. “It was that claim that ended you up in prison, so you \textit{can} steal, but not get away with it. Perhaps that works in my favor.” Ignis mused. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the desk. “Lucky for me skill and intelligence do not always have to go hand in hand, perhaps if they did you would be more trouble than you were worth.”

Prompto flushed, opening his mouth to argue before he snapped it shut with a click of his teeth.

“At least you’ve learned when not to speak.” Ignis said with a huff.

“Ah, but Ignis there is one thing he couldn’t steal.” Ardyn interjected with a taunt in his words, though who he was taunting Prompto didn’t know, “He couldn’t steal his freedom back from me.”

Prompto shrugged; he could have done it eventually. These things took time, and whatever Ardyn and Ignis had planned seemed to be a quicker way out. Who was he to look a gift chocobo in the mouth?

Ignis sighed, “I want you to steal something for me. Do this and you will have freedom.”

“What am I stealing?” Prompto asked, he was intrigued for sure. Knowing freedom was one small theft away was all that mattered.

Ignis waved a hand, “Doesn’t matter right? You can steal anything. I only need a yes or a no, will you do this for me?”

“Except myself out of prison.” Prompto said nodding sagely. A twitch of Ignis’s brow proved Prompto was infuriating this man. He wouldn’t lie in saying it gave him a small amount of satisfaction in knowing that.

Prompto flicked his eyes to Ardyn who still looked extremely pleased. Looking back at Ignis, Prompto tested his luck. “And if I said no?”

“As my prisoner, until I officially hand you over, you have no rights.” Ardyn’s voice cut through the tense air and when Prompto looked at him, his grin had grown to something a little more terrifying. “You have no rights to say no to \textit{anything} I tell you to do.”

“It helps that you are a king.” Prompto muttered to himself.

“I want consent Your Majesty, I will not force anyone to do anything they are not willing to do.”
Ignis never took his eyes off of Prompto and he swallowed. There was something fierce in his gaze even if he did not let the emotion appear on his face. The side of him that never seemed to want to take things seriously wondered briefly if this really was a sex thing before the more rational side kicked in. He would say yes, not because there was no choice in the matter, but because he could always escape once they were far enough from the city.

“I'll do it.”

Ignis immediately seemed relieved and gave him a tight smile. It dropped when Ardyn pushed off the desk and came around to Prompto. His body knew what was going to happen before his mind did and he was flinching even before the hand settled on his shoulder. “Excellent. Ignis, I trust you will see yourself out and back to your quarters? I must have a chat with dear Prompto here.”

Cold panic filled Prompto as if he had been thrown into a freezing lake. He caught Ignis’s eyes, pleading, hoping to convey his fear. Distantly he wondered how the king knew his name. However, no matter how many mental “Please don’t leave me here with him alone” messages Prompto sent Ignis, the man merely bowed hesitantly and quietly slipped out of the room without another word.

Arydn’s hand slipped slowly down Prompto’s arm until they rested on the edge of the chair. Prompto looked up with difficulty to meet the man's gaze where he was all but leaning over Prompto, his face very close. Prompto thought briefly in the span of an hour he had had two men over him and they both scared him witless. But unlike with Ignis, who Prompto was only scared of his threats, Prompto was scared of Ardyn for his unpredictability- for the way he carried himself and the way he seemed pleased to make him so scared.

“Relax, I only want to warn you before you go.”

Warn? If anyone needed a warning label it was the man boxing Prompto in.

“Those Lucians will pretend to like you, to be friends with you, but they do not know you.” Prompto narrowed his eyes at the king, trying to find any hidden meaning in his words.

“Do not give them any reason to distrust you in return.” Ardyn took his hands off the chair and Prompto took a shuddering breath. He felt weak for a totally different way than he had when he first entered the room. The excitement of leaving the castle was quickly fading the longer he was alone with Ardyn. “You’re a good boy, I would love to see you get your freedom. It would be a shame to hear of something happening to you. Stay by them until the task they have for you is done. These Lucians are rich and could hunt you down, or worse. A poor boy on his own, who knows what would befall him if there were none to hear him?”

Prompto’s eyes widened at the implication, was it an implication? Or was he making things up because he was uncomfortable in the older man’s company? It was no secret the king of Tenebrae was an eccentric man, maybe he was like this with everyone.

That thought was derailed quickly when the king smiled and reached a hand out. Laying callused fingers on Prompto’s cheek, Ardyn traced down his jaw to his neck where surely he could feel how fast his heart was beating. When Ardyn spoke next, it was in a whisper, “A perfect gift.”

Then it was over. The hand was taken away and he snapped his fingers. There were quiet clicks of boots on the marbled floor and before Prompto could process what had happened, Loqi was dragging him out of the chair and across the room. As they went through the door, Prompto twisted to look back. Ardyn’s eyes were still on him, so he turned back around quickly.
Prompto was so happy to see his prison cell he barely suppressed a laugh. As much as he would have liked to review what had taken place, as soon as his chains were back on Prompto hit the bed and within minutes was fast asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this!! Please be sure to hit that kudo button and comment if that's your cup of tea! If you have read the series that I am basing this off of, PLEASE do not post spoilers in the comments!! Let's not ruin something for everyone!
Loqi came for Prompto the next morning dressed not in his usual armor, but simple riding clothes. Prompto was surprised again; he had thought a trip like this would have taken some time to get ready for, but it seemed Ignis was impatient to leave. Chains removed, Loqi grabbed his arms and pulled him towards the door. Prompto sighed but didn’t point out he would have gone willingly. Another guard was waiting for them when they stepped out of the room and he grabbed Prompto’s other arm. When they stepped out of the tower, out onto the steps, Prompto learned in an instant the light of the castle had nothing on the sun itself. The guards simply hoisted him up by his elbows as he screwed his eyes shut and howled curses at all the gods that came to mind, the big Six and the minor ones one right after the other. Nothing in his entire life had hurt this bad. By the time they got to the courtyard, Prompto was still cursing and nearly blind.

At the bottom of the steps, Ignis was waiting. He patiently waited until Prompto was sniffling before waving off the men holding him up and suddenly he was falling to his knees. Prompto squinted up at Ignis, wiping his tears away on the back of his hand. Squinting caused too much pain and Prompto covered his eyes again.

“It will pass, the pain.” Ignis said quietly. Prompto thought briefly of cursing him too, but focused on the pain in his eyes instead.

All around them came the sounds of people rushing through and the loud cries of chocobos. Eventually most of the sounds quieted and Prompto risked a glance up. If he looked around with slitted eyes, Prompto could see there were five chocobos and each one was outfitted in sturdy saddles and small bags. He could also see Loqi saddling up one of them and Prompto instantly
knew with a knot in his stomach he was coming with them.

“This him?” came a deep rumbling voice and Prompto turned towards it warily. Oh. Big guy. He was obviously the muscle for this trip.

Ignis laughed quietly, “I said the same thing. Yes, this is the thief.”

Prompto grit his teeth and forced himself to not go back to hiding his eyes. “I have a name. Prompto.”

The big guy shrugged nonchalantly, “Common thief, tool, Prompto. It is all the same in the end right?”

Before Prompto could snap something back, another new voice joined them. “Why’s he on the ground?”

“His eyes aren’t used to the light anymore. I imagine it’s rather painful to suddenly have the entire sun out in full force,” Ignis explained patiently while Prompto looked around to see who was joining them. He was aristocratic like Ignis and stupidly beautiful. Prompto died a little internally. An entire trip with two rich kids and two guards. Prompto jumped when a hand touched his back and he leaned away from Ignis. “My apologies, are your eyes adjusted enough to go?”

“It doesn’t matter really does it?” Prompto replied with a frown.

The bodyguard laughed and hooked his hand under Prompto’s arm, “You’re right, it doesn’t matter.” Once he had him standing, he let go and began to walk towards the chocobos. “It’s time to head out.”

Prompto didn’t move from his spot and the man sighed. “Come on kid, we don’t have all day.”

Prompto eyed the chocobos deciding the best way to come near them. He loved the creatures but he knew the birds were more likely to nip at a rider they were not used to than they were to do anything else. If Prompto was about to get on an animal taller than most men, he wanted to think about the best way to go about this. Shaking his hair from his face, Prompto sucked a breath in and hesitantly walked to the large bird. Walking ended up being the hardest part of the entire ordeal. Legs shaking and ready to give out, he grasped the saddle. He needed a few moments to stop swaying before attempting anything else. Prompto must have stood too long because a few moments later there were soft footsteps behind him and he tensed before realizing who it was.

“Put your foot in the stirrup.” Prompto turned to give the other beautiful man a glare. “Your name is Prompto right?”

He nodded and the guy gestured to the chocobo. “Ok Prompto, you gotta put your left foot in the stirrup.”

Prompto did what was said and there was a firm hand pushing him up into the saddle. Once up, he shook his hair from his face again and looked around. Being a good six feet off the ground did give him a sense of importance and he smiled down at the man who had helped. “Thanks!”

Handsome Guy nodded and walked over to his own chocobo, swinging up into the saddle easily. Looking around Prompto saw the other three were also on their birds. Ignis turned his mount and clicked his reins to lead the group out of the courtyard with the dark haired man behind, followed by Prompto and the bodyguard behind him. Loqi rode beside him an arm’s length away. It didn’t take a genius to know why it was set up like it was.
Instead of focusing on the other riders, who he assumed he would get to know intimately, excluding Loqi, whom Prompto unfortunately knew more than he would have liked to, Prompto looked around the city. He wondered if it was the last time he would get to see it. It was before midday and the outdoor markets were still in full swing and although normally Prompto found himself uncomfortable in large crowds, he found himself loving the sounds of people talking and yelling. It was wonderful after the dead silence of the prison. As they rode through the crowds Prompto noticed the weird looks they were being given and chalked it up to his companions being ridiculously good looking and he sticking out like a sore thumb. The others were wearing sturdy riding clothes while he was still in the clothes he had been in before being arrested - worn, thin, and dirty, much like the rest of him. Prompto wondered if he could convince them to let him at least wash his clothes in a stream or something.

As they rode out of the city limits, he looked around in wonder. There were trees of every color, varying from light greens to dark greens and farms as far as the eye could see. People were out in the fields hard at work and Prompto realized with a small amount of surprise it was later in summer than he thought. When they had been in the courtyard that morning, he had wanted to take the sunlight and wrap it around him like a warm cloak, but now as they rode on, the heat was starting to do funny things to him, making him feel like he was wearing a coat of dirt. He itched and after an embarrassing moment realized he also smelled. He smelled really bad.

He flushed when he heard the deep voice behind him say, “Stinkin’ hot” and flushed further when Ignis from above said, “Something definitely stinks.” Prompto huffed - he’d like to see them spend forever in prison and come out smelling as good as they did. Unfortunately there was nothing they could do, so Prompto spent a good while in the saddle, uncomfortable and embarrassed. Loqi did not help the situation by looking disdainfully at him whenever Prompto glanced over at him. After looking at the unending farms grew boring, he took the time to actually study his companions. Loqi he knew, and with Ignis he had already studied his bright green eyes and perfectly styled hair the night before. Prompto didn’t think he had ever looked that put together in his entire life. The other beautiful man had a mess of dark hair and blue eyes different from his own. He looked like he had rolled out of bed and yet again, he still seemed more put together than Prompto ever was. He wasn’t sure if he was jealous or not. Craning his neck, he looked behind him to the bodyguard. This guy was terrifying - he could easily break Prompto over his knee without breaking a sweat. It didn’t help he also was beautiful. The man who he decided to call Giant Handsome Guy, raised his brows and stared back until Prompto turned back around.

As the heat rose, Prompto grew more miserable as they rode on. Exhaustion weighed him down and before long he found himself swaying where he sat. After what seemed hours Prompto realized either they needed to stop or he wasn’t going to be in the saddle much longer.

“Hey, guys?” he called out, aware of how his voice cracked. No one answered him, no one even turned to look at him so Prompto made the decision for himself. Sliding ungracefully off of the chocobo, Prompto immediately headed for the soft grass laying on the other side of the dirt road. He hit the grass hard, falling first to his knees then his stomach and didn’t get up.

Giant Handsome Guy must have been off his chocobo the second Prompto started for the grass because he had enough time to close his eyes when there was a hand on his back, shaking him gently. “Kid, get up. We need to go.”

Prompto murmured something that may have been an insult and screwed his eyes closed tighter.

“What’s wrong with him Iggy?” a voice asked, Handsome Guy, he surmised.

There was a sigh and a hand on his head. Prompto flinched and opened his eyes to see Ignis peering
at him before looking up at the others. “He’s exhausted, not enough of anything to keep him going. We aren’t where I had hoped to be yet though, Hammerhead is a good while off.” Ignis turned back to Prompto to address him. “Do you think you can continue on?”

Shaking his head, Prompto’s eyes were already closing heavily.

“I could just tie him to his chocobo.” Giant Handsome Guy said. Whatever passed above his head, Prompto didn’t know. Maybe they would leave him there forever. Prompto kind of hoped they would, he would make a nice milemarker. Get to the thief and you are halfway to Hammerhead, wherever Hammerhead might be.

But they didn’t leave, they unsaddled and sat down for lunch. Prompto ignored them and slept heavily. When the sun was halfway down in the sky, there was another hand on his shoulder shaking gently. “Prompto, Ignis said it’s time to go.”

Prompto twitched and kept his eyes closed trying desperately to remember where he was. He wasn’t in his bed, he wasn’t home. In prison he had woken up several times disoriented and Prompto automatically froze so any movements he made would keep his chains from making his injuries worse. It took a moment to remember there were no chains and he finally cracked his eyes open. Handsome Guy was looking at him with a worried expression and Prompto offered a weak grin. He sat up and took stock of his situation. Prompto felt good, hungry and sore, but he felt better than he had in a long while. He rubbed his face to help rid it of the rough pattern left there by the grass.

“Gladio, come help him,” Handsome Guy called out and Giant Handsome Guy, Gladio apparently, single-handedly pushed Prompto back onto his chocobo while he groaned. He wanted to complain more, but as they rode, Ignis pulled beside him and handed off pieces of bread for Prompto to eat. Ignis must have planned with his mouth full, Prompto wouldn’t be able to talk back, because after the first few pieces of food Prompto scarfed down, he cleared his throat quietly.

“Prompto, I wanted to apologize.” Prompto raised his eyebrows and held out a hand for more bread. Dutifully handed it over, Ignis continued, “Last night, with the king. I…” Here Ignis trailed off and he pushed his glasses up. “I lost my composure. The King of Tenebrae tends to have that effect on me I’m afraid. I unfortunately took it out on you when instead I should have been working to gain your trust.”

Prompto stared at Ignis for a few moments before taking a bite of his bread. “Tell me where we are going,” he said evenly.

“I can’t do that, I’m sorry,” Ignis replied - and to his credit he actually did sound sorry. Regardless, not knowing where they were going was mildly irritating, so Prompto focused on eating and remained silent. Eventually Ignis rode back to the front of the line to be near Handsome Guy.

It was late by the time they got to Hammerhead and Prompto was swaying in his saddle again. His nap earlier that afternoon seemed forever ago. Thankfully the heat of the day had faded into a cool breeze as the chocobos trotted through the gate which led to the inn. An old man, who must have been waiting for them, came out of the large building and crossed his arms. Blearlily, Prompto looked at him and wondered who he was.

“Scientia, you’re late,” he said.

Ignis apologized and explained they had been delayed while sliding off his chocobo. Despite the fact they had been riding the creatures nearly all day, Ignis showed no stiffness in the way he walked. Prompto would have been jealous if he wasn’t so tired. He debated for a second about
whether to slide off the chocobo much like he had before, one foot over the side and nearly faceplanting, when Gladio stepped beside him, a hand out to help. Prompto looked at it for a second before taking it and sliding down - no less gracefully, but at least he didn’t fall. Once on his feet and relieved for small miracles, Prompto took his hand back with a quiet thanks. When Gladio headed to the others and Prompto made to follow, there suddenly was a heavy hand on his shoulder. Prompto looked up in confusion and found himself staring into Loqi’s disapproving face. Prompto tried to shrug him off irritably, he wasn’t going to run off when he didn’t have the strength to get very far.

When the hand didn’t move, he tried instead to not think of who it belonged to. It was hard to do when Loqi bent down to whisper in Prompto’s ear.“Know your place. Remember where you belong or I will help you to do it.” Prompto shuddered and went still watching the men talk.

Ignis talked in low tones to the old man and gestured towards where Loqi and Prompto stood. The old man was shaking his head but stopped when Handsome Guy said something. Ignis waved them over and Loqi pushed Prompto forward hard enough to make him stumble. Filing inside they were stopped by a young woman who ran her eyes over the group before pointing to Prompto.

“That one bathes first,” she said, thick accent nearly enough to distract Prompto from what she said. By the time his flush hit him in full force, Ignis was already explaining her grandfather had said the same thing. Before he finished, she was pointing again, this time to the back of the house where he could see another small courtyard through the windows.

“There’s a waterpump out there. He can at least rinse off a little out there while I run the rest of y’all a bath.”

There was a firm push on the back of Prompto’s back and Gladio was leading the way to the courtyard.

Immensely relieved that Loqi wasn’t following, Prompto allowed Gladio to manhandle him gently outside. The watering pump sat in the center of the courtyard and he stood awkwardly, hoping Gladio would leave so he could bathe in peace. Instead Gladio stepped closer and for a split second Prompto looked from the water pump to him. He gripped the bottom of his shirt and glared. “I’m not going to strip if you're staring at me.” Prompto snapped.

Gladio crossed his arms, completely nonplussed. "Strip. Or I will do it for you."

Prompto had no time to be hesitant before he was already stepping forward, hands out like he meant to strip the shirt off of Prompto right then and there. Prompto danced away with nimble steps, previous sleepiness gone. He watched the other man with wary eyes as Gladio came near him again, reaching for his clothes. "This," he snapped, "I can do for myself." Gladio grunted and rolled his eyes. "Just do a good job." He pumped the water out, watching it gush out of the pipe and Prompto attempted to steady his quaking nerves before turning his back. He tried to empty his mind of all insecurities and stripped his shirt off.

Undressing the rest of the way was not any easier. Prompto knew he was red from the tips of his ears all the way down his chest and the shaking of his arms and legs were not all from exhaustion or cold. He didn’t make eye contact as he bent down into the stream, swearing under his breath as the freezing water splashed over his already aching bruises. While he was rinsing, Handsome Guy arrived and Prompto died a little more on the inside. Naturally he would show up to see witness this embarrassing moment.

“Thanks Noctis, you can put those down somewhere dry. Did you bring the- ah, thank you.” Without warning, Gladio shoved his hand in Prompto’s face. He flinched back before he realized
Gladio was only handing him a cloth and a bar of soap. Murmuring his thanks, Prompto lathered up the cloth and began to clean himself in earnest. It felt like he was washing years worth of dirt off, over and over he scrubbed digging deep to get rid of any trace of prison. As he lifted the cloth to his face, Ardyn reaching out to touch his cheek came to mind and Prompto scrubbed harder.

When Prompto finally looked around the courtyard again, he realized other than Gladio and himself it was empty. He hadn’t heard Noctis leave. Looking back down at his body, Prompto looked over the scars and bruises and wondered what the others thought of him. Looking closer at his wrists where the wounds were the worst he dipped his wrists into the water gently. Teeth chattering, he cursed softly as he realized several of the spots were infected and would need to be cleaned out. It would be painful to do and he was not looking forward to it.

The water slowed as Gladio leaned over and looked at his wrists as well. Prompto fought the urge to cover himself, Gladio had already seen everything he had to hide.

“Those look gross. Get dressed and I’ll take care of them inside.” Gladio handed Prompto a cloth to dry off with and Prompto realized this is what Noctis had come out for earlier, to give him all the things Prompto would need. This was further proven when Gladio handed him a stack of clothing to wear. Prompto put them on quickly, shivering all the while.

“Six, Ignis thought of everything didn’t he?” Prompto murmured with a smile as he tugged the shirt on over his head. Everything was loose, easy to move in and best of all, it was clean. Prompto almost wanted to rub his face in the fabric and take a big whiff, it had been so long since he had worn anything clean. There were tall boots with the clothes but Prompto pointedly ignored them for his own boots he had stacked on top of his old clothing.

“Ignis is going to tell you to change into what he brought you, you know,” Gladio said, watching him.

Prompto shrugged; the clothes he would wear with no complaint but he had had the boots specially made for him. They were thick and supple, but still nice enough to let him move through peoples houses unsepected. Gladio didn’t seem to care and waited for him to make his way inside before following.

Inside the common room, Ignis and Noctis were talking quietly their heads close together. It was a quiet and serene moment and Prompto couldn’t help but feel that by sitting next to them they were interrupting something. He looked up to see if Gladio had similar feelings but his face was completely blank. Either he didn’t care they were interrupting or Prompto was the only one picking up on the mood. Prompto sat heavily in front of one of the steaming bowls of stew. The smell of it alone made his mouth water, but before he could get a spoonful in his mouth Gladio was pulling his hand into his own.

Prompto resisted the urge to jerk his hand back when he saw Gladio was only examining his wrist. Ignis was watching them silently and slid over a kit full of bandages and ointments for healing. Gladio nodded in wordless thanks as he got a lantern from the wall in order to see better. Prompto watched Gladio warily, hissing when he touched an area which was particularly sensitive. Again, he wondered what the others must think of him. It was obvious from the wounds what Prompto had been doing with the chains.

“Oh, now that don’t look good at all. Don’t even think about working on that until I get back.” Prompto looked up to see the young woman from before tutting at the damage.

It wasn’t long before she came back with a bowl of warm water and a soft cloth in one hand and
more soap in the other. Gladio set to work immediately on his right wrist where it wasn’t as bad, cleaning the raw and torn spots gently. He put some cold ointment on to gradually numb the area and wrapped the wrist carefully with skilled fingers. It was neatly done with experience and Prompto wondered if Gladio was used to wrapping wounds. The scar on his face gave him a hint to the answer. The way Gladio cleaned the wounds so gently had Prompto relaxed and he felt the slow heaviness of sleep creeping up on him again.

He turned back to the woman who was saying good night to them and, busy replying, was caught off guard when Gladio took up his left arm. This wrist was much worse than the other, covered in sores and pockets of gross fluids Prompto would not like to think about. Without warning, Gladio slid a knife under the pockets of fluid and twisted. Prompto let out a single scream before he cut it off with a snap of his jaw. Everyone in the room jumped, even Gladio who had the knife a safe distance away from his arm. Scrabbling away from the larger man proved fruitless as Gladio had his arm in a vise like grip. Prompto didn’t take his eyes off of him though he knew everyone in the room was staring. Being the center of attention usually resulted in a heavy blush to spread but in the moment all Prompto cared about was getting this over with. He let out a shaky breath and nodded to Gladio realizing the man wouldn’t continue until he was ready.

Gladio quickly went about opening the rest of the infected spots, leaving Prompto breathing heavily through his teeth. Once done, Gladio spread the numbing balm over the wrist and wrapped it up as well.

“What happened in here?” Prompto heard behind him. Too tired to care, he laid his head down as Loqi entered the room. The words may have been innocent but Prompto knew there was nothing kind about his worry.

“Fuck off,” Prompto seethed quietly, but Loqi only laughed as his footsteps grew closer. There was a loud scraping noise as Noctis announced he was going to bed. Prompto didn’t move until Loqi was sitting in Noctis’s empty spot beside Ignis. Sitting up with difficulty, he hoped in the dim light no one would see the angry tears threatening to spill.

“You need to eat now, kid.” Gladio said after a moment of silence. Prompto nodded numbly and picked up his spoon. Even though it was his first real meal since being out of prison, he didn’t taste a single bite.

He could hear Gladio and Ignis talking quietly before Ignis left to follow Noctis. When he looked up again, Loqi was gone and only Gladio with him. Prompto ate until he was too exhausted to do so anymore and fell asleep with the spoon still in his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh thank you all for reading this, I love y'all <3333 Kudo and comment if that's your cup of tea! And please remember, if you have read the books this is based off off don't put any spoilers in the comments! Let's not ruin this for those who haven't read the series!
Stop Right There, Don't Come Any Closer

Chapter Summary

In which things between Prompto and Loqi are still difficult (If not more so) but things with the others begin to show promise.

Chapter Notes

HNNNGgggg THANK YOU GUYS SO MUCH?? To everyone who has hit that kudo button or commented, you honestly made my day. Ilu guys so much!
As always; a special thank you to my dear friends Mils who is the best beta and friend a girl could ask for. Where would I be without your encouragement and support??
Probably under a rock or something. Who knows. Angie, who continually makes sure that I'm still alive while I write and supports me the best she can. And Teddy who loves me enough to endure half baked ideas at midnight.
Chapter title comes from Royal by Waterparks (Thank you Mils for introducing me to them <33 )

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The floor was a hard bed to wake up on. Tired and disoriented, Prompto sat up rubbing the rough imprint of the rug from his cheek, trying to remember where he was. When memories of the night before came flooding back, he realized Gladio must have carried him up the stairs after he fell asleep. He wondered if it was also Gladio who covered him with the blanket. Prompto sat up slowly to peer at the occupant of the bed beside him and sucked in a quick breath when he recognized him.

Prompto pushed the panicked thoughts born from the knowledge Loqi was an inch from his face and instead thought about trying to escape. The idea was squashed when he moved the blanket and discovered he was chained to the bed. His ankle was was padded with a shirt and Prompto somehow didn’t think Loqi was a kind enough person to think to do that. He wasn’t known for being sensitive to personal comforts. There was nothing within reach to pick the lock to Prompto’s frustration.

So he waited, stiffly trying to work some kinks out of his shoulders until Loqi woke up. When he did, he immediately searched for Prompto down on the floor and swung his feet over the edge of the bed to lean into his space. Prompto recoiled and opened his mouth to tell Loqi off when there was a knock at the door. Loqi hesitated, looking from the door to Prompto before he moved back to call to whoever was knocking. Ignis stepped in, somehow looking as impeccable as he did the day before despite the early hours.

“Good morning, the plan is to head out after breakfast. I would prefer if we all bathed again before we left.”

Prompto looked down at his ankle and back up with eyebrows raised.
In answer, Ignis held up a key and crossed the room to unlock it. Loqi wasted no time hauling Prompto up to lead him down the hall. Prompto sighed, again not bothering to point out he would have gone wherever Loqi pointed.

Noctis and Gladio were already there, washing their faces and talking quietly. Gladio had his head ducked down to hear whatever Noctis was saying and let out a bark of laughter. When Loqi and Prompto entered the room, the two separated and Prompto eyed the both of them. He wasn’t able to speculate long before Loqi was trying to grab his shirt.

Glaring Prompto said, “I got clean last night. I don’t need you checking me over.”

Loqi rolled his eyes and snatched Prompto's wrist, pulling a strangled yelp from him. Loqi gripped his wrist tighter and held his arm up to point at the dirt. “Wash,” he commanded.

“Not happening dude.” Prompto glared, tensing for a fight, but before Prompto could wiggle out of his grasp, Loqi was pushing him towards a wash basin.

“I don’t know why you insist on pretending like you have any say in the matter. If you won’t do as you are told, then I will do it myself,” Loqi said as he poured the pitcher of steaming water into the basin and lathered up a cloth with soap. Before Prompto could interject, Loqi was washing his face roughly. Prompto held his breath, afraid of getting the soap and water in his mouth.

Holding him tight by the back of his neck in one hand, Loqi grabbed the bottom of Prompto’s shirt and tried to pull it off of him. The same fear that Prompto had in the courtyard the night before came back with a vengeance. He attempted to slip away, stamping Loqi’s bare feet with his own only to have Loqi cuff the side of his head.

“If you do not let me take it off, there will be consequences.” Loqi said quietly and Prompto looked around the room to see Gladio blocking Noctis from sight. He could hear sharp whispers but no help was coming. Why would they help him?

“Let me do it,” Prompto pleaded, praying that Loqi had some semblance of humanity in him somewhere. He didn’t. Prompto found himself being drug across the room, Loqi uncaring of his now bleeding wrist. He was brought before the big tub and without warning, Prompto was dunked into the water howling in outrage and pain. Loqi did not release his wrist but twisted it behind Prompto to keep him from fighting it. When Loqi finally allowed him up he dumped more soap on his head and scrubbed hard while Prompto coughed the water from his lungs. Again, without warning, Prompto was pushed back into the water to rinse the soap out. When Loqi’s grip loosened, Prompto flung himself across the room dripping water, coughing sharply. Prompto watched Loqi warily as he shivered.

A lifetime of never knowing where the next attack would come is what made him flick his eyes to the others. They hadn’t moved from their spots, the expressions on their faces downright murderous. Prompto wondered if they were mad he had made so much noise or if it was the water he had gotten everywhere. Ignis stormed into the room, drawn no doubt by the noise being made. He looked around the room before marching towards Prompto.

Prompto flinched when Ignis stopped in front of him and shut his eyes quickly attempting to even his breathing out into something less frantic. He heard Loqi laugh and Gladio say “Don’t.” but to whom, he didn’t know. He was only aware more pain had not come and slowly cracked his eyes open.

Ignis was before him, eyes searching for something. He seemed conflicted and in the end, he frowned and said “Follow me please.”
Prompto nodded dumbly, in awe someone had walked towards him in a room full of angry people and it didn’t end with more anger and pain. He followed Ignis down the hall, dripping water with every step. He shivered again and hoped no-one would get mad. Ignis led Prompto not back to the room he slept, but to a room he assumed the others had slept in. He quickly noticed one large bed and filed that knowledge away to think about later. Away from the washroom, Prompto’s heart slowed from it’s erratic beating and he felt himself slowly calming.

“Noctis is about your size. For now you can wear some of his clothing,” Ignis said crossing the room to where their bags were. He dug for a moment in one of them before pulling out a shirt. “Are your pants still dry or will you be needing some as well?”

Prompto nodded and took the shirt, rubbing his finger along the seams of it. It was a well made shirt done by a craftsman - whoever was buying Noctis’s shirts had money to spend on the nicer things. Prompto looked up to see Ignis watching him intently and Prompto felt his face burn.

Ignis made no move to leave the room and Prompto for what felt like the hundredth time in the past few days was faced with the impossible. Shivering, he knew there was nothing else he could do, so he gripped the bottom of his shirt and with a deep breath pulled the soaked fabric up. It was almost over his head when the situation went from bad to worse.

“What the hell?”

Prompto whipped around to where Noctis had entered silently, his face flushing, but he refused to look away from Noctis’s intense stare.

“What happened to your back?” he asked, and as he came closer, Prompto shoved the wet shirt back down. Ignis tried to intercept him, but it seemed he wasn’t going to leave without answers. “Did that happen in prison? Is that how he treats his prisoners?”

“It’s fine,” Prompto spat, wishing there was a hole that would magically open beneath his feet.

“Noctis, out. This isn’t our business,” Ignis said, his voice tight, and Noctis protested as he led him from the room, the door closing with a quiet click.

Wasting no time, Prompto quickly crossed the room to the window he noticed when he first entered the room. With a grunt, he pushed the heavy shutters open. Sticking his head out the window Prompto groaned. There was no ledge to crawl onto or anything else which could help him to climb out. He didn’t think he had the strength to dig his feet into the side of the stone walls which meant a fall would be inevitable. Looking down the length of the building had his head swimming. Most thieves had a good head for heights, something Prompto found did not apply to him. He could climb roofs or run along parapets if he absolutely had to, given he was allowed to fall apart after the fact.

A sharp knock on the door had Prompto jumping away from the window with a guilty start. He shoved his hair from his face, wishing not for the first time for a knife so he could just saw it off.

“Prompto, there’s breakfast in the common room if you’re ready to go down,” Noctis said, his words muffled by the thick wood. Incapacitated by a two story fall or breakfast? The choice was an easy one and Prompto dressed in record time.

Not knowing what to do with the wet shirt, he ended up taking it with him. Noctis hadn’t moved from the hallway and Prompto knew he wanted to say something about his scars, so he leaned against the wall and hoped he wouldn’t have to wait long. He wanted his breakfast.
“Did Loqi do that to you?”

Prompto flinched. He knew it was coming and yet it still was like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over him. “If you read the pamphlet they handed out at my trial, you’d already know I grew up in the streets. That should answer more than a couple of things. Can we get breakfast now?”

Noctis’s face was unreadable, but Prompto could see a million thoughts flickering behind his eyes. He nodded and walked by Prompto’s side as they made their way to the common room where Loqi was already seated Prompto dropped into his chair ignoring him as much as he could and Ignis took the wet shirt from him before disappearing out the door.

“Can I have my breakfast now?” he whined as Gladio sat beside him.

“I need to look a your wrist kid, it’s bleeding through the bandages.”

Prompto sniffed and shot Loqi a glare. “Oh, I wonder why. Sure go ahead, let’s just get this done and over with.”

Gladio unwrapped each wrist and applied the balm to the right arm before wrapping it back up with practiced ease. The left wrist had him frowning and he tsked before waving the woman from the night before over.

“Cindy, can you get us some water again?” Gladio asked and she nodded quickly before disappearing into the kitchen.

Stomach growling, Prompto groaned and laid his head down on the table. “This is taking forever,” he complained.

Gladio laughed quietly and ruffled the top of Prompto’s head. “Well, I’ll be sure to hurry. Your hair is pretty long though, do you usually keep it like this?” Prompto tensed only for a moment when Gladio’s hand touched him, but it was enough to have him snatching his hand back as if he had been burnt.

“It grew in prison,” he answered. Prompto eyed Gladio for a moment before burying his face into his arms, “You know, you don’t have to treat me like I’m fragile, I won’t break. I get that you guys are touchy, you don’t need to feel guilty if you do it on accident with me. It’s not common where I’m from but it’s not fair for me to ask you all to change.”

Gladio laughed quietly but didn’t put his hand back on Prompto. “I could cut your hair for you if you’re ok with it.”

There was a quiet laugh and Prompto looked up to see Ignis had come back in without the shirt and was looking at them with an amused expression. “If you value your appearance, you will not let him near you with a pair of scissors at all. I cut everyone’s hair and would be more than happy to do it for you if you would like.”

Leaning around Gladio, Noctis stared at him. “What do you think Prom? Who would you like better, Ignis or Gladio?”

Prompto rolled his eyes and propped his head up on his fist. “I barely know any of you, how can I like anyone more than the others? No I just...” he trailed off, unsure of how to put his thoughts into words. “Ignis can cut my hair, I rather enjoy looking handsome. It’s all I have going for me, except for the whole stealing thing, you know.”
Cindy brought them a bowl of steaming water in hand and water at hand, Gladio dabbed his wrist gently to clean it. When he deemed it good enough, he did the same thing to the right one.

“Now you can have your breakfast,” Ignis said and slid over a bowl of oatmeal towards him. It was thick, hot, and everything Prompto needed. The more he ate, the hungrier he was and soon he’d eaten his way through a second helping and a bowl of cut up fruit as well. There was another near Gladio and when he wasn’t looking Prompto slipped it out from under his fingers, switching it with his empty one. When he startled at the switch, Noctis stifled a laugh and looked pointedly away. Neither said anything when Prompto helped himself to the bowl of oranges in the center of the table. It took three oranges going into the oversized pockets of his shirt for Prompto to notice Loqi’s glare.

“I’m hungry,” he said as if it would do anything to lessen the glare. Cindy came back to clear the table and when she nodded at Prompto appreciatively, he gave her her best smile. “I clean up pretty well, right?”

She laughed and Prompto forgot himself for a moment, giving her a genuine grin. “Where did you get so dirty?” she asked.

“Prison.”

She nodded in understanding - people went to prison all the time in this country. “I bet you’re sure glad to be out!”

Prompto laughed. “Yes ma’am, it wasn’t too bad but I am glad to be out. The food is much better here.”

Cindy rolled her eyes, though the smile remained, and waved a quick goodbye before heading back into the kitchen. Prompto looked around the table to see everyone staring at him with varying degrees of amusement and he flushed. “What?”

Noctis laughed softly. “Nice flirting man.”

While Prompto spluttered in protest, Loqi pushed away from his seat. “We don’t need you hitting on every woman from here to our destination.”

Prompto laughed. “Why? Are you jealous?” Loqi cuffed him on his head as he passed by and Prompto with head ringing, had to laugh again. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he said to the others, who were looking less than amused.

Ignis cleared his throat and stood. “We should head out soon. Gladio if you would?”

The two headed upstairs to grab their bags while Noctis looked over at Prompto. “You shouldn’t antagonize him, I bet he would be nicer to you if you didn’t.”

Prompto snorted. “Sorry dude, but you don’t know what a sadist he is. Trust me, that man has heard me promising to be good more times than I can count. Not even begging makes him nicer.”

Caught up in peeling one of the oranges he took, it took a good three seconds of silence for Prompto to realize what he let slip and he laughed quietly, rubbing the back of his neck. Noctis looked absolutely horrified and the two fell into an uncomfortable silence until Ignis and Gladio came back down the stairs and they all went out to the courtyard where the chocobos had been saddled for them. Fortunately, there was a mounting block in the yard which Prompto used to clamber onto the bird while Gladio held it still for him and as they rode out of the courtyard, he turned to watch it slowly disappear on the horizon.
Outside the city, Prompto felt like a bug out in the open - all the fields stretched for miles and they were stark against the flat lands. It made him feel itchy. Noctis had been riding in front of Prompto in silence but he fell back to ride at Prompto’s side.

“What’s up?” Prompto asked and Noctis shrugged. “Is this about what I said this morning?”

The way Noctis looked pointedly away confirmed it. “Was it true? What you told Cindy?” Noctis asked. Prompto thought back to his brief conversation with the young woman and watched him ride comfortably on his chocobo like he had been doing it his whole life.

Thinking seriously for a moment, Prompto shook his head. “Prison was the absolute worst thing that has ever happened to me in my entire life.”

“Oh,” was all Noctis said and he went back up to his spot by Ignis.

On the other side of Prompto, Loqi snorted. “That was a fat lie, wasn’t it?”

Prompto didn’t answer, allowing Loqi to think what he wanted. He turned instead behind him to see Gladio giving him a small smile. Prompto smiled back, comforted by the fact he had their back. Turning back to listen to Ignis and Noctis, he could hear Ignis giving Noctis a lecture. From the tired way Noctis was answering, Prompto assumed these learning exercises were common. He tried to listen to what they were talking about but that after a while Prompto needed all of his focus to make sure he didn’t fall off his chocobo. Prompto would have complained he was tired and hungry but even that took too much energy.

It was mid afternoon when they reached Galdin Quay, a quaint little seaside village. Prompto could smell the ocean long before they got there, but it didn’t spark the same excitement seeing the ocean normally would have for him. All he wanted was sleep and food. He remembered dimly that he had his oranges but that would take two hands to peel and he needed both to keep from falling. There was an inn at Galdin, but Ignis insisted they must keep riding to get where they needed to be for the night. They did stop for lunch which was good enough for Prompto. He scarfed down the food offered him, simple bread and fruits which he noticed Noctis did not touch. Prompto took them when Ignis wasn’t paying attention and Noctis flashed him a grateful smile. Tottering away from the table the group had eaten at, Loqi not far behind, Prompto found a warm spot of the pier to stretch out on.

“Don’t roll off in your sleep,” Loqi said as he sat behind him. Prompto didn’t answer, he was already halfway asleep. When he woke up next, Noctis was sitting at the end of the pier, a fishing pole in hand.

“You fish?” he asked sleepily not bothering to get up.

Noctis looked over in surprise and back at his pole. “Yea, my dad took me when I was little,” He didn’t continue but Prompto couldn’t help feeling like there was more to the story he wasn’t getting. He left it as is though, it wasn’t his business what they told each other. Prompto went back to sleep. It felt like only a few minutes had passed before Loqi was nudging him in the ribs with his foot.

“Time to go. Get up.”

“Go away.”

“Get up, or I’ll get you up.”

Prompto groaned and threw an arm over his face, “I don’t want to get up, I want you to go away.”
He thought for a second before adding, “Please.”

The please didn’t work and Loqi was picking Prompto up and unceremoniously dumping him off the pier not a moment later. Prompto sputtered back up, glad the water wasn’t deep and glared at the man’s back. Loqi was already making his way towards where the others stood with their chocobos. Prompto drugged himself out of the water, clenching his jaw hard enough to hurt. He stalked to one of the outdoor tables and climbed on.

“Bring me my chocobo,” he called to Loqi, “I can’t bring the table over there.”

Loqi gave him an incredulous look and snorted. “That’s cute,” he said.

“How else am I going to get on?” Prompto asked, but Loqi stubbornly crossed his arms. Loqi liked to believe that he was better than him, and Prompto wanted Loqi to understand he could care less about his stupid hierarchy. If anything, Prompto considered himself in a hierarchy of one. He might listen to what the others said to him only because in the short time they had known each other, Prompto had one iota of respect more for them than he had for Loqi. Neither of the men moved, each glaring at each other and squaring up while Ignis and Gladio ignored them. Whether Loqi realized it or not, he had gotten himself into a fight he could not and would not win. True, Loqi was bigger than Prompto but he had been there when Prompto had been arrested. He knew Prompto could put up a fight if it came to it. Loqi seemed to think he could easily take Prompto but he also seemed to conveniently forget the only times he had seen Prompto fight it was one against five. Any other time, Prompto had been in chains when it came to blows. He was more than willing to take his chances now. In the end it was Noctis who moved Prompto’s bird towards the table saving them from a fight. Prompto turned his glare to a smile as he looked down at Noctis.

“Thank you,” he said. Noctis nodded and made his way back to his own chocobo. Loqi swung up in his saddle with a look of contempt on his face, unaware it was his dignity Noctis had saved.

They ambled along slowly as they could to keep Prompto from falling off his chocobo before Loqi sighed in disgust.

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“How else am I going to get on?”

Prompto didn’t bother hiding his own look of disgust before saying, “No.” He was too tired for optimism and frankly, he was still mad about being dumped into the ocean.

Noctis pulled back to ride beside Prompto, “I can teach you to ride.” Loqi snorted and Prompto looked at him in mild confusion.

“You’re too nice to be a prince.”

Prompto’s eyebrows raised to his hairline and he whipped around, almost falling of his chocobo to stare at Noctis. “You’re a prince? Like, as in one day you’re gonna be the king of Lucis?”

Noctis gave a lopsided grin, “If Gladio or Ignis don’t kill me first.”

Noctis tried giving Prompto a few tips on how to rise with the saddle to make the riding smoother but eventually it was Gladio who came back there with them. He explained the birds only had two legs so when they lifted one foot, their entire weight would shift. Prompto didn’t see how it was relevant until Gladio told him if he was already rising up when the chocobos shoulder hit them, the ride would be not only smoother but also it became easier to ride farther distances.

Gladio asked Noctis to hold out his hand and he did, confused. Gladio didn’t bother explaining, he hit Noctis’s hand hard. Noctis yelped and yanked his arm away. Gladio asked him to do it again,
and Noctis did with a glare.

When Gladio moved to hit him again, Noctis pulled his hand back only just managing to miss being hit.

Prompto snorted and shook his head. He had learned the same lesson years ago. If you knew you were going to be hit, at least attempt to move out of the way. The only difference was his father taught him with the flat of a sword. They practiced riding all day and in a way, Prompto was thankful. It was hard to talk when his brains were too busy being bounced around like a sack of rocks and for the most part Loqi left him alone. By nightfall, Prompto was too tired to try and had gone back to slouching over his bird and murmuring sweet words she seemed to appreciate.

They stopped at an inn, Prompto wasn’t sure if the town had a name but the inn was large. The innkeeper apologized and said dinner would have to wait. Prompto tiredly paced in the room was sharing with Loqi. Prompto expected Loqi to lash out at him for pacing and was surprised when all he did was sigh before saying, “Sit down, you’re only making yourself more tired.”

Prompto shook his head, “If I sit down, I’m not getting back up.”

Gladio came into the room with a hard look and without a word settled in the only chair in the room with a book. Prompto was too far away to see what he was reading and didn’t dare to pace too close. Gladio must have understood why Prompto was pacing and took pity on him. With a nod to the door, Gladio set his book aside and stood. Prompto was surprised for a second time when Gladio brought him to Noctis. He noticed Ignis was not in their room and wondered where he was. “Take him out on the roof or something. Make him chill out, but keep him awake.”

Prompto raised his brows. They trusted him not to push the prince off the roof? That was telling. He figured they didn’t know before he had been thrown in jail, jumping between roofs was a walk in the park for him. He knew he wouldn’t have the energy for it now, so Prompto dutifully followed Noctis out on the roof. There were stairs leading up to a small trapdoor in the roof and when they pushed through, Prompto was surprised to see the roof was flat. Not many roofs were flat where he was from. Prompto followed Noctis to the edge of the roof and sat down gingerly. He watched the skyline and refused to look down.

They sat quietly for a moment until Noctis broke the silence. “So, are you okay or…?” He trailed off and Prompto didn’t know whether to laugh or shrug.

“Or?” He asked instead.

Noctis looked out across the small town, his eyes never resting on something for long, “You’re jumpy. I wanted to know if that was normal or if maybe you just needed time away from Loqi or something.”

Now Prompto did laugh. “I was jumpy before I met Loqi. Other than that I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Noctis shrugged and Prompto wondered if he was this nonchalant when he was in his princely meetings. “I don’t know either,” He paused and flicked his eyes to Prompto before going back to scanning the horizon, “We were worried.”


Noctis glared down at his hands, refusing to meet Prompto’s eyes. “Yes. We are worried. Ignis, Gladio and I. We don’t know anything about you except what we can see, and what we see isn’t
“You read the pamphlet, there’s not much to know past what it says. I’ve worked my way up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty,” Prompto said before he crossed his arms to give the impression of thinking, “Let’s see. I can cook but not well. I can’t fight and people generally don’t like me. What else would you like to know?”

There was a sound behind them and they turned to see Ignis. “Dinner is ready downstairs.”

Prompto hopped up with all the energy of someone who had been riding a chocobo badly all day and made to follow Ignis back downstairs.

Before he could, Noctis grabbed his arm. “For what it’s worth, you’re good enough for me.”

Prompto pulled away and hoped Noctis couldn’t see the flush spreading across his cheeks in the dim light. “A crush Your Highness?”

Noctis frowned, “Don’t call me that. Friends call me Noct or Noctis, but never Your Highness.”

Prompto hummed and started down the stairs again. “I wasn’t aware we were friends.” It hit him he was saying nearly the same thing he had said to the king only two days before and felt sick to his stomach. Prompto didn’t ever want to compare Noctis to Ardyn, but he didn’t take back what he had said. It wasn’t until Noctis was behind him Prompto realized he hadn’t denied having a crush. He would have laughed if he wasn’t still thinking of Ardyn.

Noctis didn’t answer and they followed Ignis to the common room where bowls of steaming soup sat on the tables. Prompto didn’t talk while they ate, instead he ate until he fell asleep at the table.

Prompto awoke sometime later, the hardness of the floor below him. He resisted the urge to sit up quickly, only realizing where he was by the quiet murmurings not meant for him to hear. He lay still listening, willing his thudding heart to be quieter and breathing to even out. The room was dim, light only by a single candle near the others as they sat and talked.

Noctis was speaking quietly, but even so Prompto could hear the anger plainly in his voice. “He wouldn’t tell me anything and I can’t tell when he’s lying.”

There was a breath of laughter and it took Prompto a second to realize it was Ignis, “Of course not. He’s not going to open up to you after knowing you two days Noct,” he replied over the sound of a rustling blanket. “There is nothing we can do other than keep an eye on them.”

The light was blown out and Prompto lay awake with his thoughts as long as he could before drifting back off.

The first few waking moments of the next morning were spent thinking of how undignified he must have looked as Gladio carried him up the stairs for the second time. Prompto winced and swore this was the last time he would allow himself to fall asleep while eating. He was alone in the room with Noctis, who was asleep on the only bed in the room. He wondered if Gladio had slept the room with Loqi or if Ignis had curled up in the chair. His musings were cut short by Gladio pushing the door open with a silent swing. He nodded at Prompto before crossing the room not bothering to be silent. Prompto sat up fully to watch what he did. There was a smile tugging on his lips when he realized what Gladio was doing.

He didn’t bother gently shaking Noctis, but picked him up and dropped him back down on the bed.
Noctis barely stirred. It took a few more of these forceful attempts before Noctis opened his bleary eyes. Prompto’s smile vanished the second Noctis focused solely on him. He stared back with no shame until Gladio came over and unlocked his ankle. He told Prompto to leave the room, Ignis was waiting for him downstairs and Prompto had no choice but to leave the two in the room alone. He closed the door and stood for a second, listening to the quiet murmurings inside before doing what Gladio had told him to do. Ignis was where Gladio said he would be and without preamble led him outside to a pump. Loqi was already there, stripped to his waist and pumping water. Ignis did the same, stripping with no problem in the chilly morning air. The sun was already rising, the sky clear and blue but the town was still hidden in shadows. Prompto shivered and stared at the two men who were bathing quickly. Loqi eyed him for a second and Prompto took a step back.

“I will bite you if you try and bathe me today.” He warned.

Loqi laughed and nodded, “Fine, but only because you’re probably septic. I don’t feel like dying a horrible death today.”

Prompto frowned but said nothing, wary of Loqi’s good mood. Ignis handed Prompto a washcloth without a word and he bent down to the water. It was cold but he didn’t complain, it could be worse. Prompto was washing his face when Gladio and Noctis came outside.

“The point of a bath it to get clean you know, that’s hard to do if you don’t get undressed.” Gladio teased. Prompto didn’t answer but focused on scrubbing harder.

“Gladio.” Ignis warned quietly. Prompto didn’t see what looks were exchanged above his head but he could hear the way Gladio sighed.

“We’ve all seen them, shouldn’t matter right?”

Prompto flushed and studiously tried to ignore them when Noctis crouched beside him. “Can I see the washcloth when you’re done?”

Prompto handed the cloth over but stayed crouching while the older men argued above their heads with glares and quiet gestures. “You’re not going to take your shirt off?” he asked after a second of watching Noctis lather up the cloth with soap.

Noctis shrugged, “I have a scar on my back. It’s not pretty and I don’t like people looking at it,” he looked at Prompto, the level of understanding in Noctis’s eyes was more than he had ever seen before. “Even if people know about it, it’s a reminder of what was done to me.”

Prompto nodded and stood without another word. He waited in the cool sunlight thinking, until everyone else was ready to go inside. Breakfast was waiting for him, warm bread and bowls of something hot and creamy. Prompto did not need to be told to dig in and was pleasantly surprised to find whatever he was eating, he loved. While he ate he listened to the others talking around him.

“Let me guess what caused that thumping this morning, shall I?” Ignis quirked a smile at Noctis and Gladio laughed.

Loqi had settled at the end of the table, not part of them but near enough should Prompto try and run he would be there in a flash. Not that Prompto was planning on running. Breakfast always came before fleeing.

Gladio pointed at Noctis with his spoon, “He could sleep through a city being destroyed. Mark my words, one morning he’s going to sleep through being killed.”

Noctis pushed the spoon out of his face, “Isn’t it your job to keep me alive though?”
“Sleeping lightly is something a soldier needs to be able to do though,” Loqi chimed in ignoring the grumpy look Noctis shot him.

“Yeah, but who wants to be a soldier?” Noctis grumbled.

“Not me, for sure,” Prompto said into his bowl. Everyone turned towards him and he felt his face heat up.

“Who asked you? No one cares,” Loqi sneered.

“He did, you stupid -“ Prompto started to snap back before Ignis interrupted with a sharp clearing of his throat. Before Ignis could try to smooth over anyone’s rising tempers Loqi was already talking over him.

“What would you know about being a soldier, oh scum of the gutter?” Loqi’s brows were drawn down in a furious glare and for the life of him, Prompto couldn’t figure out what he had said to make the other so angry. But still, he asked a question and questions demanded answers.

Prompto was not known for holding his tongue when he should and was arguing back before Ignis could intervene again, “Not being scum of the gutter I wouldn’t know what they think. However, my father was a soldier and I know for a fact it’s a thankless job for stupid, ugly people and all it does is make you think you’re better than anyone else. Soldier are the ones who take everything out on everyone else.” Sometimes Prompto surprised himself with his capacity for tact and this was one of those times as the table fell into a perfect silence. Loqi’s face went carefully blank but he didn’t bother with a response and instead shoveled bread into his mouth.

Point two Prompto, point none Loqi.

His win was short lived when Gladio nudged him. “You know I’m technically a soldier, right.”

Prompto’s face erupted in flames and he ducked his head down. “You can be the exception, I guess.” Gladio laughed, “To the stupid part or the ugly part?” Prompto grinned and put more food in his mouth so he wouldn’t have to answer.

Breakfast was done all too fast and as they all stood to leave Prompto was jerked back, Loqi’s hand gripping his arm tight.

“I do not believe you know your place. You are only alive and on this trip because of me, I demand respect.”

Prompto tried to wrench his arm away and only succeeded in having nails dig painfully in. Prompto glared and looked around to see if anyone had noticed what was happening.

“So, so, so. It is usually those who demand it that deserve it the least. What will happen if you do not get it?” Prompto said.

The muscles in Loqi’s jaw jumped from clenching his teeth so hard and he shoved his face close enough Prompto could feel his breath on his face. “I have a riding crop packed. I will use it on you, do you understand? I have a job to do and I will not let you mess this up.”

Prompto glared but understood plainly. “Fine. I’m going to need rules to follow then. I am a scum of the gutter remember? I can’t read your mind to know what I can and can’t do.”

Loqi opened his mouth to speak but as he did, Noctis rounded the corner. He froze and looked from Prompto to Loqi before saying with steel in his voice, “We’re ready to go.” He waited until Loqi
let go before leading Prompto outside. Noctis looked like he wanted to say something and Prompto was waiting for it but by the time they had gotten to the chocobos he hadn’t said it.

No one seemed to be in a talking mood as they rode out and Prompto filled the time by thinking of his companions again. Noctis was going to be king one day and Gladio was obviously his Shield. Prompto flicked his eyes to Ignis riding tall in the front. He had major sway with the group and was the one to meet with Ardyn about Prompto, not Noctis like Prompto would have thought. So who was Ignis? Prompto slid his eyes to the side to watch Loqi ride for a moment. Prompto frowned and gripped his chocobo tighter as the road began to get steep in places. As they rode on, the road began to look less traveled and Prompto had less time for thinking. Instead he focused on not falling off. He was getting grumpy with the way things were going, no time to think and constantly being afraid of slipping off his bird. The path had gotten skinnier, the tall grass on the side catching on their pants. The chocobos worked hard to heave themselves up the steep climb. By mid morning Prompto’s arms and legs shook with the strain of holding on.

Ignis, as Prompto was learning to expect, was the one to notice how tired he was getting. The next open space they came to, Ignis led the way to the grassy center. Prompto’s bird obediently followed without guidance and he was more than thankful he wouldn't have to try and wrangle it near the others. Prompto slid down, his knees nearly buckling when he hit the ground. He stayed standing, barely, leaning on his bird for support. Prompto pet her tiredly and kept an eye on what everyone else was doing. Ignis was pulling food from his bags, Gladio talking quietly with him while Noctis flopped in the sun to take a quick nap. Loqi was as always no more than an arms length away from Prompto. Lunch wasn’t anything special, something Prompto could tell bothered Ignis but when Noctis made a disbelieving sound at the bread he was handed Ignis sighed.

“We have to be careful with our food. I can’t be sure we were given enough to last us.”

Prompto perked up, “Last until what?”

Ignis fixed him with an indecipherable look and after a beat, “Until we are through the mountains.”

Prompto eyed the bags tied to the chocobos with a careful eye before huffing and laying back on the grass next to Noctis, “You didn’t bring enough food. We’re all going to starve.” He closed his eyes in the warm sun and as he was stretching out he heard Loqi make a noise. Prompto laughed, guessing the sound was one of incredulity. “You’re right, I won’t starve. I’ll just eat your food too Loqi.” He cracked an eye open to see Loqi giving him an ugly look.

“I, for sure, am not starving so you can eat.”

“I don’t see why not. I am the most important person here,” Prompto told him before closing his eyes.

As he dozed he could hear the low tones of Gladio and the even more hushed tones of Ignis talking. After a moment of realizing sleep wouldn’t come, Prompto sat up and looked around.

“Ah, that would be why he’s not grumbling.” He said looking at Loqi who was resting with his eyes closed against the only tree in the area. Ignis and Gladio were staring at Prompto and he shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Ignis nodded like it was to be expected and Gladio slid his eyes to Loqi. He watched for a moment before looking back to Prompto.

“Listen, I know it’s not my business-“
“Then don’t ask,” Prompto interrupted. Gladio frowned but continued on anyways.

“You’re ok right?”

Prompto crossed his legs and leaned forward on his fist. “Am I capable? Functional? Sure. If nothing else in my life has taken that from me, prison sure as hell wouldn’t.”

“Why did you bet a man you could steal the king’s crown and show it to him the next day in the middle of a crowded wine shop?” Ignis asked a moment later. Prompto groaned, he should have pretended to sleep so he could eavesdrop on them. It had been a professional risk, one he had been willing to take and one he didn’t expect them to understand. So he didn’t bother saying so. He stared passively at the men and shrugged.

“What about you? Who are you?” Prompto asked Ignis. He liked to learn things on his own, but given the chance to take the easy way out Prompto would easily take it.

Ignis seemed confused for a moment and before he blinked in understanding. “Who am I in the grand scheme of Noctis’s party?” When Prompto nodded Ignis continued, “When Noctis becomes king, Gladio will be his shield and I will be at his side as his advisor.”

Prompto nodded again, slowly to himself. He had expected something along those lines. Ignis fit the role of advisor perfectly. If Noctis needed to know how many people an acre of farmland would feed, Ignis would be able to tell him. If Noctis ordered the same acre of land to be burnt, Ignis would also know how many people would starve from it. Prompto regarded the two men in front of him seriously. These two men held the future between them. He saw how Noctis looked at them with a loyalty and devotion which only came from a lifetime of being bonded together. Prompto watched Ignis shake Noctis awake and wondered if one day he would have a bond as strong as theirs.

Chapter End Notes

WHEW THAT WAS A LONG CHAPTER YALL. (the next chapter is even LONGER) I hope you guys enjoyed it and I can't wait to see you guys in the next chapter!! Kudo and comment if that's your cup of tea! IF you have read the books, PLEASE PLEASE do not post spoilers in the comments!! First off, many readers have said they haven't read the books and I don't want to ruin the story for them and also there is a good chance that I've changed that part of the story. Lots of stuff to come, and as always thank you guys for everything <33
By the time the sun hung low in the sky and evening was falling, Prompto regretted not taking a nap. He kept his mouth shut, unwilling to be the reason they had to stop. It didn't help in the end, Gladio called up to Ignis after watching Prompto nearly slide off his chocobo for the third time. As soon as a spot was chosen for them to camp, Prompto dismounted clumsily and curled up in the prickly grass. It didn't occur to him this was the first time they had camped outside since setting out until he heard Gladio coaching Noctis on how to build a fire.

“Have you never been camping?” Loqi asked watching the exchange from where he sat by Prompto’s feet. Looking up from his pile of kindling, Noctis sent an embarrassed look at Gladio and Ignis.

“Not alone, there wasn’t really any opportunities to do so.”

Gladio nudged Noctis with a pointed look. “Pay attention Noct. When you pile it up it won’t be able to burn.” Noctis frowned, thinking about it. Gladio continued to explain, “Make a house and the fire will live. Make a graveyard and it will die.”

Understanding flashed across Noctis’s face and he dismantled what he had done to remake it. Gladio nodded in praise and he moved to let Ignis cook. Prompto decided to lay with his eyes closed, enjoying the sounds of everyone moving and talking to each other. Loqi stayed out of it, deciding instead to sit at Prompto’s feet. Dinner was almost done when Loqi spoke quietly.
“I know you’re awake,” Loqi said. Prompto hummed but didn’t open his eyes. “I’m going to lay down those ground rules you wanted earlier, so listen well.”

Prompto sat up, giving Loqi his full attention. He sat close enough to hear but not close enough to touch- which seemed to suit Loqi fine. “Go on then,” Prompto said once he was comfortable.

“Rule number one, remember your place. Know who you are and don’t forget it.” Loqi’s eyes narrowed and the man had a serious face to rival Ignis’s. Loqi didn’t elaborate and pushed onward. “Rule two, I don’t like seeing you be so friendly with those Lucians. They may think they own you, but you and I both know where you belong.”

Prompto suppressed a shudder, thinking of Ardyn as Loqi began talking again, “Rule three, disobey me and you disobey the king, everything will get reported to him.”

Frowning, Prompto shifted and said “And if I don’t like any of these rules?”

“He nodded grimly, it had been on his mind a good portion of the day.

“There you have it then,” Loqi said. He fell quiet watching the men sitting around the fire talking quietly amongst themselves. Loqi spoke again, sudden in the silence that had fallen over them, “I’m sure they will be coming over to tell us dinner is done any moment now. Let’s save them the trouble and head over there ourselves.”

Prompto stood and dusted himself off before heading over towards the others and although he was proud he made it through the meal without falling asleep, he knew he wasn’t going to last much longer. Blearily he looked around and saw while he had been laying down someone had set up two tents. Ignis nodded towards them with a smile and Prompto didn’t need to be told twice, crawling into the one closest to them as fast as he could, falling asleep to the sounds of talking.

He woke up briefly when someone entered the tent but relaxed when he realized it was Gladio. Prompto must have made some noise because Gladio made a shushing sound before settling next to him. Sleepily he realized on some level he should be bothered by this, but the night was cool and Gladio was a warmth he didn’t know he needed until it was there.

The next morning nothing was said as Prompto helped dismantle the tent he had slept in. He didn’t know where Loqi had slept and wondered if Gladio coming into his tent would cause trouble later. Regardless, everyone was in a good mood and ready to go by the time they were on their chocobos.

They reached a small farmhouse sitting off the side of the road shortly after noon. The house was near ruin, whitewash flaking off in chunks to reveal stone walls underneath, and an older man stepped outside, his military training obvious to anyone with eyes to see it.

“I expected you last night,” the man said crossing his arms.

Ignis dismounted and tipped his head in a polite bow. “Apologies Cor, we were delayed.” He glanced at Prompto and rather than elaborate, simply said, “We will need provisions.”

Cor nodded. “I got everything you will need. We can talk more inside after you put the birds in the shed.” Ignis helped Prompto down and led the way inside.

“The chocobos though?” Prompto asked, craning his head to look at them, but Ignis waved a hand as if to say it was not a problem and they went through the main room of the house to the back where there was a room with windows on three of the walls and a row of beds.
“You didn’t seem to have a problem sleeping with Gladio last night so hopefully you won’t mind if we all sleep in similar ways tonight. We usually bunk together to save on money,” Ignis said. He didn’t look at Prompto as he spoke and there was something niggling in the back of his mind trying to make itself known, but Ignis was talking again so he forced himself to pay attention. “It’s too late to start up the mountain today, we need a full day to do that, so we will stay here and start in the morning. You should be able to rest as much as you need.” Nothing had ever sounded more like heaven to him, but Ignis was pulling a face - a small one, but it was there nonetheless.

“What’s the catch?” Prompto asked suspiciously.

“According to the rules of our arrangement with the king, there are rules we must follow.” He paused as Loqi came in the room holding the shackle in hand and Ignis’s frown deepened. “One of the rules is you must be under constant surveillance and when there is a chance you cannot be, then you must be chained to something.”

Prompto wondered briefly what the other rules they had to follow were while Loqi had him sit on one of the beds to kick his boots off and knelt down to lock the cuff around his ankle. He tested with two fingers to make sure it wasn’t tight and nodded when he deemed it good enough before leaving the room without another word.

Ignis sighed heavily through his nose and shook his head. “Let me get something to pad it with at least, there’s no reason to cause you any more pain than you are already in.” Prompto shifted the cuff into a more comfortable position and wondered if the dent in his ankle would be permanent.

Hesitating, Ignis came near with a shirt and asked, “May I put this on you?”

Prompto blinked, remembering Ignis hadn’t been in the room when he told the others not to worry about causing him discomfort. He had assumed the others would tell him though and it meant a lot that Ignis would still take care.

He nodded and tracked Ignis’s movements, hardly daring to breathe. Ignis was gentle with him, barely touching him at all and for a brief horrifying moment, Prompto wondered what it would be like to have those long fingers trail over him for a much better reason.

“Prompto, are you ok? Would you like me to open the windows for you?” Ignis asked cutting into his fantasy and Prompto looked up to meet Ignis’s intense gaze, stammering out what he hoped was a yes. Ignis stared for a moment longer but got up to crack one of the windows on the far side of the room without comment. The room had been warm before, but with the window open the room became cool and Prompto sighed as the room began to feel like his one at home.

“Thanks Iggy,” he murmured as he laid himself down comfortably. Ignis said something back, but Prompto’s eyes were closed and he was already drifting off. He spent the day dozing, catching up on rest he desperately needed.

He thought he might have sat up a few times to look out the window closest to his bed, but he could have been dreaming about Gladio and Noctis shirtless outside as they sparred with real swords because the next time Prompto sat up they were gone.

As darkness fell and the stars came out, Prompto could hear the voices in the other room talking quietly and he turned his head to the window, unperturbed to see Loqi sitting in the room with him. However, he was surprised to find him sitting in the window, looking up at the stars with an expression he had never seen before on the man.

“Lonely?” Prompto asked, unsure if this was another dream.
Loqi turned towards him, his face now carefully masked. “Go to sleep.”

Prompto closed his eyes dutifully and didn’t wake again until he felt a dip in the bed beside him. “It’s only me,” Noctis said quietly.

Prompto shifted trying to see in the dim moonlight coming through the windows but couldn’t see his face. “Where is Loqi sleeping?”

He felt rather than saw Noctis shrug. ‘He said something about not sleeping under the same roof as Cor.’

Prompto thought about that, brows furrowed, but when his eyes started drooping he didn’t fight it. He listened to the even breathing of the other three men in the room and the comforting feeling of someone beside him and fell back asleep.

The next morning Prompto was warm and content to lay in bed with his eyes closed, comfortable with the weight draped on his stomach. It took a moment for his brain to kickstart into action and when he realized it was Noctis pressed firmly to his side his stomach did a strange flip-flop, taking everything in him to not frantically backpedal away from him. Noctis was asleep with his mouth slightly open, face buried in between their two pillows and tucked into Prompto’s side. He cast a look around the room only to realize they were alone and with the cuff around his ankle, Prompto was officially trapped until someone came to rescue him. He watched the dust motes in the warm sunlight and eventually Noctis’s slow even breathing had him dozing again.

When next he woke, Noctis was being drug off of him with sleepy protests. Gladio was indifferent to them and showed more patience than Prompto would have credited to the big guy as he said, “Come on Noct, we have to go. Ignis is getting in one of those moods. We let you sleep in for Prompto’s sake but it’s breakfast time now.”

He got Noctis up on his feet but his eyes didn’t open until they were walking to the door. “Iggy will be in here with the key in a moment.”

Prompto nodded and waited as patiently as he could, brushing his hair from his face and wincing when his fingers caught on some of the worst knots. It wasn’t too long but having his hair in his face was an annoyance.

Ignis appeared as Prompto was attempting to pull the knots apart. “If you would like, I can cut it as you eat breakfast,” he said and Prompto agreed to that idea enthusiastically, sticking his leg out so Ignis could unlock him.

Breakfast was bowls upon bowls of food and Prompto’s stomach gave an embarrassingly loud growl at the smell. “I’d say eat up because you won’t be getting anything this good for awhile, but with Iggy around you’ll always eat good,” Gladio said dropping into the seat across from him.

Prompto paused spoon halfway to his mouth and raised his brows. “He cooks?” He twisted to Ignis and asked again, “You cook?”

Ignis came by his side, a pair of shears in hand and amused by Prompto’s shock. “I can, moderately well anyways. Noctis is notoriously picky and forcing the royal kitchens to cater to that, which wasn’t something I was willing to put them through.” He took a comb from his pocket and held it up in a silent question and Prompto nodded, wincing as Ignis started in on his tangles.

“Moderately well?” Gladio scoffed. “He’s the one who cooked the meal at the inn the other day. Surely that’s not just decent cooking.”

Prompto resisted the urge to turn and look at the other man while the scissors were dangerously close to his face.
close to his eyes, but he was surprised. It explained why Ignis wasn’t around the other night and he thought back to the meal, sad to realize he didn’t remember what he ate. He wondered if he’d get to taste Ignis’s cooking again.

Breakfast was quiet, save for the sounds of eating and the quiet snips of Ignis’s shears as locks of hair fell around his chair and Prompto spoke only once to ask to keep the length but get it out of his face. Ignis didn’t cut much off, but the feeling of not having hair in his face constantly was enough to have Prompto grinning.

The smile dropped from his face when the man from last night sat at the other end of the table, eyes trained on Prompto, and he felt the blood rush to his face under such an intense stare, nearly dropping his spoon. He quickly laid it down and clasped his hands in his lap to hide the shaking.

“Are you Cor the Immortal?” Prompto asked bluntly, hoping to hide his nerves behind a mask of indifference, but he knew - Cor knew, everyone knew - it was a bluff and a terrible one.

“Is my reputation so great it goes all the way to Tenebrae?” he answered.

Prompto shrugged. Everyone knew who Cor the Immortal was, though not many outside his country had seen him. “I suppose.”

Cor nodded and the world went back to normal as Ignis finished cutting his hair and settled down beside him to eat his own food, conversations coming back to life. When Gladio unwrapped his wrists this time he did it without looking so pained and Prompto endured it without complaint. For the first time since prison he felt truly good.

His wrists were doing much better, with most of the sores mostly healed except for the ones Loqi had pulled the day before. One wrist was bandaged back up and the other was left to air out.

While the others began to pack up, Prompto went outside to stretch in the sun, quickly putting his hair up in a small piece of twine he had stolen from one of the saddle bags the day before. He was mid backbend when he heard footsteps coming near him and did a slow walk over, careful not to fall on his face. Standing, he felt a grin teasing at his lips.

“You seem happy this morning,” Noctis said.

“I’m thinking of how lucky I am.”

“Lucky?” Looking over him with raised eyebrows, Noctis crossed his arms. “Doesn’t look like you got the lucky end of anything.”

Prompto laughed and rolled his shoulders. “Maybe to someone who has always gotten the lucky end of everything. I was thinking I was lucky the gods answered my prayers. I prayed every day not to get sick in prison.”

Noctis settled on the steps leading to the house and watched Prompto go through a series of stretches. “Are you afraid of getting sick?”

Prompto paused for a moment, reflecting over his childhood. “I saw more people than I can count waste away to sickness. I would rather die by my own hands before getting that bad,” he said, looking at Noctis with his expression serious. “In that way, I am glad the gods answered my prayers. No matter what has happened to me, I am lucky.”

Shifting on his seat, Noctis stayed silent and Prompto went back to his stretches.
In the near distance he could see where the mountains began and wondered if that meant they were close to the country of Niflhiem, but without a map he couldn’t be sure.

Ignis called them away from their spot and once they were next to him he explained they would be traveling on foot from then on.

“What?” Prompto asked.

Gladio shouldered a bag nearly bursting at the seams and Prompto recognized it as one of the ones which had been on the chocobos. “The trails would be too hard on them,” he said and Prompto turned back to where saw the foothills to consider them again. If they were traveling on foot then they were indeed going deeper into the mountains and while Prompto looked forward to it he also grimaced, knowing it would be a hard trip. “Thinking about running?”

Prompto was aware Noctis and Ignis had stopped talking quietly among themselves and were waiting for his answer. “Nah,” he said eventually, “I don’t think I will.” He wasn’t sure when he came to that decision but it felt right.

Eyeing him, Gladio gave a smile and said, “You look good with your hair up like that.” Prompto flushed bright red.

Loqi joined up with them not long after, visibly stiffening as he shot a look at Cor, who was not far behind. There was a story there and Prompto was almost eager to find out what it was. He may not be a patient person, but for this he was willing to wait. They all said their goodbyes and promised to meet up again in a few weeks.

The trail was exactly what Prompto predicted it would be; narrow and winding, often ending in dead ends which slid straight down. Anywhere the trail ended, Ignis or Gladio would look around for a foothold to climb down with and always found them with ease. The trail was barely big enough for Gladio’s large frame and there would have been no way to fit a chocobo and Prompto lamented his missed chance to say goodbye to his bird. The steep slopes began to edge up sharply to their sides and Prompto breathed a sigh of relief as the world closed in on them in a comforting way. They stopped for a quick meal before they were exhausted and took the time to rest.

There was a question begging to be asked, but before Prompto could ask, Noctis beat him to the punch. “Where are we?”

“Just outside Lestallum.”

Noctis’s eyebrows lifted. “I think we are far enough that we can tell Prompto what we are going to have him steal, right?”

Ignis nodded. “Tell Prompto everything you know about Niflhiem first.”

Miffed, Noctis recited something in a bored voice which sounded like it came straight from one of Ignis’s lessons. It was almost laughably simple minded - most of the exports came from lumber and it needed to import most everything else; it was a mountain country which experienced frigid temperatures and was ruled by the current queen.

When Noctis finished Ignis was less than pleased. “Really Noct,” he said, sighing in exasperation, “Niflhiem controls the only land that connects Lucis, Tenebrae and Accordo. Two of which are the wealthiest trading countries on this side of the world. The Queen, Aranea, allows caravans and traders to go through for a price which is one of the ways they earn most of their money. Because she depends on the trade and travelers, she is always neutral in times of war and strives to keep the
peace between Lucis and Tenebrae especially.” Ignis began packing up what was left of the food never breaking stride in his lecture. “Something happened during Queen Aranea’s great grandfather’s rule, Noct do you remember what it was?”

Noctis shrugged on his own bag, face twisting in concentration. “Was it the bridge?”

“Very good,” Ignis said. “King Iedolas was not Queen Aranea’s true grandfather, but rather she took the throne from his ancestors and the royalty of Niflhiem insist on anyone who becomes royal is family no matter the circumstances of their birth. I have digressed - the bridge originally ran over a valley between two mountains and King Iedolas wanted to go to war with Lucis, but his minister of war wanted to hold onto their neutral position. During the night, he and a group of men destroyed the bridge. The king had them executed, but without the bridge no army can get down the far side of Lucis.”

Shaking his head, Gladio huffed. “They knew they would have been beaten by Lucis. They are cowards who know they are safe in their mountains.” He spoke with spite and confidence lacing his words, holding the opinion of most Lucians.

“Why should they have let Iedolas down the mountain when it would have hurt both their trade and their reputation?” Prompto asked and although Ignis was about to reply, he pushed on. “And if the Nifs have always been neutral, how do you know the Lucians could have beaten them? The Lucians don’t know anything about their fighting style. You’re assuming a lot there.”

Gladio was taken aback by this and his expression grew thoughtful. “True, most of the time when you go to war you can pull from past knowledge of wars. With Niflhiem we have nothing to pull from, we know who their minister of war and their ambassadors are but we don’t know what they are truly capable of. To go to war with them would probably be an outright demolition of our army - they can study the wars we’ve had with other people.”

Pausing in his ramblings, Gladio seemed to notice for the first time everyone was staring at him. A sheepish grin overtook his thoughtful expression and he spread his hands and said, “It’s my job to overanalyze battles, but to answer your other question, the Nif’s lied. They told everyone they destroyed the bridge to stop Iedolas, but in reality they were scared with the growing threats of war and that eventually someone who wasn’t from Niflhiem would take over the throne.”

Prompto leaned forward. “So in all this time the only people who have ruled Niflhiem have been from Niflhiem itself? The rule has never changed at the hands because of an outside force?”

Picking himself off the ground and dusting his pants, Noctis nodded. “Unlike a lot of countries, Niflhiem is one of the only who have never been overrun by invaders. My family was from over the seas and took over Lucis when it was a smaller less known country, there’s a long boring history to it which Ignis made me learn.” He held a hand to help Prompto up and asked, “Why do you want to know?”

Shrugging Prompto said, “Seems interesting since we’re going to be stealing something involving the royalty of Niflhiem.” He grinned at Loqi. “Does Ardyn want me to steal a crown? You know I can do it.”

Loqi, who had been silent for most of the morning, glared. “Most people find it appalling to break the law.”

“No most people find it appalling to lose their freedom too, I wonder how the people of Niflhiem will take the news they will be ruled by someone else very soon?” Prompto shot back.
The conversation ended there and they went back to climbing up into the mountains.

It wasn’t long before Noctis was hanging back from Ignis until he was beside Prompto. “Does it upset you what we are doing?”

Prompto didn’t answer and Noctis seemed content to wait him out until the silence became too much. “Am I right? Will we be stealing something which will be taking away the freedom of others?”

If he was uncomfortable by such a blunt question, Noctis didn’t even so much as bat an eye. “Yes,” he said and went back to Ignis.

Night fell quickly as they started getting more into the mountains. The more they continued on, the less and less they could see of where they were putting their feet and more than once one of them slipped on the loose rocks. Everyone needed help from those around them and even Loqi took a hand from Ignis at one point. Prompto was grateful his hair was out of his face and he could feel a breeze on his neck as air became cool.

Ignis stopped them in an area used by travelers often, evident by the stone fireplace which had been built in the wall of the ravine, and as they spread out and set up tents little was said. That changed once dinner had been cooked by Ignis over the fire and Prompto dug in, both ravenous from the amount of walking they had done and eager to get a taste of Ignis’s cooking. For once he wasn’t nearly falling asleep as he ate and was able to appreciate what had been painstakingly prepared for them.

“Ignis, now can we tell him why we are doing this?” Noctis asked after he had eaten half of his food.

Nodding, Ignis threw himself into another lecture. “You already know Niflhiem does not pass on the throne to just the males since there is a queen in power now. But it’s only been that way for a few hundred years. Do you know how they did this before?”

Prompto hesitated. “Do you mean the Ring?”

“Correct, the Ring.” Ignis said and Prompto flushed. It wasn’t praise, but it felt very close to it and it was enough to have him feeling warm.

Loqi frowned, “What ring are you talking about?”

Ignis didn’t seem bothered by the fact Loqi asked the question and instead explained patiently. “Before the invaders came, this entire continent worshiped the same gods, but now we all worship the main six. Niflheim alone worships an additional plethora of smaller deities - such as Carbuncle, the protector of dreams. According to the old religion, the goddess Shiva made the world from the frozen tears she shed when she believed Ifrit was unfaithful to her and when he came near to pledge his love again they melted into our oceans.”

“The history of the gods is long and complex, but the relevant point is when Siren, daughter of Leviathan, made them a ring which would bind Ifrit to Shiva and rather than giving it to him, she gifted it to the people born of them to rule in their stead. Niflhiem believes they were the first to be born because they live where it is the coldest and they use this ring as undeniable prove they should be the ones to rule. The royalty passed the ring down to their children until one day a thief
stole it and became king, simply because he held the ring. It then became tradition for the ruler to hide the ring when they were ready to end their reign and whoever stole it would be crowned the new ruler. That is, until one of the rulers hid the ring well enough that it was never found again.

“I have a question,” Prompto interrupted. “This is just a myth right?”

“If Ignis says it’s real then I believe him. It could be found, right Ignis?” Noctis asked.

A short silence and then Ignis nodded.

“You think you’ve found it?” Loqi asked.

Hesitance was a look Prompto had only seen on Ignis once, but there it was, clear as day as he struggled to put his thoughts in order. “There are documents which have survived from that time. King Ardyn had them in his custody, which is why we must work with him to get this done. Others have found the ring before, but according to these documents none ever came back, which makes me wonder if they were merely… poorly equipped.” Ignis smiled at Prompto over the fire. “It would take an exceptional thief to steal the ring, someone with a sharp mind as well as nimble fingers.”

“I thought you said I wasn’t smart,” Prompto said and felt a rush of something hot when he thought Ignis flushed in the dim firelight.

“I do apologize for that again, the king of Tenebrae is one of the few people who can make me lose my cool easily. I also felt he would be more willing to let us travel unaccompanied if he felt I could keep you in line, but he sent his guard along anyways,” he replied.

Prompto laughed. “I can assure you I was definitely scared, so you did your job well. Do you have those documents with you? Maybe they can give me some sort of clue as to what to expect when we get to wherever the ring is hidden.”

“They don’t exist anymore,” Loqi said, breaking his silence.


“I burnt them on King Ardyn’s orders,” he said and Prompto winced. It would have been better if these records hadn’t been found at all. “This plan either succeeds or no one ever has the chance to attempt again. I am here to make sure all goes according to plan and that you do not run off with it once it it found.”

Prompto ignored the last part as he had already given his word he wouldn’t run, and besides, seeing this through was far more interesting than heading home. “Are we stealing this ring so someone can be king of a cold and desolate hellscape of trees?” he asked. “How does this work?”

Expecting Ignis to answer again, Prompto was startled when Noctis spoke. “We will send the ring back with Loqi to give it to Ardyn so that he can marry Queen Arenea to become ruler of Niflhiem and Tenebrae both. Then we will strike up a treaty to allow Lucis to trade freely with them and I will be granted the title of King’s Thief.” He sounded world weary, too old for his youthful appearance, and under Prompto’s growing anger he felt a beat of sympathy for him.

Fury quickly overcame it and he opened his mouth before he could stop himself. “So is this the real reason Loqi is here? I find the ring and he knifes me in the back?”

The range of expressions which went across the faces of each of his companions would have been funny, if it weren’t for the look Loqi gave him, staring evenly with a silent promise of what was to come. Prompto realized with growing dread that Loqi had said as much only a few minutes before
and despite the fact Noctis was angrily explaining they would never do such a thing, he knew better. Even if the Lucians let him go, Ardyn was never going to. A chill spread through his body and he shivered in the warm summer air.

Sleep didn’t come easy that night. Prompto pretended to be unconscious when Gladio came into the tent and settled behind him. When Gladio stirred he was still awake, listening to Ignis get a pot of coffee going as the sky began to lighten.

“Did you get any sleep at all?” he asked and frowned when Prompto shook his head wearily. “Are you thinking of what we talked about last night?”

Prompto stared at the fabric of the tent, clenching his jaw hard enough to hurt. If he could curl into himself any smaller he would. His silence was telling and Gladio was gentle when he spoke again, “We aren’t going to let Loqi or King Ardyn put their hands on you. It’s already been decided once the ring has been found, you are free to go and if you wanted to stay in Lucis, you could. As long as you don’t start stealing.”

Snorting, Prompto gave a wry smile and said, “Thanks but no thanks. I’m sure Lucis is a lovely place, but I would rather be the famous thief known for stealing the ring.”

“Would you be comfortable in court though?” Gladio asked and Prompto flushed.

“No, I wouldn’t, but the point of being a thief is not being seen.”

Gladio’s gaze traveled from Prompto’s face down and then back up with a smile teasing the corner of his mouth. “I don’t think it would be possible for someone like you not to be seen.”

Prompto stammered out something he hoped was intelligible as Gladio exited the tent laughing, and he waited until he was sure his face wasn’t red anymore before he went out to the others. It seemed he wasn’t the only one to not get sleep he thought as Loqi nursed a cup of coffee, his back against the wall the fire was built into. Prompto watched as Ignis single handedly threw together breakfast and made more coffee all before Gladio was even able to wake up Noctis.

“Are you always so put together?” he asked after being handed his own cup of coffee, taking a sip and wincing. Lucians drank their coffee very different from how they drank theirs at home.

“What do you mean?” Ignis didn’t need to be told before he was sweeping in with a small container filled with honey and dumped an a generous amount into Prompto’s cup.

“You’re always on top of things even without having been asked to do it. You never seem bothered by all the responsibility either.”

Sitting down on one of the many logs in the area, Ignis took a sip of his own coffee. “I’ve often found that responsibilities gravitate to the person who can shoulder them.”

They fell into silence and once Gladio pulled Noctis out of the tent he shared with Ignis, they ate a quick breakfast before setting off. The trail they had been walking the night before changed from loose rocks to hard dirt as they traveled in between tall pine trees and Prompto took a deep breath, letting the scent fill his lungs.

“Does Lucis have this many trees?” he asked as they climbed out of the valley into a forest which stretched as far as he could see.

“Sure, in some places,” Gladio replied. “King Regis has the forests protected until we can get more
trees growing though. He doesn’t want Lucis dependent on other countries forever.”

Turning to look at the trail they had been on, Prompto was intrigued to find he couldn't see where they had been. The path was totally unnoticeable and from where they were and no towns or rivers were in view either. To Prompto it felt they walked forever through the forest and when he looked up he could only see the dark green of the fir and pine trees stretched across the sky.

As darkness began to fall, Prompto was surprised Ignis didn’t stop them and instead pushed them towards a road which went through the forest, perfectly laid in geometric stones. He got a good look at them as Gladio made sure the way was clear before having them cross quickly back into the woods.

“Where does the road go?” Noctis asked Ignis.

“From Niflhiem’s capital city all the way to the main pass into the mountains.”

“But how did they lay it?” he wanted to know.

Instead of Ignis explaining, it was Loqi who spoke up. “Titan, the god of the earth. It was said he loved people enough to die for them by catching a falling star at the volcano, but before he did, Titan laid the road. He was a giant with one eye who also built the old walls and the castle in Niflhiem’s capital.” He seemed unfazed by the surprise and shrugged. “Don’t you guys know the stories?”

Noctis shook his head. “In Lucis, Titan is among the main six we worship, but he’s not as kind. The gods are more like myths we occasionally celebrate.” He paused thoughtfully before asking, “They don’t really believe Titan built their walls, do they?”

Prompto snorted, and said, “No more than you Lucians believe your own myths. It is what it is - a story to tell around a fire and an excuse to take a day off work.”

“You almost seem learned there for a second Prompto,” Loqi said with his eyebrows raised and Prompto shrugged. He didn’t care how he seemed to the others for the most part. As they continued on in the near pitch blackness of the night, a thought occurred to Prompto.

“Do other countries know there is more than one entrance into Niflhiem?” he asked, looking around like he expected someone to jump out at them any moment.

Laughing, Gladio clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, I already checked the way remember? But oh yeah totally. There are tons of entryways into any kingdom, but there’s just the one main way into Niflhiem, so if an army comes through they would know and be able to fight back immediately.”

Relieved, Prompto nodded and didn’t talk again. Twilight fell as they set up camp just off of the road and Ignis set about making dinner for them. While they ate, Prompto asked a question he had been thinking about since their earlier conversation. “Did Lucis convert to the main six after the invaders came or were they already practicing it before then?”

Noctis thought for a moment and said, “I think it was after. Tenebrae and Accordo followed suit after Lucis converted. My father says Niflhiem is foolish for not doing the same.”

“Why?”

“A country with too many gods is like a country with too many kings. No one knows who to be loyal to.”
Prompto huffed but kept his mouth shut and Noctis was quiet through the rest of the meal, something neither Ignis nor Gladio seemed to be worried about. They talked quietly between themselves about the best way to try and make up the time they had lost stopping for Prompto those first few days and he didn’t mention they would have gone much quicker if they had brought a cart for him instead of a chocobo.

“Does Niflhiem really have a god for everything?” Noctis asked during a lull in the conversation.

Ignis frowned. “Are you sure you want to learn about this when your father has specifically said he didn’t want to you?”

Noctis thought about it and shrugged. “I don’t think he wants me to worship them, but I don’t think he would object to an academic interest in it.”

Laughter exploded from Gladio and Prompto flinched at the sudden loud noise. “You? Academic interest?”

Noctis flushed ducking his head, saying, “I like learning, just not about ruling. I like learning about fish.” “Of course you do,” Gladio said laughing and Ignis had to hide a smile of his own before answering Noctis’s question.

“They have gods for many things - dreams, light, storms, fire. There is even a god of thieves.” He glanced at Prompto before continuing. “I believe the god of thievery was depicted as a short young man with blond hair and blue eyes. His name has been lost, but many thieves take names to mean ‘swift’ in honor of him and I believe the title of King’s Thief is hereditary in Niflhiem and that the current Thief is named something similar.”

Loqi snickered. “Maybe you’re related, Prompto. A cousin or something.” It would have been a kind statement if his voice wasn’t dripping with condescension.

Flushing bright red, Prompto spluttered, “All thieves are named in his honor,” and jumped up from the fire to stomp to his tent. Wrapped up in his blanket and willing to call it a day, he was unprepared for someone to slip inside shortly after him. Even less so when he realized it was Noctis settling down cross legged beside him.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why?” Prompto asked sitting up to mirror Noctis. He liked the others, but there was something about Noctis that made a rush of warmth travel through him whenever they were alone together. Prompto assumed this was what trust felt like.

Shrugging Noctis looked away. “I didn’t mean to bring up something that would end up with your feelings hurt. It wasn’t my intention.”

Prompto barely resisted the urge to shrug as well and said, “I’m kind of sensitive if you haven’t noticed. I’ll get over it.” It was quiet outside and he realized he couldn’t see the dim light of the fire through the canvas of the tent. “Did the others go to bed?”

Nodding, Noctis looked up. “They didn’t want to be out there with Loqi. Not when he’s acting as smug as a cat stretched out on his bedroll.” He looked suddenly bashful. “I hope you don’t mind, but I wanted to sleep in here with you. Gladio and Ignis needed some time to be together.”

“It’s fine if you sleep in here - wait.” Prompto made a face. “Gladio and Ignis need time together?”

Something guarded flashed across Noctis’s face and when he spoke next it was slowly, each word carefully chosen. “Gladio and Ignis have been together since they were teenagers, it is only natural
they would want to sleep together sometimes. I’m not sure how it is viewed in Tenebrae but in Lucis- Why are you laughing?”

“Dude, I wasn’t making a face because I thought it was weird, I was making a face because have you ever tried being intimate in a tent? I feel bad for Ignis’s back tomorrow morning. Honestly, I thought you were together.”

Noctis was taken aback and then he was laughing too. “I guess we aren’t as secretive as we thought. Yeah, we are all together. One day I will have to marry and Ignis and Gladio will still have each other.”

His voice grew sad and Prompto saw a side of Noctis he hadn’t seen before. He knew Noctis would be king, he had had suspicions he was in love with the others, he knew he loved fishing and he was secretly funny and sweet. Prompto hadn’t realized Noctis might just be as lonely as he was.

Noctis broke his line of thought with a quiet laugh and lowered his voice conspiratally, “You know one time back when I was twenty, my father took me on a fishing trip and Gladio and I had sex in my tent not even a few feet from where he slept.”

Prompto gasped and held a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud. The idea of doing something where his parents could have heard him was not a thought he would like to explore.

“I scraped my back on a rock and we couldn’t go to the physician to look at it until we got back to the castle the next day. My father teased me nonstop for slouching like a teenage boy the whole time we fished when in reality I was just in a lot of pain.”

It wasn’t the perfect topic to try to return to a relaxed mood, but it was something. Flopping back on his bedroll, Prompto groaned slightly. “I’m too old for this camping stuff. When do you think we can stay in an inn again?”

Noctis settled in beside him and laughed. “If you can convince Iggy to spend the money on a room then I will never doubt any of your abilities to ever again.”

“I wasn’t aware you were doubting them to begin with,” Prompto said. It was quiet and he was slipping off to sleep when Noctis spoke again.

“How old are you?”

Rolling over to face Noctis, Prompto stared unabashed at him before answering. “I don’t know. I guess about your age.”

Noctis’s eyebrows furrowed. “You don’t know how old you are?”

“No. Even my birthday isn’t my real one. My sister gave it to me.”

“I’m reminded daily that I know nothing of you,” Noctis said with a sigh. There wasn’t anything Prompto could say and in the following silence, Noctis closed his eyes.

Despite not having gotten much sleep the night before, Prompto stayed awake long enough to memorize the way Noctis’s eyelashes looked spread over his cheekbones and the curve of his lips.

Chapter End Notes
So, I would like to say that this chapter was a monster and hella long and is the longest so far, buuuut I just finished writing chapter six and that sucker is EVEN LONGER so hopefully you guys are okay with that!!

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter, and as always if you have read the books please do not spoil anything if you decide to comment!! I love all of you guys ;;;;;;; see you next time!!!
We Don’t Talk Enough, We Should Open Up

Chapter Summary

Prompoto thinks about boys, figures some things out, and also wants to throw himself off a mountain. If they get caught though he might actually die so there's that.

Chapter Notes

Short little note before the chapter!
Thank you to Mils; you are a doll, my concert buddy, an absolute unit of friendship.
Angie, thank you for watching every single 50 shades of grey with me and shit talking them with me and Teddy. I know it shattered your soul to be subjected to something so terrible. Teddy- my stars, my sun and moon. You mean so much to me <3
And finally, thank YOU! YES! YOU! The reader! I wouldn't be where I am now if it wasn't for your support and love.
Chapter Title is Harry Styles, Sign of the Times

See the end of the chapter for more notes

True to Prompto’s predictions, Loqi was smug as a cat the next morning. Camp was packed up quickly and Prompto kept all traces of his thoughts from his expression while they worked. Otherwise, conversations of why he looked like the sun shone only for him would spring into existence and Prompto wasn’t sure he could explain it himself.

It wasn’t the harsh teasing that Loqi delivered to him that had his emotions skittering to and fro like a feral cat. His mind wandered to the night before; the small amount of vulnerability Noctis showed him was strangely intimate in a way that he couldn’t describe. Given the chance, he would have gone to a physician and asked if he was dying, but since the closest thing to a physician they had was Ignis, that wasn’t an option. He wondered briefly if throwing himself off the mountain would be preferable.

Ever since he’d had his one stray thought of Ignis’ fingers, anytime he was close, Prompto had a near death battle to keep a blush from rising - and being around Gladio was just as bad. It was confusing as hell and they made it worse by only ever looking at him with barely there interest. They were kind, but hadn’t done anything for Prompto to feel this way.

By noon they reached the top of the mountain ridge and looked down at their decent. Head swimming and stomach clenching finally for a reason other than his companions, Prompto dug his feet in.

“I’m not going until we have lunch. I don’t feel like dying on an empty stomach,” he announced. He was flippant, but perfectly serious. Even when Gladio asked if they could go just a little longer, Prompto did not change his mind.

Ignis relented and as lunch was passed around, he asked Prompto if he was alright. His tone was light, his words tripping around his accent like a stone on water. Prompto almost wondered if true
concern was lacing it’s way into those words or if his desperate hopefulness was starting to color even the most mundane of questions.

Realizing that Ignis was pointedly waiting for an answer, he nodded and accepted the food given to him. “I’m fine.”

“You say that a lot and yet it’s hard to believe.” A smile tugged on Ignis’s lips and Prompto returned it, neither confirming nor denying his gentle accusation.

After lunch they continued their decent, Loqi in front of Prompto and Gladio behind. The food helped and Prompto comforted himself with the thought that if he did fall, at least he could take out Loqi on the way down.

There were no identifiable markers on their trail and Prompto wondered if Ignis had gotten them helplessly lost - though the idea seemed strange to him. Putting those thoughts aside, he followed those in front and trusted Ignis. Looking up, he realized there were trails higher above them on the sides of the mountain and felt a shiver of fear - which had nothing to do with heights - snake down his spine. The thought of being caught in Niflhiem with the Lucian prince and his retainers was not something he had planned for.

“Aren’t there better ways to get to wherever it is we are going?” Prompto called out, casting his eyes about as anxiety gnawed at his stomach.

“There are, but this way is less traveled and Ignis doesn’t want to be caught out in the open,” Gladio responded.

Gritting his teeth, Prompto glanced up once more. “I’m sure there are. Is there no way that anyone could see us from the forest?”

It was Loqi who answered, “Probably not.”

Snorting, Prompto shook his head. “A successful thief doesn't depend on probably.”

“A successful thief?” Loqi shot back, twisting just enough so Prompto could see the sharp smile sent his way. “How would you know?”

Prompto spent the rest of the trip down trying to purposely kick loose rocks at the back of Loqi’s head.

After a time, they came to a place where the ground was fairly even and Ignis stopped them for a break. Flopping down beside Gladio, Prompto used the man’s size to help block the blistering sun from view. Gladio laughed knowing what he was doing. Noctis settled on Gladio’s other side leaning his face up to the warmth.

“Hey, Gladio,” Noctis said dropping his voice down low. “Do you know where we are heading?”

Prompto perked up. He had assumed - wrongly so - everyone except him knew where they were going.

Humming, Gladio cast a look at Ignis. “Lucis is all I know. He won’t tell me anymore than that.”

When Prompto leaned forward to check Gladio’s face for once his expression matched his dark tone. Gladio was angry he wasn’t trusted with the information and Prompto didn’t blame him. Why all the secrecy? Unless they were afraid Prompto would somehow find out and take the Ring for himself? Settling back and narrowing his eyes he quickly discarded the thought; they had shown
they trusted him for whatever reason. There was only one person in this party they didn’t trust. The location was hidden but the reason why was known to everyone, Prompto mused silently.

“Why did my father send all three of us on this mission and not just Ignis or you?” Noctis grumbled.

Rubbing the scruff on his jaw, Gladio took his time answering. “I feel the most simple reason is this is a learning experience for you and I am needed to protect you. A more complicated answer, and the one I think is right, is King Regis believed it would be easier to convince Ardyn to hand over the documents if you were there.”

They rested until they felt well enough to continue scrambling down. Loqi dropped behind Prompto, ending any attempt to kick rocks at his head. Somehow Prompto ended up walking beside Noctis as the trail grew wider. Finding that he didn’t ‘mind was a small shock, nothing worth voicing, but something to think about later that night when he went to sleep.

They walked in companionable silence, giving Prompto a feel of what that meant. He had never had someone to walk beside in such a way and was about to start likening the feeling to a curling up in a thick blanket with a warm drink when Noctis spoke.“Were you really named after the god of thieves?”

“I am, yes,” Prompto replied, confused by his line of thinking. Out of everything to talk about, why would Noctis want to talk about him?

“Huh.” Noctis seemed stumped, as if he hadn’t expected such an easy answer. Then he blinked and continued as if he hadn’t spent the last five seconds in disbelief. “How did your parents know what you were going to be when you were born?”

“How did your parents know what you were going to be when you were a baby?”

“My father is a king,” Noctis said wrinkling his nose, not looking forward to the role he would one day fill.

Prompto cocked his head. “And my mother was a thief,” he said easily.

“So you just grew up being what they expected you to be?”

Chewing his lip, Prompto thought best on how to reply. “I suppose, but my father wanted me to be a soldier too. He was always incredibly angry at me for it. My mother had hoped for something better for me as well, I think.” He hesitated then added after a beat, “I’m something of a disappointment to everyone.”

Behind them Loqi made a sound, probably agreeing with his father’s disappointment.

“Your father wanted you to be a soldier too?”

Prompto eyed Noctis who had gone carefully blank faced, though he retained enough expression to appear interested. “Are you surprised I knew my father well?”

Red to the tips of his ears, Noctis tried to find a way to justify himself, but Prompto only laughed and held onto him as he lost his footing.

“I knew my mother and my father. They raised me together until I was kicked out,” he explained. Noctis looked like he wanted the ground to swallow him and Prompto laughed again. “It’s ok Noct, it’s easy to assume I was illegitimate because of my past. Well, easy for someone who jumps to conclusions based on not a lot of information anyways,” he teased.
“What about your sister?” Noctis asked, pointedly looking where he set his feet.

Waving his hand dismissively Prompto said, “She’s not my actual sister. She just took me in after my father kicked me out.”

An inscrutable expression crossed Noctis’s face and his steps faltered as his gaze hardened. Prompto wondered what he was thinking about, and stayed silent to allow him the space he needed. Noctis flicked his gaze at him occasionally but didn’t speak again until they had slipped down the shoal a few more times. Whatever he had been thinking about so intensely was no longer present on his face as he began again conversationally, “So, where is your sister now?”

Prompto hummed and wistfully said, “She’s at home, probably wondering where I am.”

“Will you go home to her when you are done with us?”

Prompto nodded without hesitation. “Absolutely. I’ve been gone too long.” He didn’t add that she didn’t know he had been thrown in jail or he was now tramping across Niflhiem with some of the most important people in Lucis. He wondered what she would think once he told her everything that had happened. She would probably scold him, but be impressed nonetheless Prompto realized with a small amount of pride.

As they descended down the mountain, the valley below came into view. It had been eroded by a spring not large enough to call a river, but Prompto found the sound of it relaxing. Lucis stretched before them and to the left was the ocean, a constant on the horizon.

“Home has never looked so beautiful,” Noctis murmured and Prompto stared at the soft look on his face.

“How long have you been away?”

“A few months. We stayed in Tenebrae to visit Luna and make the plans for this trip. It took a lot of convincing before Ardyn agreed to hand over the documents. We aren’t sure what changed his mind, one day he came to us and just gave them to Ignis. We left a few days later.”

Prompto peered at Noctis curiously hoping he would elaborate, but when nothing came forward he asked, “Luna?”

Grunting as his foot slipped again, Noctis regained his balance and panted. “Childhood friend. Ward of Ardyn.”

He had heard the king had a ward but rumor was he had planned to either marry her himself or use her as a political pawn. Prompto had never seen her, but he had heard many men pledging their lives to her. “Have you been betrothed to her?”

A black look overtook Noctis’s features and when he spoke his words were biting. “If marrying Luna would save her from Ardyn I would be. But since marrying her would only bring him into my country, so far we have held him off.” Sighing bitterly, Noctis’s next words were without heat and his voice was so soft Prompto almost didn’t hear. “For how long though, I’m not sure.”

Giving a weak grin, Prompto wished he could do more for him. The smile Noctis sent back was tight, but it was twinged with hope.

That night, under the neverending expanse of stars and tree branches clawing at the sky, dinner was a quiet affair. Everyone seemed content to enjoy what Ignis had made and no attempt at conversations were made. When Prompto was alone, silence didn’t bother him - it was a part of his
job and had been a part of his life for so long he didn’t know any better. Silence in the company of others had him shifting restlessly, waiting for someone to suddenly get angry, to throw something. It had never been a good thing in his experience and the memories building up had him pulling at the bandages around his wrist.

It seemed to strike Gladio the same time as Prompto that they had not had the chance to look at his wrist that day or the day before. Guilt was heavy in the air as his wrist was undressed and Prompto tried to smile and ease the expression off Gladio’s face.

When his smile did nothing for the tightness by Gladio’s eyes, Prompto said softly, “It’s my wrists, I could have said something.”

Gladio grunted and eyed the mess with hard eyes. “I should have remembered.” Scowling, he rummaged around for new bandages and salve.

Something heavy settled in Prompto’s stomach - the familiar feeling of fear, something he had never wanted to associate with Gladio. Resisting the urge to pull his wrist back, Prompto sat still, hardly daring to breathe or take his eyes off of him while he worked. The second Gladio wrapped his wrist again, Prompto scrambled away to sit near Noctis, who nudged him.

“You ok?”

“Peachy.” He hoped his voice wouldn’t betray him and looked pointedly anywhere except at Noctis, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself as he tried to examine the situation, feelings aside. Gladio was a man who took his job seriously - protecting Noctis would come before anything else. He was intense about the things he cared about, a thought which had Prompto frowning. Was he angry because he felt he failed Prompto? The thought was dizzying and Prompto closed his eyes to process.

He opened them again when he heard Loqi ask, “Is Lucis always this green?”.

“Lucis receives the most rain on this side of the world, with the only exception of Cleigne. The rainfall is the reason that Lucis has some of the most profitable harvests and why other countries depend on us for trade,” Ignis explained. His expression didn’t change but Prompto like to pretend that he knew enough about the men he was with to recognize the tightness around Ignis’s mouth and the way his voice had a certain disinterested tone.

But then Noctis was asking something, and to Prompto’s surprise it was directed to Loqi. “Things in Tenebrae are pretty green though, right?”

“It’s only really green during the spring and early months of summer. It gets hot after that and everything turns more golden as it turns to fall. Lucis is more green than Niflhiem during this time of year as well.”

“Have you spent a lot of time in Niflhiem?” Gladio asked.

Loqi’s face fell carefully blank and his voice was neutral as he said, “I lived there for eighteen years.”

Prompto listened with interest as the others expressed the same surprise he felt.

“How did you end up in Tenebrae?” Noctis asked leaning forward, his eyes wide. Niflhiem was such a closed off country that a native who was not a trader out in another country was almost unheard of. Someone leaving their own country to serve another was not done.
Pursing his lips, Loqi took his time answering. “I thought there was something I needed to do here and I just never left.” It answered nothing and everything. Some things about him were slowly making sense and suspicions Prompto had about him were becoming clear as day. It wasn’t long after that the realization that he had been too hasty to write him off so quick in the beginning of their trip came to him.

That night Prompto slept lightly for the first time since leaving prison. He opened his eyes at the sound of someone moving around and poked his head out of his tent to see Loqi slipping away from camp, turning towards the mountain they had just climbed and for a long time watching with an unwavering gaze. Prompto ducked back into the tent and curled in around himself as he settled down next to Ignis. He understood the feeling of homesickness well. Laying awake for a long time after, he slowly put his experiences with Loqi with what he knew about him, trying to form a singular man out of the two people presented to him. Finding it near impossible, Prompto rolled over and fell asleep to the sounds of Ignis’s soft breathing.

In the morning, they finished off the rest of their food. The bread was stale and rock hard, eating it was near impossible.

Prompto looked at it with disgust and when Ignis saw, he laughed. “Don’t worry, we’ll be picking up more food later.”

“How soon is later?”

Ignis pointed down the valley to a break in the trees. “Can you see the rooftops of the houses up above?” By Prompto’s estimation there were a few hours of travel between them and the tile roofs in the distance. “We will get lunch there.”

“Then the birds can have the rest of my breakfast.” Prompto pitched his bread away from their campsite, everyone else following suit with the exception of Gladio who shrugged and said he had eaten worse.

They began walking soon after and found themselves being slowly closed in by the sides of the cliff again. Even as the morning dragged by, the air was unbearably hot and it didn’t take long for Gladio to shed his shirt. The laces of everyone else's shirts were loosened, no one quite willing to undress to the same degree of Gladio. The path was just as slippery and unforgiving as it was the day before and it wasn’t long before part of the path dropped sharply off to shelf about eight feet below the top of the cliff.

Prompto flexed his knees and jumped without hesitation. Behind him he heard shocked cries and when heads popped over the cliff he gave a weak wave. Noctis jumped not a moment later, almost knocking him down, but Prompto steadied him while Noctis looked over him with roving eyes.

“Are you ok? Hurt anywhere?” he asked, clearly flabbergasted by his actions.

Prompto gave a thumbs up and put his hands on his knees, breathing deeply. “Not the biggest fan of heights.”

That gave Noctis a pause. “Why did you jump?”

Prom shrugged. “Gotta do what you gotta do.”

The others were landing beside them before Prompto got his nausea under control and although he was sure that they would wait if he asked, he wanted this over with. They continued down the path, Prompto sending up a quick prayer that they wouldn’t need to jump again.
"Are you sure there isn’t an easier way to get down, right?" Loqi called up from the back of the line. Prompto could see Ignis debating on whether or not he should answer, but the ever polite delegate side of him won in the end.

"There is an easier way, but if we are caught that would take a lot more explaining and time than we have," Ignis explained wearily.

"Wait, so what would happen if we were caught in Lucis?" Prompto asked.

Gladio hummed thoughtfully, scratching his scruff. "You two are obviously not Lucian with your pale complexion so we would probably be taken in. Lucis is big, not many people actually know what the king and Noct look like. So if we told them who we were, we would lose a lot of time finding someone to take our word."

"That’s putting it positively," Noctis interrupted. "There’s also the chance that we get executed for impersonating the royal family."

Prompto rubbed his neck and decided he liked the feeling of it attached to his head too much to let them get caught.

They continued on as fast as they could safely. Prompto’s prayers went unanswered as the path switched back and forth between across the cliff, dropping five feet down with each sharp end.

"Oh there are easier ways to get down, I’m sure. Give me an hour out here and I would find it," Prompto grumbled and he swore loudly as his foot slipped. Regaining his balance was easy enough, but he swore again as he hit his wrist on the outcropping.

Despite his near death experience, Prompto was still the first one down the cliff. Picking his way through the rubble at the bottom, he leaned against a large boulder to catch his breath. He wanted to go behind the rock and fall apart quietly, but Loqi had been in a somewhat good mood for the past few days and Prompto had been in a somewhat good mood for the next few days and Prompto was not going to ruin that for a few seconds of privacy. Sinking down to the rocky ground, he let out a shaky breath and watched the progress of the others. It was slow going, Noctis looked like he wanted to just jump down like Prompto had and only Ignis’s sharp words were stopping him.

Finally down on solid, miraculously flat land, Noctis beelined for Prompto’s side. "Are you ok? Do you need a minute?"

Prompto waved a hand in a general ‘it’s fine’ gesture in lieu of answering.

Ignis waited a beat to see if he would elaborate, and when he didn’t, turned to the path that lead to the town he had pointed out hours before. “I’m going into Lestallum to rent some chocobos and buy lunch. Stay and rest here.”

"I thought you said that if we were caught we would be executed or something," Prompto argued, already surging to his feet, but Gladio reached over and plucked his sleeve, laughing.

Ignis gave a fond smile, sending waves of fluttering through Prompto’s stomach. Flushing, Prompto wriggled out of Gladio’s grip.

"If we are caught with you, then it would take a lot of explaining. Which would lead to us explaining that we are royalty, which would then lead to a series of unfortunate events. No, I will be fine on my own," Ignis explained and with a lingering look at Gladio and Noctis, he left without another word.

Opening up his pack, Gladio said, “No point in wasting the time that we have,” and pulled out two
wooden swords - heavy things he made look light as a feather pillow as he tossed one to Noctis. Prompto wanted to argue that Ignis’s accent would set him apart from any other Lucian but kept his mouth shut in favor of watching the two men square up. Remembering the dream back in the little house, he realized it was more reality than he thought.

Gladio and Noctis flung themselves at each other with intensity he didn’t think possible, not with the long climb down they had just done. Watching in interest, Prompto noticed that in skill, Gladio was better. He had the added advantage of height and possibly years of training on Noctis - though it was easy to see that Noctis would be a deadly opponent if he focussed on the task at hand. It was obvious the drills they went through were familiar, though Noctis’s mind was elsewhere and barely paid attention until Gladio caught him in the thigh with a sharp rap.

“Are you alright?” Gladio asked, hefting the sword over his shoulder.

Noctis glared at the ground, rubbing his thigh. “I’ll live.”

Satisfied with the answer, Gladio made him practice a block until it would come naturally to him.

“He’s good,” Loqi said quietly.

Prompto felt the corners of his lips quirk up. “Which one?”

“Noctis,” he replied then went into an in depth lecture about the way Noctis fought. It was strange to see the man so animated and talking about something that was a passion for him. Underneath Loqi’s pride, Prompto couldn’t help but feel that there might be a reason to like him after all.

Eventually Gladio signaled for them to stop and put their swords away. Prompto noted that each of their packs had a secret pocket sewn on the inside, big enough to hold a practice sword and a real short sword inside. Momentarily reassured that they had not come into the wilderness with only the large sword Gladio wore strapped to his back and Loqi’s sword, Prompto’s relief faded when he wondered who would watch his back if it came to a fight. He also wondered if hidden away in one of the bags was a gun. On political business such as they were, the Lucians would be permitted to use them, but somehow Prompto couldn’t see any of these men being able to wield something so finicky and hard to aim.

There was still time before Ignis returned, so while the three of them talked about strategy and fighting tips, Prompto laid back in the grass with his eyes closed. He listened to how the hesitation that the Lucians had talking to Loqi about technique faded after a few minutes when Loqi threw himself into the conversation.

A soft breeze blew the grass in whispers and the soil under his fingers was soft powder, shifting comfortably. The only other sound besides the conversation and wind was the distant sounds of chocobos getting closer. He cracked an eye open as they got closer, only to think last second it may be a stranger and not Ignis at all. Leaping to his feet, he tensed just as Ignis came into view with an amused smile.

“It’s just me, no worries.”

Fixing him with a flat look, Prompto dryly said, “Since getting caught would put my head on the line, I think I will worry thank you.”

Ignis laughed and briefly, all sass was forgotten as Prompto fixated on the sound and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, transforming his entire expression. Prompto fought a blush and pointedly looked away only to meet Noctis’s intense gaze. Out of the frying pan and into the fire
and his face was erupting into flames. Noctis’s face was carefully blank and Prompto found himself desperately wishing he knew what he was thinking.

Oblivious to his sudden discomfort, Ignis and Gladio were discussing how to best proceed. Eventually it was decided they would ride on until they reached the main road until night fell. With the moon lighting their way, they would be able to continue onwards until they were too tired. When it was announced they would eat in the saddle, Prompto inwardly groaned. Riding and eating was too hard for him to do. He hoped he would have enough energy to eat when they stopped for the night.

Distractedly helping pack up their camp, he jumped when Noctis sidled up to him.

“Lets sleep together tonight,” he said, voice pitched low. Prompto immediately choked.

Noctis rolled his eyes before saying, “Sleep in the tent together, tonight was Gladio’s night but I have something I want to talk to you about.”

Relief flooded Prompto’s sense and he nodded weakly. “GOTCHA, um, what did you want to talk about?” he asked, but Noctis merely fixed him with another look before going to help Ignis with the provisions he had bought. If Prompto thought he was tired before, the extra dramatics given by Noctis brought him to a new level. Squinting his eyes as if to help see through that dense skull of his, Prompto hissed, “What does that even mean? Why are you like this?” No one heard his frustrated whispers and for the time being, he went unanswered.

Mounting their chocobos, they headed out and Prompto bounced along, trying to get used to the feeling of riding again. He worried about being seen so close to the road and wished for a cloak to hide his hair and fair skin. It would be too hot and even more suspicious, but at least it was a form of security. If Loqi felt the same, his expression betrayed nothing.

The thought of whatever Noctis wanted to talk about hung heavy on Prompto’s mind as twilight fell. Disappointment was another factor to his mood as they rode around the town Ignis had mentioned before, as he had been hoping to see actual civilization at some point in this trip. They rode on past the point of exhaustion, Prompto desperately trying to cling onto his chocobo, and as the moon was dipping below the horizon Ignis signalled for them to stop.

There was no fire that night, but Prompto couldn’t find it in himself to care. He wearily helped set up the tents and crawled in as soon as he was handed his bedroll. The talk Noctis wanted to have flickered at the edges of his consciousness and he tried desperately to stay awake until Noctis joined him.

When he did, Noctis curled up at his back with a tired mumble of “We can talk tomorrow.” Prompto fell asleep to the warm puffs of breath on the back of his neck, a feeling he was unaccustomed to, but found he didn’t mind.

The next morning was another quiet one and while waking to a chilled dawn was nothing new, having arms entwined around his waist was not something he dealt with often. Resisting the immediate urge to struggle from the grasp, he tensed and tried to remember where he was and who was in his bed. Memories came back slowly through the faze of his sleep deprived mind, and he relaxed into Noctis’s arms with a soft sigh of relief.

“You awake?” came a murmur against his neck.

Prompto hummed and sat up, shaking his hair from his eyes. Reaching for the twine he shoved in his pocket the day before, he pulled his hair back up.
“Do you want to have this talk now?” Prompto asked. It was only Noctis and yet butterflies swarmed his stomach like making a permanent home there was the best idea they’d had all day.

Noctis sat up, attempting to blink the sleep from his eyes. “I guess yeah.” He yawned and shook his head before continuing, “I just have a quick question to be honest, do you li-”

A sudden cold draft blew through the tent and they jumped, looking towards the door of the tent which Gladio was holding open. “Do you plan on sitting in here gossiping forever or are you actually going to come out and help us pack up?”

Exchanging guilty looks, they shuffled out of the tent for some quick breakfast before packing up. He was still nervous, but now Prompto was a little desperate to know where Noctis had been going with his question.

Regardless, the day passed them by and they traveled at a quick pace, promising to have them falling into their bed rolls equally exhausted that night. Whatever had happened between Gladio and Loqi the day before during his nap persisted and they chatted like old friends around the fire about fights they had been in. Noctis and Prompto excused themselves and although Ignis didn’t miss the way Noctis stuck to Prompto’s side as they slide into the tent, he kept any opinions he had to himself.

Fidgeting where he sat, Noctis’s eyes darted around the tent until they settled on Prompto’s hands which were clenched in his lap as he willed himself to steady his breathing. This was only Noctis, only a talk, but panicked thoughts made themselves known by the quickening of his heart. It had occurred to Prompto late in the afternoon this talk could be because Noctis knew something the others did not - a thought which sent hot waves of anxiety through him and he braced himself for the words which never came.

“How do you like Ignis?”

Startled laughter burst from Prompto’s lips and he quickly clapped a hand over his mouth to smother them. “What?” he choked out, sure there was some way he misheard him. When Noctis only stared back, Prompto laughed again. It took him a few minutes to settle down enough to take the question seriously, and when he did he found that the complicated feelings from before hadn’t faded any. “I don’t know, to tell you the truth.”

Noctis raised his brows, painting the picture of patience, except for the twitching of his hands giving him away. This was, without a doubt, the most awkward conversation Prompto had ever been apart of and yet he was dizzy with relief not to be having the conversation he thought he would be having. So he sucked in a breath, pushed it out in one go and said, “I think you’re all madenly attractive, but I’ve never really…” He trailed off, only uncomfortable with his own inexperience and uncertainty.

A whoosh of air escaped Noctis’s lungs and he gripped his knees hard enough to turn his knuckles white. “You’ve never.” He broke off, a small laugh escaping and Prompto tilted his head thoroughly confused with how this conversation was going. “I need to talk to Ignis.” Noctis scrambled to his feet, kicking up his bedroll as he went.

Shooting a hand out to catch him, Prompto looked at him with wide eyes. “Please don’t tell him what I said. I was just going to quietly crush on all of you, I don’t need someone killing me over this.”

Noctis laughed but settled back down. “I don’t think they would kill you, they already care too much about you. Ignis is obsessed with feeding you until you gain weight.”
Offended, Prompto looked down at his stomach. “My weight is good for a thief.”

Eyebrows shooting up, Noctis had the gall to look amused. “Is it now? Tell me, when you counted your ribs last how many did you count before the number was too high?”

Prompto sniffed in contempt, but a smile was tugging at the edges of his lips. “How did you know anyways?” When Noctis’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion, Prompto elaborated with an embarrassed wave of his hand. “That I think you are attractive.”

Scoffing, Noctis gave him a warm smile and said, “A dead person would be able to tell. You’ve been walking around with lovesick eyes for days.”

Snorting, Prompto settled down on his blankets. “I don’t make eyes at anyone.”

Noctis laughed and settled behind him in the spot he had been occupying for the past few days. Prompto sank into the warmth sleepily. “Tomorrow we can talk for real about what this means,” Noctis mumbled, already yawning. Prompto hummed an answer and let it go.

He fell asleep, warm and happy, feeling for once the gods had answered one of his prayers, even if he wasn’t sure which one it was yet. His dreams dared to challenge that happiness, sinking him deep into the cell with the door which creaked open once the sun set and the burn of the whip upon his back. He could taste blood in his mouth and a face looming over his while he panted and pleaded for mercy.

When Prompto woke up, strangled breath catching in his throat only adding to his fear. He felt too hot and stuffy inside the tent in Noctis’s arms, it felt too much like the other times he had found himself in the arms of lovers who did anything but love. Recoiling from the embrace, Prompto threw himself out of the tent, gulping in huge lungfuls of air.

“Prompto?”

Whipping to the source of the voice, Prompto immediately dropped his eyes once he realized both Gladio and Loqi were still sitting by the dimming fire. Just what he needed - an audience. They had already seen and the idea of sleep was now a thousand years away, so he made his way to the two men and settled between them.

“Bad dream?” Gladio prompted.

Eyes flicking towards Loqi, Prompto shrugged. “Maybe.” Something dark passed over Gladio’s face and he knew in the tense silence that followed any form of camaraderie which had been forming was quickly being destroyed.

“I know what you did for me,” he said, watching Loqi for any sign he should stop talking. There was none and Gladio was interested, hesitantly so.

“Loqi was the only one who beat me except for that first time,” Prompto explained. Seeing the glare Gladio shot Loqi, he was quick to continue, “I know it sounds bad but it was kindness. You can’t tell me any different. You did it so no one else could do it harder or kill me.” Loqi tilted his head in a silent admission and Prompto smiled. “Thank you. It still hurt like hell, but you saved my life.”

Frowning, Gladio stirred the embers with a long stick. “But why would you do that?”

Staring back evenly, Loqi said, “I am not from Tenebrae. I do not enjoy being needlessly cruel, but I do have my orders and if I wish to live I need to make sure he remembers his own rules. I remind
him of the price on his head and who is after him.”

“I don’t like it,” Gladio replied.

Prompto laughed and clasped his hands tightly, eyes burning into the dying embers. “There is only one person enjoying this game, and I assure you he is not at this campsite tonight.”

Nodding Loqi said, “No, but agents of his will have followed us and will be reporting everything.” He fixed Prompto with a look. “So for gods’ sake, do what I say or you will have us both killed.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter!! I'm heading out of town this weekend to go see the Final Fantasy Distant Worlds concert and I AM SO EXCITED! Chapter six is already done and y'all are in for a RIDE. It's easily my favorite chapter by far (even if writing it made me want to throw my laptop through a window) I'll see you in the next update! And again, thank you thank you thank you for all your comments and kudos. You guys are the sweetest. Please, hit me up tumblr! My name is Prrrrmm there too!
Everyone Makes Mistakes, Am I Mistaken For the Way I Carry On?

Chapter Summary

Much is learned about everyone, both good and bad. Even when Prompto has good luck, his bad luck is far, far worse though.

Chapter Notes

#YIKES
Y'all, this update has taken so long and I'm so sorry ;;;; After the concert I had a lot of bad days and then life just got in the way and poor Mils was so busy so we didn't actually finish editing this chapter until last night!!
The good news is, I have chapter 7 already done. We just have to find the time to edit that for you guys! Also can I just say, THIS IS THE LONGEST CHAPTER OMG Warning, this chapter has some violence in it towards the end!
Anyways- thank you so much Mils for your constant support and listening to me vent these past few weeks. ilu
Chapter title comes from &Run by Sir.Sly and K.Flray

In the warm golden glow of the morning sun, the truthfulness of the dark seemed strange and far away. No matter how far away it seemed though, it did happen and the knowledge that someone else knew some of his innermost thoughts was terrifying.

The temptation to run- to leave everything behind- pulled him stronger than Prompto had ever experienced. But when he saw the quirk of Noctis’s lips turned his way, some of his trepidation died. In its place grew a longing that pulsed in time with the beat of his heart and Prompto was surprised that it hurt. As they bathed in the river close to the campsite, there was an urge to do something, anything. He didn’t know if he wanted to throw himself at Noctis and the others or if he needed a pillow to scream into; to sit very still and disappear from this world or pace like a cat in a cage. It was hard, to have someone open up when it was expected of him in return. There were so many wants in him that Prompto forced himself not to act on any of them, if only to give him time to pick apart his brain and figure out what was wrong with him.

Everything about Prompto was a lie - a well constructed lie which had held firm for the past fifteen years. He wondered idly as he washed himself if he looked any different to the others. He definitely felt different. The talk with Gladio and Loqi before crawling back into his tent saw to that. Knowing that the members of his group were banding together gave him peace of mind and helped reassure him that things might be alright. After Loqi had given him the warning that there would undoubtedly be someone watching them, Gladio had sworn to protect him. What could a shield do against the might of another king? Still, the thought that someone had his back was a kindness that he had rarely been shown.

Light poured into his heart, butterflies chased each other in his stomach, and his legs felt like soup,
but underneath these feelings were the dark, hideous doubts that came raring and ready to fight. There was no way that Noctis had told him the truth; it was both an impossible and improbable situation. Shaking his thoughts and water from his hair, Prompto paused to sneak a glance at him. He hadn’t sensed a lie the night before and Noctis hadn’t been anything but truthful since they met, but doubt lingered, brushing deceitful fingers through his thoughts.

Noctis had taken his shirt off for his bath and Prompto saw at once the deep, twisting scar he had mentioned before he forced himself to stop staring and went back to washing where his clothes did not cover. He didn’t want to make Noctis regret taking his shirt off in front of him, knew personally the level of trust that took. Gladio and Ignis had already bathed and were drying in the morning sunlight, giving Gladio’s skin the glow of a god and catching on Ignis’s hair seemed like spun gold. Even Noctis, dripping and teeth chattering in the cold water, was breathtakingly beautiful.

Prompto’s sister had once told him that life is all the little in between the big things. A simple existence is just as worthy a life to live as one that a king lives. It was easy to take things for granted, especially the beautiful things that one would have to look for. As Prompto dried off with an offered cloth, he wondered what kind of life anyone would have to lead to be amazed by everything life had to offer. It was a perfect summer morning and Prompto intended on shoving all of his feelings aside to live for the moment.

Good feelings between Loqi and Gladio persisted through breakfast and Prompto was pleased. If Loqi was in a good mood, then he would stay off of his back leaving more time to talk to Noctis. He wondered about what Noctis had said, endlessly. The more he wondered about it, the more he thought of his own experiences with lovers.

Prompto had never been with someone in the way that his companions were involved. He had needs and wants that he took care of - one night stands which never evolved into something more. He wasn’t even sure he was capable of more than that or if he was wanted in the way that he now ached and longed for. Waking up in Noctis’s arms again that morning had set his heart aflame, and he wondered how long it would take before someone who was used to getting everything, grew bored of him. Prompto firmly shoved that thought back again. He was going to enjoy this, for however short lived it would be.

He was pulled away from his meal when Gladio started asking Loqi more personal questions. “Are you afraid of Cor because you are from Niflhiem?”

Loqi stiffened where he sat and he wasn’t the only one. Prompto shot a look over at him trying to gauge his reaction - most from Niflhiem had a deep rooted hatred for Cor the Immortal. Loqi it seemed was no different.

“I am not afraid - I hate him, there is a large difference.”

“He is regarded as something of a hero in our country,” Ignis remarked mildly.

“Not in mine and not to me. He killed my father,” Loqi snapped, eyes burning as he glared. “I cannot change my past anymore than you can, but I do not plan on letting it rule my life. I have put it behind me.” He pushed away from his seat and stomped to a quiet spot beside the river.

They let him go and Prompto found himself staring at Loqi’s back, wondering what else he would find out about this man on their trip. His opinion of Loqi was changing daily and he wasn’t sure what to think about that. Right now, he held the firm belief that the man was an idiot. He should have just lied, rather than stir up trouble when everything was going so well.
“Loqi’s father was part of the Tummelt conspiracy?” Noctis asked quietly. Gladio and Ignis shook their heads, shocked by the turn of events. They flicked each other a lightning fast look that held a thousand conversations not meant for his eyes. Prompto quickly turned to stare back at Loqi, chess board pieces moving into play as he tried to imagine what Ardyn was trying to accomplish with such actions.

The Tummelt conspiracy was widely known, though not often spoke of. Noctis was a child when he and his retinue had been ambushed on the road by a group of Tummelt followers, hellbent on destroying the country of Lucis while the prince was still young. Prompto had been around the same age at the time and remembered hearing snatches of conversations, floating out of opened windows as he passed below - whispers of Cor the Immortal destroying the Tummelts in a devastating blow. Loqi hadn’t moved. Was he waiting for them to pass judgment on him?

Suddenly the horrible cruelty of the situation was clear to him. This knowledge was a good way to constantly put them at odds with each other- making any sort of friendships nonexistent. Without trust, where would that leave them?

If Ardyn had known whose family Loqi belonged to, sending him was a way to get him killed by Gladio or Noct himself and an easy call for war. The Tummelts were still an important family line, no matter how far it had fallen, and if Loqi had surrendered himself to Tenebrae like he had said, then his death would be an act of war to Tenebrae. Loqi was just as much in the Lucians mercy as Prompto was. Surprisingly, this knowledge did not help him feel better at all.

Something clicked into place and it left Prompto speechless, if only for a moment. His brows knitted together as more and more things began to make sense.

“If you had known, would you had let him come?” he whispered lowly, studying Noctis’s face intently. “The Lucian family never formally accepted Niflheim apology, did they?”

Noctis was pale, his mouth set in a firm line. The crease between his eyes was deeper than Prompto had ever seen and he resisted the urge to brush it away. Slowly Noctis shook his head. “I don’t know. He wasn’t the one who attacked me” Taking a shuddering breath, Noctis lowered his head in his hands, gripping his hair like a lifeline. “We were ordered if we ever found someone who hadn’t been turned in to finish the job.”

“But that isn’t you Noct, you wouldn’t do something to someone who didn’t even take part of the attack, would you?” Prompto pressed, searching his expression for any clue of what he was thinking.

Noctis stayed silent for so long that icy cold fear began to snake into his stomach and chest. Had he really been so wrong about Noctis? The water rushing through the river was a harsh reminder Prompto had only just come to the decision to hold the things of beauty close when all of this happened. Then, Noctis looked up and met his eyes with an indecipherable look. “I am not here for revenge. I am doing this quest to bring peace between three countries that could eventually turn to war. I just…” he trailed off, breaking eye contact from Prompto to look at Loqi standing stiffly at the water's edge. “I never thought I would be faced with such a decisions before I am even king. I wonder what my dad would do if he knew.”

It was hard to see him so lost between duty and what he felt in his heart. Loqi’s back was still turned to them, a clear sign that he was waiting for them to make their decision. Glaring at his lap wasn’t going to help, but until Noctis needed him he was going to stay by his side. Ignis laid a hand on Prompto’s shoulder with a soft approving expression, patting his shoulder once before kneeling down in front of Noctis. Not for the first time, it painted a picture of unending patience for his prince. Lost in his own thoughts, Noctis didn’t so much as lean into the offered emotional support.
Gladio went to Loqi, standing a ways off. It was nothing more than an offer of peace and comfort should it be needed, but it was enough. The rigid line of Loqi’s back relaxed enough that Gladio came closer, voice pitched too low to hear. It wasn’t the first time that Prompto had noticed his gift for putting others at ease with nothing more than a few words. Looking over at Noctis, he wished desperately for that ability as well. With no words to offer, he sat dejectedly.

“Noct, if we are to continue I need to know that this isn’t going to be a resentment that will put our party at odds.”

Taking a steadying breath, Noctis stood up. “There is nothing about the past that we can change, the only thing we can do is move onwards. I can’t think of what Ardyn’s goal was by doing this, unless he didn’t know, but I honestly just want to get this done now. I want to be home.”

Ignis nodded and looked like he wanted to say more, but with the approach of Gladio and Loqi he kept it to himself. They packed up the campsite with an efficiency that came from experience, but it lacked the usual light feel that Prompto had begun to associate with it. The feeling in the air had his shoulders aching with tension and he kept his eyes down. A life of bearing the brunt of most frustrations had his heart racing, body preparing for a blow that never came. When he dropped a bag, he flinched so hard that every eye was on him and a thousand apologies came to his tongue, but before he could get them out, Ignis was there with a strained smile and a steady hand to help him.

Murmuring his thanks, Prompto felt the iron band around his chest lessen enough that he was able to take his first full breath in an hour. Once they were packed, the silence stretched onward and it settled over the group as they walked towards the next town.

Looking around at the trees gave Prompto an idea - a stupid idea, but an idea nonetheless. “Did you know that stress can make trees stronger?” he asked.

“Oh?” Noctis replied half heartedly, but it was enough encouragement for Prompto.

“There’s something about the way when the wind hits the trees, it causes the bark to get thicker to protect the tree better,” he said gesturing around at the forest surrounding them.

Noctis’s lip quirked up in amusement, “Why do you even know something like that?”

“Well it is better, of course, to know useless things than to know nothing.” Prompto replied with a laugh. His laughter died when he saw that Noctis was regarding him curiously. “What?”

“You know Seneca?”

Prompto froze, he hadn’t expected Noctis to recognize who he had quoted. Kicking himself internally, he wanted to throw himself off the mountain - of course he would know a famous philosopher, he probably had tutors who drilled him continuously. Finding his voice he said, “He was popular with the elders where I lived, how do you know of him?” He hoped in vain his deflection would work and the spotlight would stay off of him.

Ignis had been walking in front of them, but upon hearing their conversation, stopped to walk beside Prompto. The path through the woods wouldn’t have been wide enough the day before, but the closer to their next stop they got, the more space they had to spread out. Looking up at Ignis in a mixture of confusion and panic, Prompto wondered what would happen if he had given anything about himself away with such an obscure reference.

“Interesting choice of conversation for people from such a poor place,” Ignis remarked coolly.
Shrugging in an attempt to hide his growing panic Prompto said, “Poor in economy and rich in
conversation?”

Nodding, Ignis considered him before looking ahead at the path thoughtfully. “That’s true I
suppose, what other philosophers do you know of? I’m particularly fond of the thoughts of-”

Noctis interrupted before Ignis could continue, desperation to derail him almost enough to make
Prompto laugh as he said, “Ignis made me read him, that’s why I’ve heard of him too. So you like
lame jokes, that’s cool. What else do you like?”

“I like drawing,” Prompto said and hid a smile at their surprise. People usually reacted like that,
trying to imagine someone like him sitting still and quiet. “I like to capture the moment, drawing is
a way to do that. If I can capture what I felt, what I saw, then I’ll never forget anything.” The
tenseness in his chest lessened with how Noctis was looking at him in interest, thoughts of the
morning were millions of miles away.

The group made it to their next spot a few hours before night fell. Stomachs were rumbling, but
spirits were high as laughter spilled from everyone. Gladio had been finishing a tale of the time
Noctis had been walking across the practice yards and someone had hit another person’s wooden
practice sword so hard it had flown across the yard and hit Noctis in the face. They had walked for
the past few hours in the same manner, trading stories of good times. Prompto didn’t have many to
tell of his own life, other than different times he had gotten in trouble but the others had found the
stories funny nonetheless.

Taking a moment to asses the group as they cleared the area of anything that would make camping
hard, Prompto frowned thoughtfully. He had been thinking of them as a large group, talking about
them as ‘the others’, but really the group had gone back to being split from the Lucians and Loqi.
The only difference was Prompto now counted himself among the Lucians rather than with Loqi
now. Throughout the day Loqi had been subdued, not joining in on the obvious attempts to bring
up the groups spirit. He hadn’t done anything to cause worry, but Prompto stayed out of arm’s
reach from him as much as he possibly could.

Pulling his thoughts from his companions, he looked around. The area was much like many of the
other spots that they had stayed at, with the river they had been following on one edge of the
clearing and a few trees on the edge of the forest on the other. They would set up the tents near the
trees, out of the way of where Ignis would need to prepare their food.

“Noctis and I shall go into the outpost to buy our chocobos, Gladio will stay here,” Ignis said,
pulling Prompto from his uninterested examination of the campsite.

“I can’t stay here?” Noctis asked and Gladio firmly shook his head no.

“Nope, I want to talk to Prompto,” he said. His tone left no room for debate though it was obvious
that Noctis wanted nothing more than to do that.

Ignis waited to see if Noctis would push his luck and when he didn’t, he turned down a path that
lead off around the edge of one of the cliff walls. “We should be back before sundown. It won’t
take long.” he said. “There is food in the packs in case you get hungry.”

Prompto waved goodbye and ignored the way Loqi shifted in his peripheral vision. He turned
instead to Gladio who was hoisting the two bags containing the tents onto his shoulders. Satisfied
with what he saw, he decided Gladio would ask for help if he needed it and went to Loqi after
stopping by one of the packs for an apple.
Loqi was still standing where he had come to a stop when they had made it to the campsite but when Prompto came close, he moved off to the edge of the trees assuming correctly that Prompto would follow. Settling under a tree where they could both keep an eye on Gladio, Prompto handed the apple over and said, “Tell me this isn’t going to be an issue.”

“We need to talk,” Loqi replied.

Prompto tsked and shook his head. “That wasn’t an answer to my question, I need a yes or a no.” He felt Loqi’s gaze burning into the side of his face, but he didn’t take his eyes off Gladio setting up the tents. He had taken off his outer tunic that he wore and was shirtless in the blistering heat. Prompto envied him for only ever wearing the outer tunic and loose traveling pants and pitied Ignis and Noctis for having to wear the full tedious royal ensemble; shirt, tunic, pants tucked into high boots. Gladio’s boots were only to his calves and even then Prompto had heard him complain how hot they could be. Prompto worried his lower lip between his teeth.

“I’m not planning on killing him if that’s what you are thinking,” Loqi snapped. He passed his apple from hand to hand, smoothing thumbs over the bright red skin. “I’m not a murderer.”

“I never implied you would or that you were, I’m asking if this is going to cause problems down the line. Where do your loyalties really lie?” Now Prompto turned to face Loqi and met his even stare with one of his own.

“I would ask you the same,” Loqi said. “You let others fight your battles for you.”

Prompto could have laughed, but held back, knowing the amusement was still clear on his face. His loyalties were the entire reason he was doing this - that and a healthy fear of what Ardyn would do to him if news came back to him that he had failed. Somehow he didn’t think he’d let him run free and had enough money in his coffers to ensure that he would be caught eventually. “No, gutter scum like me gets drafted into the infantry and fights for a worthless king. Are you a hanger-on who watches or do you fight with the gutter scum?”

“That’s treasonous,” Loqi warned.

“Is it? Says the one serving a different ruler, at least I know where my loyalties are. We still aren’t sure about yours. You’ll have to find a way to fix this you know, it can’t continue the way it is or no one is ever going to fully trust you.”

Loqi’s laugh was bitter and loud, and Prompto glanced to see if Gladio had heard. He had stopped mid swing with the small hammer they had brought for setting up the tents and was staring. Meeting Prompto’s gaze, he raised his eyebrows in a silent question. Prompto stared back until Gladio shrugged and went back to hammering in the stakes.

“They didn’t trust me before this,” Loqi said.

Prompto shook his head pityingly as he replied, “It will be worse now. They will never leave you alone with Noctis and will sleep in shifts. Every time you twitch it will be noted. I’ve seen unwavering loyalty to someone before and this will not let up until you are no longer a threat to them. You know if you hadn’t been such an asshole maybe people would believe you when you say that you’re a good guy. I don’t understand why you didn’t just keep your mouth shut.”

Loqi was silent for a long time and they went back to watching Gladio. He was almost done with the second tent by the time Loqi spoke again. “I’m not surprised that the truth is unthinkable to you. I guess I’ll figure it out.”
Snorting, Prompto stood and dusted himself off. “Do it without me, I don’t like you enough to try and help.” Leaving Loqi to his thoughts, he joined Gladio at his side.

“Have a good talk?” Gladio asked. His tone was teasing but his amber eyes were sharp as he searched Prompto’s face.

Prompto shrugged. “As good as it gets with Loqi. Did you have a good talk with him when you found out who he really is?”

Raking his fingers through his long hair, Gladio took his time answering. “You can’t choose your family. Noctis was right, Loqi wasn’t the one who attacked him, but that doesn’t mean that they never tried to shove propaganda down his throat at a young age. Who knows what Niflhiem is really like, assassinating the heir to Lucis might be a common topic of conversation there.”

“Oh, I imagine it’s common everywhere to hate other countries - especially when you know next to nothing about them. I’m sure it helps if you think that you are going to be attacked by them at any moment,” Prompto remarked drily.

Laughing, Gladio nodded. “Oh sure, that’s a good point too.” They stood in silence, enjoying the moment before he sighed. “I do need to talk to you though.”

Waving a hand, Prompto gestured for him to lead the way to a private spot. They went to the opposite side of the campsite, sitting on the large rocks that rested on the edge of the river.

“I don’t suppose you know what this is about do you?” Gladio asked. When Prompto looked at him blankly he flicked his eyes back to the water. “You’re in love with Noctis.”

Raising his brows, Prompto thought about that. Was he? He had thought it was a mutual attraction and nothing more. He hummed tapping his lip. “I’ve never been in love, I wouldn’t know.”

Drumming his fingers on his biceps, Gladio huffed. “Either you’re a better liar than I gave you credit for or you are honestly oblivious.”

“Assume both,” Prompto replied. “I also told Noctis that you were attractive, not just him. Who’s to say that I don’t love you as well? Like I said, I wouldn’t know.” He wasn’t going to bring it up to Gladio or Ignis, ever, but presented with a chance to do so he figured he might as well take advantage. In the following silence, however, he wished he could take it back. Risking a glance at Gladio was enough to see he was thinking over his next words carefully.

Prompto was already wincing by the time he got the first few words out. “Knowing Noctis, he told you that we are all in a relationship together. I suppose it doesn’t matter that he did.” Gladio shifted on his rock until Prompto was firmly in his line of sight and continued, voice softer, “I only want to talk to you because this is the first time that Noctis has chosen someone on his own. Other than with Ignis and I, he’s never shown interest in anyone. You’re interesting and cute but I’m afraid you are more dangerous than you let on.”

A hollow feeling had taken up residence in Prompto’s chest and he found that he much preferred the confusing, spiraling feeling from this morning to what he felt now. His throat seized with fear and his pulse jumped when all he could see in Gladio’s eyes were a hunger to destroy anyone willing to lay a hand on those he was sworn to protect. Bolting seemed like a very real and a very good idea right then. Shooting to his feet and casting a quick look at Loqi, Prompto’s mind spiraled into thoughts of how fast he could run versus how fast they could run.

“My heart is big enough for two people right now; Ignis and Noctis. They are the two people in the
entire world that I would lay my life down for. They are my world. If anything happens to them, you will be the one I come after. Do not let this fall on you, not when you have caught our eye as well.”

Prompto sat back down slowly, confused by the sudden turn of the conversation. He refused to take his eyes off of Gladio and his burning expression. “Falling in love with someone in a week is irresponsible of someone of my position. I can’t fall in love with someone who could slip off at any given chance - or do something on the orders of someone else, which is what I was going to talk to you about with Noctis.” He tapped his thigh with his fingertips as if thinking of the best way to phrase his next words. “I’ll keep it simple - whatever you’ve been told, don’t do it. I would rather you break his heart by slipping away in the night than by showing him a side of you that he didn’t need to see.”

Prompto pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think I’m capable of breaking anyone’s heart but I’ll keep that in mind I guess.”

Sudden laughter burst from Gladio, full and loud filling the space between them. “You have the look of a beaten puppy, it’s no wonder Noctis is trying to think of a way to convince you to stay in Lucis after we find the ring. Let me be wrong about you Prompto, you are far too sweet for whatever Ardyn has planned. If you won’t stay in Lucis with us, let him down gently.”

They sat in silence for a while, feet in the water as the sounds of the river flowed passed. Prompto wondered if he could walk away from them without his heart breaking. He thought he could, but there was enough doubt in his mind to make him wonder.

“What are you thinking about?” Gladio asked eventually.

A quip was quick to come to mind, but Loqi’s words from earlier had stuck to him like a burr under a saddle, rubbing him raw, and he found himself wanting to tell the truth - to tell some of his more private thoughts. “My mother used to tell me that I was too empathetic, that I feel too quick and too deep and that one day I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between love and wanting to help everyone. I’m wondering if she was right.” He thought about what his mother would say if she could see him now and shuddered to think of his father’s opinion - surely it had fallen even lower. His sister, she would worry - she always did.

“Do you miss your mom?”

“No.”

“I miss mine,” Gladio said more than a little mournfully.

Prompto tilted his head and kicked water before asking. “Oh? What is she like?”

And after that, things were a little more relaxed. They talked about family and he learned about Gladio’s father, Shield of the King, and his mom and little sister. Prompto would occasionally answer questions about his own family, though he knew most of what he was saying was printed in his pamphlet - his parents were dead and he lived with his sister when he wasn’t in jail. It was only half truths, and although there was no way that Prompto could tell him anything more, Gladio took everything he gave and treated it like gold. Instead, Prompto gave up what he could; his favorite color, his favorite season, and all the things that weren’t life or death for him. He had never told anyone these little things about himself - not even his sister - and it was liberating. It was nice to feel like his every word was important and for someone to treat him like he was just as special.

“So why did you steal the king’s crown?” Gladio asked as the sun went down and twilight was
Prompto shrugged with a teasing grin. “Because I could.”

Any reply that Gladio had was ignored in favor of the sounds in the distance. Prompto tugged his boots back on and leapt to his feet and Loqi, who had drifted off into sleep under his tree, woke with a start as he ran past him. Ignis and Noctis came back around the corner, both on large chocobo with another three trailing behind on leads.

Prompto stopped in front of the birds as they dismounted and eagerly looked between all them. “Which one is mine?”

Amused, Ignis pointed at one and said, “Hello to you too, Prompto.”

Prompto didn’t care if this chocobo was actually the one they had gotten with him in mind or if Ignis had decided it on the spot, regardless he made a beeline for his bird. He stepped far enough away that it couldn’t bite him and waited for it to trill at him before cautiously stepping forward, hand out. When his bird bumped its beak against it he wasted no time wrapping his arms around it’s feathered neck.

“I thought you hated chocobos?” Noctis asked from behind him.

Humming, Prompto didn’t bother turning around to answer. “I never said I hated them, you just assume things. I have a healthy respect for what their beaks can do, but I love them otherwise.” He continued rubbing his face in his bird’s feathers feeling the dusty softness press kisses over his cheeks. Sighing, he realized how much he missed home and his own chocobo. He only left his bird’s side when Ignis called him to dinner.

Picking at his food seemed like a sin against all the gods he knew (as to waste something so divine was surely sacrilegious), but anytime he put the fork to his mouth all he could think of was home. Appetite gone, Prompto resorted to pushing his food around his plate and as he gazed at each of the men he had come to know in such a short time, he realized that Gladio was right - he didn’t know anything about them and at the end of this Prompto was going home. Was it worth it then, to make the effort to get close to them? It was hard to think about and it left a lump in his throat. He wanted more than anything to learn what they loved, what they hated, and what would make them want him too. But, home was safe and home was also love. Was he wrong for wanting both?

Before Prompto crawled into the tent he was sharing with Ignis, Noctis pulled him aside.

“Meet me after Ignis falls asleep? I want to talk to you.” His eyes burned into his own, pleading without words until Prompto said yes. Triumph flashed in his smile and apprehension crawled up Prompto’s spine.

Sharing a tent with Ignis was a balm to his frayed nerves, but his mind wound itself into dark places as he tried to make sense of it all. Sighing, Ignis sat up and squinted him in the darkness. “I can’t sleep if I know there’s something keeping you up. Do you want to talk about it?”

Smoothing his hands over his bedroll, he thought about it. “The love from family is different from the love you get from someone you like, right?”

“Are you thinking of Noctis?” Ignis asked in reply.

Snorting Prompto shook his head. “Does everyone know then?”

“Of course, communication is the most important thing in a relationship. Noctis came to me as
soon as he realized he was interested in you.”

Prompto nearly choked, coughing until he could gasp out, “Is it okay for a prince to show interest so quickly?” What he really wanted to ask was, _is it okay for him to show interest in me_, but those words stayed stubbornly down.

Laughing quietly, Ignis said, “He was more sorry for you, I think, than attracted. It wasn’t until later that he felt more than simply fascinated.” He sighed and Prompto could see him shake his head. “He’s always… been an interesting young man. I imagine that Noctis finds your friendship, regardless of the fact that he is a prince, one of the most wonderful aspects about you.”

Prompto didn’t answer, thoughts still spiraling. Ignis eventually laid back down. He wasn’t asleep when Prompto slipped out of the tent, but he didn’t stop him either. Noctis was sitting near the dying embers of the fire, lost in thought. He wasn’t surprised when Prompto sat next to him and stirred from his thoughts long enough to smile at him.

They sat in comfortable silence, each lost to their own thoughts as the minutes passed until finally Noctis asked, “What did you and Gladio talk about?”

“This is what I’m losing sleep for? To gossip?” Prompto replied with a cheeky grin. “I learned that you are a liar and Gladio does not like me.”

“Yes, to gossip and you love it, I can see it on your face.”

Prompto laughed, but didn’t deny it as he let Noctis continue. “We never had a chance to talk about all of this. Today has been a little more than I bargained for.”

Noctis stopped talking, eyes settling back on the embers, and it was quiet again as he reflected over the day. “I never said he liked you, I said he thought you were cute - there is a difference. Ignis still only wants to feed you.”

Laughing at the thought of Ignis forcing soup down his throat, Prompto sat comfortably with Noctis at his side. This was news that took a burden off of his shoulders, one he hadn’t even known he was carrying. “That just leaves you,” he said. The moment of truth and more than ever his feet itched to run before he could get hurt.

“Yes.”

“Yes you feel the same as they do, yes you find me attractive, or yes it just leaves you?”

Noctis turned back to Prompto and it was like getting punched in the stomach, the look on his face leaving him breathless and searching deeper. “May I kiss you?”

Leaning forward before he had a chance to think about it, Prompto forced himself to stop right before his lips ghosted Noctis’s own. “Will you be heartbroken when I leave?” he whispered, voice like glass shattering the night.

“Don’t leave and I won’t ever have to learn the answer to that.”

Shaking his head, Prompto tried hard not to let his face show what he was feeling. He wasn’t sure if he succeeded. “I have to, King Ardyn will not let me just go to you. I have loyalties to someone else.”

Jerking back like he had been burnt, Noctis started. “You’re in love with someone?” His tense posture doesn't fade until Prompto shook his head.
“I need to go home to my sister, she doesn’t know where I am.”

Noctis thought about it before leaning back in, not as close as they had been but close enough that Prompto felt lighter for it. “I would still like to try and make something work between us.”

Nodding, Prompto quietly agreed. “I would like to know what it’s like, for as long as I can have it.”

“Does this mean I can kiss you? I won’t do it unless you give me a yes.”

Prompto hesitantly brought his shaking hand up to Noctis’s cheek, letting fingertips caress his smooth skin. He didn’t miss the way that Noctis shivered under his soft touch or the way his eyelashes fluttered closed. “I’ve never kissed someone because I liked them.”

Noctis blinked his eyes open, “You’ve been with someone, but never kissed them?” When Prompto shrugged an answer and started to retract his hand, Noctis grabbed it in his own and said, “Yes or no Prompto.”

“Yes.”

He didn’t know why he should accept this love, this kiss, but Prompto also didn’t have a reason to reject it. The only thing pushing him forward was the deep concealed loneliness that threatened to swallow his existence. The second his lips touched Noctis’s he knew two things.

One, he had made the right choice. Two, he was undeniably fucked.

His world began and ended with Noctis; he both wanted to drown in this feeling and wanted to run away. Fire burned through his veins and he swore if he opened his eyes, Prompto would realize this was only a dream.

The hand on the back of his neck and the soft skin beneath his palm told him differently. Noctis’s teeth nibbled his bottom lip until he sighed in pleasure. He slid his tongue into Prompto’s mouth and if he had thought the press of lips were amazing before, he was in a whole new world now.

The need for air broke them apart and they stood, foreheads pressed together as they got their breaths back. Noctis gave him a shy smile and eyes flicking down to his lips set Prompto’s heart pounding again. Given the chance to do nothing more than kiss Noctis for the rest of his life he would do it, but before he could suggest it, Noctis gave him a quiet goodnight and slipped across the campsite towards his tent. Knowing there was going to be an early morning tomorrow did not motivate Prompto at all towards his own, his mind going too fast.

Instead, Prompto made his way to the edge of the clearing, stumbling to the first tree he saw. Leaning against it, he pressed his thumb firmly to his lips like he could keep the impression of Noctis’s there forever and almost missed the movement to his left. Loqi came towards him, something in hand.

“If this is the way it must be then so be it,” Loqi snarled and Prompto pushed away from his tree. This was definitely the time to go back to his tent - where Ignis was, where he was safe. The words were ominous in a way that Prompto recognized as desperation, a wild animal pushed into a corner in danger of lashing out.

“You’re a fucking lunatic,” Prompto hissed. “You said you would figure it out and I said leave me out of it, killing me isn’t solving any of your problems.”
“I didn’t say I was going to kill you.”

Prompto tried pushing past him, but that was when everything went very, very wrong.

The blow caught him by surprise, hard across his cheek and lip. Prompto stumbled once, clapping a hand to his where his skin was torn and thought, *thank the Six it didn’t hit my eye.

The pain caught up to him - his world blooming into white before exploding into red and he fell to his knees, choking a sob out as blood dripped through his fingers. Loqi stood over him, the picture of a manevolot god, riding crop in hand. His entire face throbbed and he could taste blood in his mouth which was strange, when before all he could taste was Noctis’s sweet kiss. He looked up at Loqi whose face was twisted in horror before hardening over in fury - in acceptance. Loqi considered him for a moment longer, building his mask back up, before he raised the riding crop once more and Prompto flinched.

“Get up.” Loqi snarled. Prompto bared his teeth in silent fury and stayed down. He would not give Loqi the satisfaction of hearing more than that one sob. They heard the others at the same time and Loqi raised his voice so it would carry. “I gave you explicit orders and you went against them. You knew the punishment.”

Prompto glared and stood slowly, hand still covering his face. “And what exactly is this accomplishing, other than making us hate you more?”

Raising the crop high as if to strike again, Loqi grit his teeth. “I would burn the world if that is what it took.”

Ignis saw him first, bloody hand clasped over his cheek and glaring at Loqi in the pale moonlight and Prompto held a hand up to stop him before anything could escalate further. Fury and pain laced through him, and for a long moment he could think of nothing to say except for a stream of curses - he wasn’t sure what kind. His mouth was so full of things he wanted to scream that none of them could come out, which was just as well because if he had said one thing then it all would have come out and this was not a showdown he planned on having with company to see.

Controlling the rolling of his stomach long enough to stomp past, he snarled, “What I do and *who I do*, is none of your business. You’re a dead man walking because the second I get my chance, I’m going to kill you.”

If Noctis and the others expected him to come to them, they were terribly mistaken as he shoved past to the stream. Cupping the cold water in his hands, he winced as he carefully washed his face. It was slow going and by the end he was choking back more sobs. His face was torn, and it wouldn’t be healing anytime soon. It throbbed, bringing back painful memories he had thought were long buried.

“Prom?”

Jerking away from Noctis’s voice, Prompto curled inward to protect his face from prodding fingers. No one had tried touching him, but it was only a matter of time before they did. Ignis tried to get through to him next, kneeling beside him.

“Promto, I need to see the damage and decide what I can do for it.”

Reluctantly, Prompto dropped his hand and turned his face so that Ignis could look. In turn, he studied Ignis’s face, trying to decipher what he saw there - the fire in his eyes was anger and the way his brows drew together was concern. There wasn’t enough light for Ignis to inspect, but with
a little coaxing the fire they had sat around not hours before was brought back to life. Prompto sat as patiently as he could while Ignis gently prodded at his cheek and clicked his tongue before digging around in a small bag at his side. Pain made his mind fuzzy in a way that he distantly hated, but was thankful for as Ignis continued to touch him.

“It’s not as bad as I thought. Your lip is cut but otherwise fine, but your cheek, however, does need a few stitches. Hopefully since it’s not deep it won’t scar. ”

“I don’t care about scars,” Prompto said stiffly.

Ignis paused, looking at at him and whatever he saw in Prompto’s expression had him softly saying, “No, I don’t suppose you do.”

It wasn’t the first time he had gotten stitches for an injury, but it still felt odd for the slim needle to pass through his skin pulling silk along with it. He only winced once, but when they were done Ignis handed over a small bottle.

“It’s a potion - a drink we make full of herbs to help with pain. Hopefully it will numb your mouth.”

While Ignis had been busy with Prompto’s mouth, Gladio hadn’t been idle and as soon as Loqi had dropped the horse crop impassively, he hit him square in the face. By the time Ignis was done with Prompto, he was tied to the same tree they had sat under together earlier. Noctis stood uncertainty between Prompto and Loqi, a barrier if need be, but he didn’t have to worry, as Prompto turned towards the tents, exhaustion catching up to him.

Sleeping on his left cheek was impossible, but sleeping with his back to Ignis was even more impossible. In the end, he slept on his back, fingers lightly tracing bandage placed there. His cheek throbbed and he wished for another potion to finish numbing it. Closing his eyes and slowly evening his breath, Prompto pretended to sleep until Ignis was sighing softly and drifted off.

Slipping out of the tent for the second time that night took concentration, but it wasn’t hard as Prompto was used to sneaking out of most places he ended up in. He crossed the campsite silently, eyes trained on the opposite tent where Gladio, a much lighter sleeper, slept. When he was satisfied that no one would wake up, he quickened his pace until he made it to the trees.

Kneeling in front of Loqi, Prompto waited until he looked up from the ground. His lip was split and there was a darkening bruise blooming across his cheek which gave Prompto a small amount of satisfaction. He didn’t miss the way that Loqi’s eyed the knife he had stolen from Ignis after he had finished stitching his cheek. Prompto twirled it idly as he opened his mouth slowly so not to tear the stitches and asked, “Why?”

“For a second it looked like Loqi would laugh at him, but scoffed. “You know why I did it.”

“That’s not what I meant, you had to do it on my face? Why not my back or arm, where it wouldn’t hurt everytime I tried to talk?”

Now Loqi did laugh. “You could learn to keep your mouth shut for once-” he cut off at the glare Prompto gave him and then said, “You need your back and arm to get the ring.”

He wanted to throttle Loqi for being so dense but instead he clenched his jaw, ignoring the flare of pain that came from doing so, and breathed out slowly. When the urge passed, barely, he said, “Gods I hate you so much; why do you even care about that damn ring so much? You’re going to be killed.”
“King Ardyn is going to be in Lucis to receive the ring and imagine what he will do to you when you don’t have it. It will make what I did look like a love tap.”

Time stopped as Prompto tried to process those words. He froze, knife still gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. “What do you mean he’s going to be there? Do the others know?” Loqi shook his head mournfully. “You need to hurry or I fear that King Ardyn will do something terrible.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Ardyn would be sitting on two thrones whether the ring made an appearance or not. If he got the ring, he would rule Niflhiem and Tenebrae. If not, Lucis was doomed to take Niflhiem’s place. Prompto went back to twirling his knife, using it as a way to ground him as he thought. “Why are you helping the Lucians so much?”

“I just want someone to like me. You cannot think how painful it is to be continually surrounded by people who think your very existence a misfortune .”

Prompto gave him a flat look. “Those would be terrible last words.” He hesitated, before saying quietly, “I am sorry, for what it is worth.”

Loqi tilted his head, baring his throat and sniffed. “And here I thought you hated me. I’m not sorry at all. Let’s just get this over with.”

Prompto gripped the knife tightly and this time, he didn’t hesitate.

Chapter End Notes

WELP
THERE’S THAT.
¯\_(ツ)_/¯
SEE Y’ALL NEXT TIME THIS MESS UPDATES
Also fun fact, the story that they told about Noct getting his nose hit? That actually happened to me! My brother hit me in the face with a stick and broke it lmao
ALSO Seneca is a real philosopher and he is rad af okay for real, bye di do y’all~
Heaven Knows I've Tried, But It Just Keeps Getting Harder

Chapter Summary

The after effects of Loqi set in and a surprising guest makes an appearance

Chapter Notes

Hello all, that last chapter was... a lot wasn't it?
It's been a hectic past two weeks but I wanted to update for y'all before I moved and
got wrapped up in all that mess! I've been running on empty lately lmaoo
Thank you Mils; your support, binging bnha with me, your help, your amazingness,
your friendship. Thank you for it all ;;;;
Chapter title comes from All the Pretty Girls by Kaleo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Prompto was shaken awake, his eyes were gritty and the entire left side of his face throbbed.
His first response was to scramble away from the heavy hand, the next to rub the sleep from his
eyes and look around in confusion. Ignis was grim as he took in the dark shadows under Prompto’s
eyes, his lack of sleep apparent. The last potion he had taken wore off only a few hours after he had
finally been pulled under by the warm embrace of blissful nothingness and sleep afterwards had
been near impossible. The dim light of the morning was enough for him to see the tightness around
Ignis’s eyes and the determined set of his jaw.

“I suppose you don’t know what happened to him?”

Yawning turned out to be a terrible idea when the stitches pulled tight and Prompto clapped a hand
over his face. Letting out a low hiss of pain and blinking tears from his eyes, he gritted his teeth.
“Who do you mean?”

Ignis waited until he saw none of the stitches had tore before twitching the tent open to the
morning air and stepping out - an obvious sign to follow, even though all Prompto wanted to do
was curl into a ball to sleep more and maybe chug four potions. Sighing, he stretched out the kinks
in his back before crawling out. Standing around the tree Loqi had been tied to were Gladio and
Noctis, talking quietly. Backs turned to their approach, all Prompto could make out was the tense
lines of their shoulders.

As Ignis and Prompto came near, they fell silent and watched with carefully blank expressions.
Noctis’s was far better than Gladio’s, whose hard eyes gave away much more. The ropes that held
Loqi were slashed, fallen in a mess.

“Looks like he took off,” said Prompto after the silence had gone on too long. His mouth twisting
in a grimace when his stitches pulled again, face throbbing with every beat of his heart.
“Promtio, I need to know. Did you see him leave? I know you were awake for most of the night.”

Fighting back a flare of irritation - purely brought on by the pain - he mentally counted to ten and
considered the scene once more. “Nope, looks like he took off to me. So stupid.” He scoffed and looked away.

Noctis was pale but regarded him with the same fierce intensity as Gladio. Ignis flicked his eyes to them before settling a hand on his hip, bringing the other to rub the bridge of his nose. “Please take this seriously, if you had something to do with this we could all be in trouble.”

Shrugging, Prompto traced the area around his stitches, feeling the heat coming off of it. “I am taking this seriously.” He sighed and said, “Six, I didn’t stab him, ok? Or watch him run off or anything else you might think. Don’t you trust me?”

“Should we trust you?” Gladio asked. His voice was like granite, unyielding and strong, enough so that Prompto fought the involuntary flinch before steeling his nerves to meet Gladio’s eyes.

Prompto considered him. “I’m asking you to trust me now.”

The conversation dropped and the campsite was taken down slowly. Noctis shot furtive glances Prompto’s way whenever he thought Prompto wasn’t looking and in turn, Prompto steadily ignored him. He was trying to keep himself from acknowledging the very real possibility that his face was becoming infected. Rather, he turned over the night before in his head - the good parts. He had gone to bed too angry and hurt to review it, but Noctis had kissed him, and he had liked it even. Angrily, Prompto realized the throbbing of his face shoved any thought of doing it again far away. Tapping his fingers on his thigh with impatient bursts, he was ready to put this campsite and all the memories of Loqi far behind him.

Gladio seemed to have the same thoughts as he grabbed Ignis’s elbow. “What’s the plan?”

Casting a quick look at Noctis and Prompto over by their chocobos, Ignis replied in an equally soft voice - but not quiet enough for Prompto to miss. “I am hopeful that if we can give him the ring, King Ardyn will not be too angry at Loqi’s disappearance.”

“Do you think Prompto had anything to do with it?” Gladio asked.

Ignis’s voice dropped lower, too low for Prompto to hear. Sighing inwardly, Prompto wished he could have heard the rest of the conversation.

Eyeing Noctis, he gingerly touched the inflamed skin around his stitches again. “What are you thinking about?”

Humming Noctis pet his chocobo idely. “I’m surprisingly less upset about the disappearance of a companion as I thought I would be. Which, I’m sure as a future king is wrong. I wish you had had the chance to punch him in the face for what he did to you.”

Stifling a laugh, Prompto said, “I assure you, I wanted to do more than punch him but I suppose it will have to wait.”

Noctis laughed, but his expression was too guarded for Prompto to fully enjoy the sound. They watched each other until Noctis stepped closer to him, his body near enough if Prompto wanted to he could have kissed him. “Is your face doing okay?”

“It hurts like hell,” Prompto said, surprising them both with a little honesty. He got off lucky he knew - Loqi had hit him one time and stopped. Now his main concern now was letting it heal and not getting an infection. Tracing the hot outline of the cut, he winced.

Digging a potion out of their saddlebags, Noctis handed over the glass bottle while concern made a permanent home on his face. Prompto ripped the cork top out of it and swallowed it in two large
gulps, feeling the fire fade to a dull ache. The heat remained and Prompto wanted to ask if they had anything against infections but Noctis spoke before he could.

“Will you continue with us?” he asked curiously, watching as Prompto tested the pull of his cheek, opening and closing his mouth slowly.

Clicking his mouth shut with a little more force than was necessary, Prompto furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “Why wouldn’t I?” Originally it had been nothing but his own ambition was keeping him there, but now conflicted by his emotions he was unsure but knew that no matter what he wouldn’t leave. Prompto lowered his voice. “I’ll stay as long as you want me to.”

Noctis smiled brilliantly, and for the first time that morning it felt like the sun’s warmth was finally reaching him. Feeling shy from the onslaught of emotions pouring into his chest from such a simple action, Prompto fell silent as Ignis and Gladio came to them with grim expressions.

Stomach dropping, he was aware all at once that even if Noctis wanted him to stay, it did not matter if Ignis and Gladio decided to leave him here. They might blame him for the night before - for not waking them or for allowing it to happen at all.

“There’s a the chocobo outpost nearby. We’re thinking of stopping for lunch and for better access to medicinal items. We could give your cheek and lip the proper treatment it needs,” said Ignis, pulling Prompto from his thoughts with surprising ease.

“You’ll let me stay?” Tilting his head silently, Ignis let Prompto answer his own question with a relieved “Yes.”

Gladio gave Prompto a boost up onto his chocobo and the party quietly rode to wherever the outpost was.

Staying up as late as he had was definitely not his best idea and he had to stifle the urge to yawn more than once. Noctis fell back to ride at his side, dark thoughts rolling off of him in waves. Prompto, when not on a job, had the patience of a toddler and felt the pull of temptation to ask him what was on his mind. He was mulling over the best way to approach it when Noctis broke the silence himself.

“Did… Did I cross a line last night? Is that why he hit you?”

Blinking, Prompto took in his words, letting them tumble around his mind before he had a half legible answer. “Why in the Six would you think that?

“It happened literally right after we kissed, what am I supposed to think?” Noctis said, voice tight.

Prompto hated the way his voice shook when he asked, “You regret kissing me?”

It took effort, but Noctis’s face slowly softened as he thought before firmly shaking his head. The relief he felt confused Prompto. He wanted this, had never wanted anything so much before in his life. Gods, he wanted to hold onto it with a ferocity that surprised him, but if he did, what was he to do with it?

“I don’t regret it either,” he said, voice quiet. “Do Ignis and Gladio know?”

Once again, Noctis shook his head, slower this time. “I was going to tell them but-” Glancing at the mess of stitches holding the fragile skin together, Noctis hesitated. “I wonder if I should now. I will, because I have to - but I wanted to hold onto this just for us a little longer.”
Humming thoughtfully, Prompto watched Ignis in front of them riding with the ease of experience and considered what it would be like to keep it only between them. He was being offered so much he didn’t even know what to do with it. With a shaky smile, Prompto said, “I want that too, but how will they respond when they find out we kept this from them? They should come before me, they love you too much not to.”

“It’s different with you, you know?” Noctis said after a moment. “You chose this and I will never have to worry if it’s because I’m a prince.”

Raising his eyebrows, Prompto laughed and grimaced at the pull. “I am a thief and you have untold riches piled under your bed. I’m pretty sure you should worry.”

Noctis joined his laughter but when they fell silent Prompto said, “Ignis said that the most important part of a relationship is communication. Don’t ruin something with the people you will spend your life with for me.”

Clenching his jaw, Noctis looked away, effectively cutting off the distraction of conversation. It didn’t take long for Prompto to realize the bouncing of the chocobo started to coincide with the throbbing of his cheek. In the silence, his thoughts were useless and eventually boiled down to a simple “Ow” with every step. He could see the archway leading into a large house when he was sure he couldn’t go another step. His body was surely on fire, there was no way that he could hurt this bad all over from one simple lash across his face - not when he had had so much worse in his life. This should be nothing more than a minor annoyance.

Prompto dug his nails into his palm, holding the reins as hard as he could. At his side Gladio shot him a look and he forced himself to relax his grip.

“I’ll talk to them tonight.” Noctis’s quiet voice startled him, breaking the long silence hanging between them. A quick look at Gladio showed he had either not heard or was pointedly ignoring them.

“Only you?” Prompto asked, hoping desperately the strain in his voice wasn’t too noticeable.

Noctis nodded but didn’t elaborate. More for the consideration of the pain it would cause him than anything, Prompto hummed and left it at that. Once at the chocobo ranch, the owner - who Prompto was informed was named Wiz - came out with a kind smile which fell as he took in the tense group.

“Ignis, as much as I would like to say welcome back - why are you here?”

Shooting a quick look over his shoulder at Prompto, Ignis said, “We’ve had an incident.”

Watching Wiz’s face transform from one of concern to tightly reigned back anger was a sight to behold and Prompto quickly looked down in case that anger was directed his way.

“I hate to ask, but would you mind if we stayed the night?” asked Ignis.

“Aye, stay as long as you need. I’ll get the birds put up if you want to go ahead and go inside.”

Ignis was off of his chocobo and crossing the space to where Prompto sat on his own bird so quickly it took him a moment to register the offered hand. Cautiously, Prompto slid his own into Ignis’s grasp and allowed himself to be helped down.

“I want to look at those stitches and make sure everything is as it should be. I worked by very dim light last night and I cannot live with the idea that I may have messed up in any way,” Ignis said,
leading him inside the small house.

Prompto had all of three seconds to look around in the living space which welcomed them before being herded off to a room to the right next to the entryway. In the room Ignis him to was a large bed and a plush chair tucked in the corner by a tall bookshelf. Pushed into the chair, Prompto sat and looked around while Ignis flicked the curtains aside, filling the previously muted room with streaming golden light. It was nice - not moving and letting the light bathe him. Ignis placed a cool hand on his jaw and even such a gentle touch caused a shock of pain to wrack his face. Gasping, Prompto couldn’t do anything but screw his eyes shut and pant his way through it.

“What should we do, Iggy?”

Prompto hadn’t realized Noctis had followed them in, but his quiet voice steadied him. He cracked his eyes open, not caring if they saw the pinpricks of tears beginning to form, as Ignis studied his stitches. When the muscle in his jaw jumped, Prompto closed his eyes again, already knowing what would be said.

“I need something to clean his face with and more silk,” Ignis said to Noctis, and then to Prompto softened his voice. “I need to restitch your cheek, the area closest to the mouth has begun to pull apart. It would be beneficial to clean out the wound with the healing herbs we carry before sewing it back up. Are you okay with that?”

Once Prompto had nodded his consent, Noctis left to get what was asked of him.

“How bad does it hurt?” Ignis asked as he walked over to the small dresser to wash his hands in the small bowl of water which sat on top. Watching him, Prompto was hit with the realization this was the first time anyone had taken care of him when he was hurt beyond the initial stitching up of his wounds. It was a dizzying realization.

He wondered what he was supposed to say - he had always lied when someone took the time to ask how he was, but they wouldn’t have helped him even if he had told them he wasn’t okay. The instinct to lie came so swift and intently, already opening his mouth to do so, when he remembered Ignis saying he was fine too much for it to ever be true. Faced with the chance to tell the truth and actually have something come of it, he hesitated.

When the pause between question and answer became more than a little too long, he exercised a little honesty for the second time that day and said, “It hurts like hell.”

Ignis’s lips tilted upward and he raised eyebrows. “If you keep this up, we might make a respectable man of you yet.”

Huffing a tired laugh, Prompto said, “What telling the truth?” When Ignis nodded, he continued, “I just want you to know I take offence that you don’t think I’m a respectable man already.”

It was quiet after that as Ignis washed his hands and Prompto sank into the chair, exhaustion sinking through him. He hadn’t been this tired since he first got out of prison and felt like his entire body was a heavy stone sinking through water. There was a lot catching up to him and before he knew it, his eyes were struggling to stay awake.

He couldn't have been asleep too long before there were soft fingertips trailing along his jawline and he jerked back, eyes open wide.

Noctis was kneeling on the floor in front of him, holding his fingers back like he had been burnt and a guilty look. “Sorry,” he murmured.
Ignis was watching them, but Prompto ignored him in favor of taking a deep breath and giving a shaky smile. “You just scared me, that’s all.” His heart slowed its frantic beating to something a little slower, but ghosts lingered under his skin and memories of pain played on repeat. Any trace of sleepiness was gone for the moment.

In Noctis’s hand was another potion, which he handed over. Prompto looked to Ignis and asked, “Should I drink this now or after you’re done?”

“Now. You’ll want to be numb when I start taking the stitches out,” Ignis replied with a grimace.

Frowning, Prompto looked from the small pair small scissors in Ignis’s hand to Noctis, who tried to give him a reassuring smile. It couldn’t hurt more than anything else he had ever gone through, so with a shrug which felt far more forced than he would have liked, Prompto uncapped the small vial and chugged it. The numbing effects washed through his mouth, leaving him breathless from the lack of pounding that had accompanied him this entire time.

Ignis got to work as soon as he was sure his mouth was numb, snipping the silk which held the cut together. The potion worked amazingly, but despite that there was still the feeling of pulling which set Prompto on edge. The night before he had been too dazed and angry to focus on Ignis putting him back together, but now he was hyper focused and memories threatened to resurface.

He must have made some noise he wasn’t aware of because in an instant, Ignis’s hands were away from his face and Noctis was by his side - had he ever left his side? It brought him back to the present and he blinked, clearing the last of the memories from his mind.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, dropping his eyes to his lap.

“Nonsense, I imagine it must hurt quite a bit,” Ignis said, gently. “Face wounds bleed a lot, though they generally aren’t dangerous. It’s a shame I had to do this at night with barely any light to see by. These stitches would be a lot cleaner and more concise if that hadn't been the case.”

Ignis pursed his lips and used the rag beside him to clean the blood from his hands, Prompto’s eyes stuck on the red. “I was afraid of infection setting in, since the inflammation made it seem that way. A physician would have left the stitches in and tried to treat it, but since I put them in less than ten hours ago I believe it will be okay.”

“I’m sure it will be fine Iggy, you’re doing your best,” Noctis said, handing over a new vial. This one was painted green Prompto stared at it questioningly. “This one is a sort of antidote. It keeps the poison of the wound from spreading - or so the healers say.”

Pulling a clean cloth from his seemingly never-ending stash, Ignis poured some of the antidote on it. It was cold and stung when he pressed it to the cut and Prompto couldn’t hide his initial flinch as Ignis finished cleaning it, murmuring comforting words. Sewing his face back up took less time and before he knew it, Ignis was stepping away to eye his handiwork with a critical gaze and a sigh. “It was a cowardly thing to do, to attack your face like that. Regardless of what happened, it was not his place to judge you.”

Exhaustion was sinking in now they were done and when Prompto spoke he felt like his voice was forcing its way through shattered glass. “Whose job is it to judge me?”

Frowning, Ignis looked at Noctis before slowly saying, “No one can judge you but the gods themselves.”

They’re by a quick knock on the doorway, Gladio leaning against the frame. “Wiz has some soup
for us, said it would be easier for Prom to eat,” he said. He didn’t move from his spot and Prompto dropped his eyes from Gladio’s unwavering gaze.

Ignis nodded and held a hand out for Prompto to take. It was funny, how such a simple act of kindness could feel like someone stepping on his chest and if anyone noticed Prompto’s hand shaking when he gripped Ignis’s, they said nothing.

His grip was dropped as soon he stood and all Prompto could do was stare at his now empty fingers. Jumping at a soft touch on his back, he looked up into Noctis’s searching gaze, Ignis and Gladio taking their cue to leave them alone.

“You okay?” asked Noctis.

Prompto had been asked that so many times that day alone and all he could do was shrug. Noctis hesitated, casting a quick look at the door before stepping closer.

“Can I touch you?”

Prompto was tired, tired, tired, but he desperately wanted more than just a question in that moment and gave a jerky nod. Even that took more out of him than he liked. Six, it felt like his entire body was sinking and dragging to the bottom of a lake and he wondered if this was just a dying man’s dream. If this was only a dream, then everything else - those who cared for him, these new friends, these new feelings - were far too good for someone like him, but good dreams were a rarity in his life and he was willing to let this one play out, no matter how exhausted he woke in the end.

Noctis brought his hand up slowly and Prompto tracked its movement until he couldn’t, unless he wanted to go cross eyed. The gentle sweep across his jaw mimicked what Noctis had done to wake him earlier, the tingling that followed giving him a sense of reality. He wasn’t dying, he was living.

His breath hitched and he squeezed his eyes closed as Noctis’s hand went from the careful trailing to cupping the marred side of his face. Desperate for more contact, Prompto leaned into the touch, opening his eyes and immediately shutting them again - Noctis was looking at him far too tenderly. When his lips pressed to Prompto’s forehead, he choked out a sigh, burning tears pricking his eyes and he squeezed them shut tightly to keep them from spilling over. He couldn’t even explain it, there was too much happening and he hated the way he couldn’t tell Noctis everything. Guilt and fear burned through him and he tried, mostly successful, to squash the feelings down, but Noctis didn’t move away. If anything he moved closer and slowly wrapped his arms around him in a hug and a sob hitched in Prompto’s voice, smothered in Noctis’s shoulder. He didn’t say anything, holding Prompto until his shaking subsided.

“Let’s get some lunch,” Noctis whispered and Prompto nodded. If before he felt like he had been a stone at the bottom of a lake, then now he was too tired to even think of a poetic metaphor.

No one said anything when they showed up much later to the table Wiz had gracefully set for them, but Prompto purposely avoided the older man’s gaze, staring at the steaming bowl of broth before him. Conversation started up, with mentions of a storm brewing outside passing over him. He ate methodically; spoon meet broth, broth meet mouth. He looked up from his bowl once - when it was decided they would stay the night in Wiz’s spare room.

Meeting Wiz’s eyes had him ducking his head and finishing his soup quickly. It was good, amazing even, and Prompto murmured a thanks before numbly walking back to their temporary room. The others let him go, quiet conversations following at his back as he shut the door and sank into sweet silence.
The sky outside had turned from the warm afternoon glow to a light grey as clouds from the east rolled in. In a few hours, the sky would be nearly black as the sky wept, feeding the god Leviathan her children. Rumah would be out to play - throwing his bolts to splinter the earth and smash the trees - more of a reason to take shelter rather than risk travel. It was a small comfort to know they would have had to stop their journey, even if he hadn’t needed first aid. That thought was fleeting as all the others before it had been. He had never seen the ocean but he had read about it enough to imagine his thoughts were waves crashing against the stone cliffs of his mind. They were probably important, but they were dying before they had a chance to really become great - a disconnect from his mind and body, like they belonged to someone else, and Prompto found the more he tried to grip to the icy walls of his reality, the more everything slipped through his fingers.

“You look dead on your feet kid.”

Any other time, were he not so tired, he would have jumped in surprise someone could come up to him so quietly. As it was, he only half turned from the window to look at Gladio. “Maybe you should rest?”

He thought about what was being offered - the chance to sleep again on a real bed, but in the home of a man old enough to be his father that he did not know. Reluctance must have shown on his face because Gladio moved from the door frame and gestured at the bed.

“We will all be in here with you, Wiz only has this one spare room.”

Prompto relaxed, the knowledge that someone would be watching his back when he couldn’t enough for him and he kicked off his boots and pants to climb into the bed. It was big, not big enough for the four of them. Sinking under the covers and into the pillows, he murmured, “I’ll sleep in the chair tonight so you can have the bed.”

There was a huff of a laugh and the sound of a book being cracked open before he was pulled under.

He slept soundly, but for how long he wasn’t sure. He stirred when he felt weight dipping the side of the bed and when he cracked his eyes open Noctis was sitting by his side, face shadowed by candlelight as he looked down at his clasped hands.

“I need to tell you guys something,” was all he said before his shoulders shook and he took a deep breath.

Prompto was interested and tried to stay awake long enough to hear what he would say, but darkness started creeping in again and the three voices joined together into a wonderful melody, like the ones he sometimes heard at home when he found himself in the chapel. In his last moments of consciousness, Prompto realized that this - falling asleep to the sounds of the others voices - must be the closest thing to heaven someone like him could have.

His dreams were muddled, burning of fire until they were kissed away by cool breaths upon his face. It felt wonderful, especially since even in his dreams his face ached.

“Won’t you open your eyes?” a voice asked him.

He hadn’t been aware his eyes were closed and fluttered them open. He stood in a library, books stacked high on towering shelves with a cheerful fire burning near a table. He shouldn’t be here.

“Who’s there?” he called.
A door clicked behind him and he turned, any doubts in his mind being replaced by worry he fought to hide. A woman dressed in black was standing before a closed door, her expression was kind, but Prompto found it hard to trust her.

“Who are you?”

She ignored him, walking past to sit in one of the chairs at the table. He noticed she had pointedly left the chair to his right alone. “Won’t you sit Prompto?”

Shaking his head, he said, “Not until you tell me who you are and what we are doing here. This isn’t a dream.”

The woman tilted her head and opened her eyes, peering at him with a glinting gaze. Satisfied with what she saw, she closed them and a slow smile spread across her face, more real than the one she had before. “I am a messenger for the gods. You may call me Gentiana.”

With a snort, Prompto leaned against one of the bookshelves and crossed his arms. “Yeah, and I’m a king.”

Tilting her head, Gentiana studied Prompto silently and he resisted the urge to fidget under her calm appraisal of him. “Maybe not a king, but not what you pretend to be. Why are you so far from home?”

“If you’re a god then shouldn’t you already know the answer to that?” Prompto countered.

Gentiana laughed and gently reminded him, “I never said I was a god, only their messenger.”

Clicking his tongue, Prompto let the silence which followed her statement stretch. This wasn’t a dream, that much he was sure of. The air was much too crisp, too clear in the face of his rapidly loosening grip on reality. It hurt too much, both physically and emotionally, to be here. The only explanation was the gods had deemed him important enough to pass on a message to him and that… that was a thought which sat uncomfortably on his shoulders.

“What’s your message then?” Perhaps it wasn’t smart to be rude to an ethereal being, but Prompto wanted to leave this place - to wake up in the bed at Wiz’s and set out on his journey once more.

“I like you Prompto,” Gentiana replied, amusement clear in her voice. “I think I’ll come visit you again. I’ll give you the message then.”

Huffing, Prompto crossed his arms in annoyance, but as soon as she gave her clear dismissal, the floor dropped from under him and he fell through the darkness only to jerk awake in the spare bedroom at Wiz’s.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter and I am tired, tired, tired much like Prompto in this chapter. Bedtime for meeeeee!! I hope you guys enjoyed and I'll see y'all next update!! Comment or Kudo if that's your cup of tea, but either way have a fantastic day!
Been Awake For Far Too Long, But I’m Alive

Chapter Summary

Prompto spends some quality time with someone he never thought he would and learns some valuable life lessons as he does. Someone’s fate is cleared up - for now, ot4 softness all around, and some things also come to light about Prom’s visits to Gentiana.

Chapter Notes

I’d really like to start this off by just apologizing for the time in-between updates ;;;; I’m really sorry y’all. I promise this story will not be abandoned, I have the rest of it completely planned out! Between work, starting school again, having a toddler at home and being sick it's hard to get the time to write though. Not to mention my lovelyper beta, Mils, also has the worlds busiest schedule!

However, we love you and we thank you for being so patient and understanding!!

Chapter title comes from Alive by Greame James

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knowing where he was and understanding his surroundings were two different monsters. Prompto knew the former the second he jerked awake, but as he looked around the room in dissipating panic, he couldn’t think for the life of him why he was there. His dream of Gentiana messed with his perceptions of what was real or made up. Looking over at Noctis sound asleep beside him confused Prompto even more. Beside Noctis sat Ignis, awake and working in a small notebook.

“Are you alright?” he asked, his soft voice splintering the warm calm of the room. Prompto stared at him, taking in the glint of the candlelight off the glasses perched on his nose and the rumpled top he hadn’t changed out of from the day before.

“It’s storming still,” Prompto said for an answer. The rain pelting the side of the house was heavy, battering in time with his still frantic heart. Noctis stirred beside him, murmuring in sleepy protest before settling.

Ignis set his notebook on the bedside table before tilting his head towards the door. Tugging his pants on Prompto followed as they slipped from the room, silent as shadows. Every step Ignis took seemed to be ten times louder than his own, though Prompto couldn’t find it in him to fault him for it. After all, he hadn’t grown up sneaking through homes for food to eat as Prompto had.

Ignis lead him through the small house, settling before the embers of the fireplace. After a moment of hesitation, Prompto sat in the worn chair across from him. It was strange to see Ignis so rumpled and uncaring, but he found he liked it.

They stared at each other, listening to the rain and the popping of the fire before Ignis cleared his throat. “Noctis told us about what happened between you two,” he said, and Prompto shifted,
aware of how aware he was - a stark difference to mere hours ago when he couldn’t keep a grip on anything. “Loqi saw you kissing and for that he hit you? It doesn’t make much sense to me.”

Fiddling restlessly with the sleeves of his shirt, Prompto tried to think of a way to absolutely not have this conversation right then - or at all. With Ignis staring at him, looking for answers, there was no way out of it. “There were rules,” he said, “rules I didn’t follow.” When it became clear Ignis was waiting for him to continue he did, hesitantly. “I wasn’t supposed to get close to any of you, I had to remember my place, which I can only assume he means the gutter where I belong.” His voice came out more bitter than he meant it to, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“No man can judge the worth of another, no matter his position in life. If you believe your place is by our side then so be it. None of us will tell you no, and it was not Loqi’s place to take that route as an appropriate punishment for not following inane rules,” Ignis replied, heat lacing his words. Frowning, he made an effort to take a steadying breath. “We don’t know much about you Prompto, but we’ve talked about it and we would like to help you. Tenebrae doesn’t have to be your home anymore.”

To his surprise, the temptation to take Ignis’s offer hit him harder than he thought it would. His mouth curved into a tentative smile and after a moment of reflection he said, “Give me time to think about it.”

Ignis tilted his head to regard Prompto thoughtfully. “I hope that what happened won’t discourage you from trying to be there for Noct.”

The soft smile on Prompto’s face curved to a slow grin, biting at the cut on his face, but he found he didn’t care. “Wait, are you telling me to actually continue whatever it is that we have going on?”

“You could call it what it is - a relationship,” Ignis said with amusement, “but yes, he is very fond of you and I can see how good you are for him. He has smiled more around you in these past few weeks than he does outside of Gladio’s and my own influence. Why wouldn’t I want to encourage that? I hope you stay with us long enough to become friends with us all. We already consider you one of ours.”

Prompto considered this before offering a small smile. “Friends aren’t something I’ve ever really had, I would like that.”

“Good. You seem better than you were earlier - more yourself. Perhaps you should get more sleep?”

Humming, Prompto turned his gaze to the fireplace. Gentiana came to mind and he was reluctant to admit that he was a little more than uneasy at the idea of falling back to sleep. If she was a messenger, when would she be back for him? He heard Ignis sigh and the rustle of his clothes as he stood.

“In that case, I’ll be going to bed.” Ignis took a step closer and leaned down to take his chin in delicate fingers. Searching eyes met his and Ignis said, “You have so many secrets, what I would give to solve even a few of them.”

Brow furrowed in confusion, Prompto didn’t try to pull away from his grip and Ignis must have seen something that satisfied him, as he huffed a laugh. “Goodnight Prompto, do try and get some sleep tonight.” Ignis pressed a small kiss to Prompto’s forehead and stepped back to let go of his chin.
Once he heard the click of the bedroom door, Prompto set his gaze on the slowly dimming embers. He was surprisingly okay with the kiss Ignis had given him - it felt like a gift and not something needed to act upon. If he were honest with himself, Prompto was upset at Loqi for ruining his chances of learning how to have a relationship. There must be something past kissing - he had seen enough people in love to know this - but it was amazing in its own right, and he was more than a little disgruntled he wouldn’t be kissing Noctis anytime soon.

His face continued to throb as the night wore on, but he couldn’t find it in himself to steal a potion or another antidote from Ignis’s bag to ease some of the pain. He would wait, patiently, for them to give him what he needed. Whatever had been in the antidote seemed to have helped the heat coming from the stitches the most. There was a strong sense of relief as he retraced the row of stitches.

As much as he wanted to linger on thoughts of things he wasn't allowed to have, Gentiana was stuck there - the more he tried not to think of her, the more she came to mind. What did this mean and why had she come to him of all people? Did those of destiny often get visited by messengers of the gods? He toyed with the idea of asking Noctis if he received these dreams as well but discarded it. Frowning pulled his stitches but refused to leave, even as outside went from an inky purple and blue to the fading grey of dawn. It had stopped raining at some point, but he wasn’t sure when.

Slow, rhythmic clumping of heavy boots - too light to be Gladio, more steady than Noctis, and too heavy to be Ignis’s - coming down the hallway snatched his attention and Prompto felt his breath seize as Wiz made his way closer to him. It was too late for him to take off to the room he and the others shared.

When he stepped into the room, Wiz startled then hesitated between coming closer and walking out the door. “Would you like to come and check on the birds with me? They might need a gentle hand to help them after the storm we had.”

The ‘no’ perched on the tip of Prompto’s tongue but the pull of the birds held it back. Wiz was content to wait for an answer and Prompto nodded before scurrying back into the bedroom to hunt for boots. He cast a quick look at his sleeping companions, a content smile on his face as he slipped back out.

After tugging his boots on, they walked into the misty dawn. The silence settling over them was tense as they made their way to the stables. Prompto stayed out of arm's reach and the farther they got from the house, the more his nerves kicked in. He berated himself for allowing the prospect of chocobos to lure him where no one could see them.

But as soon as they stepped into the stables, his fears pushed themselves back enough for a small smile to spread across his face. There were birds everywhere and he rushed towards the one closest to him. Prompto buried his face in the downy feathers like he’d done with his own chocobo what felt like a lifetime ago. Breathing in familiar smells, Prompto melted and let the bird preen through his hair. He allowed it a moment longer before pulling back and going to offer the same love to the other chocobos. For all the rain and thunder they had gotten, they were fine.

“Hey there little buddy,” Prompto whispered. “How are you doing? That rain didn’t scare you at all, did it?” Babbling and saying sweet words to the chocobo was calming, helping him to leave some of his funk behind. It wasn’t enough to make him feel back to his usual self, but then again, he hadn’t been his usual self since his imprisonment. He wondered if the others would still like him if he allowed himself to relax enough to be his usual self. As time went on, this more severe and tired side of him became less of a mask and more of a default setting.
“You’re good with them.”

Prompto jumped away from the chocobo in surprise and tried to calm his breathing when he saw it was Wiz. “I love chocobos,” Prompto replied when he was sure his faintness of breath wouldn’t be noticeable. Feeling too blunt, he awkwardly tacked on, “I used to have one.”

If Wiz took offense to the short sentences and the wide berth Prompto gave him, he said nothing of it and came to stand at the stable next to his to pet the chocobo inside. Wiz seemed lost in thought as he murmured, “I used to have a son.”

It was out of the blue and made no sense to bring it up, but in a way Prompto understood. A truth for a truth - he had played this game with his sister enough to know the rules. He looked at the straw at his feet and kicked it. “I know. The room you have us staying in- it was someone you cared about. The furniture is beautiful, it must have taken you a long time to carve it all.”

“It did take me a long time,” Wiz said absently. His eyes glazed with the ghost of tears and his voice was rough. “He died.”

“I know,” Prompto repeated softly. “The only reason to keep someone’s room intact like you have is if you expect someone to come back or if they’ve died. A good son would stay behind to help you.” They stood in silence, petting their chocobos and lost in thought.

“You remind me of him.”

Prompto didn’t know what to say, but when they walked back to the house, he felt better. Once inside, they both kicked off their boots, and when Wiz went into the kitchen, he padded behind to sit at the table. The embers had long cooled in the fireplace and Prompto didn’t want to be alone anymore. Wiz was quiet as he put a kettle on to boil, which he was thankful for when he had a whole head of troubles to work through. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts he jumped as a mug plunked down before him, a twin to the one in Wiz’s hands. A quick, cautious sip told him the drink was hot tea - not unlike what he would drink with his sister when she had time for him.

Settling in the seat across from him, Wiz took a sip of his own. “So, do you want to talk about this?”

Prompto blinked in genuine confusion. “About what?”

Gesturing vaguely, Wiz said, “You tell me. You show up yesterday looking like you went a round with a bear and today you can’t relax around me unless there’s a chocobo between us.”

“I wasn’t feeling well yesterday,” Prompto mumbled, shrinking back into his chair and gripping his mug tight between both hands.

“That doesn’t explain how you act around me.” The silence stretched between them and Wiz spread his hands with a low sigh. “Not all old men are bad, son.”

He hit the root of the problem with such accuracy that Prompto flinched. He watched Wiz tensely and said, “I know.”

“Your head might know, but your reactions say differently.” Wiz paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was quiet and mournful. “Was it your dad who made you so afraid?”

This time, Prompto was able to hide his surprise by bringing his mug to his face. “You’re perceptive.”
As he rubbed the back of his neck, Wiz seemed older than he had before. “Not all fathers are bad, just like not all of them are good. I tried to be the best I could and I know I messed up a lot - hell, sometimes fathers can teach you everything and hand you the world and still beat you black and blue. Whatever happened with your father, you deserved better.”

It wasn’t much, but it was more than Prompto had before and it had him blinking away tears. He couldn’t say anything for a few moments, and when he could, his voice was too tight to say anything more than, “Oh.” The air between them cleared as the tension left his body, leaving him the most relaxed he’d ever been in the presence of an older man.

Wiz had told Prompto something important and he couldn’t help but want to return the favor. “I like to draw,” he said eventually. It wasn’t big, but still a treasure to be tucked away.

Without preamble, Wiz stood and left the room and for a horrible moment, Prompto wondered if he’d been wrong and Wiz didn’t care at all, but he soon returned, a small notebook in his hand. Setting it in front of Prompto, he asked, “Could you draw for me?”

Prompto blinked in surprise, looking from the book to Wiz and back. “I need something to draw with.”

A charcoal stick wrapped in paper appeared from Wiz’s front pocket and he said, “A person should do the thing they love most first thing - that way their entire day is spent with the knowledge that at least they were able to do something good, even if the rest didn’t go the way they thought it would.”

When Prompto flipped the book open, pages of building sketches, plans for the future, and notes on chocobos flew past. He flicked his eyes up and Wiz shrugged. “I use it a lot, why not have something good in there?”

It didn’t take Prompto long to think of a subject - for Wiz, there was only one thing worth drawing. As he began sketching, he asked, “What’s the thing you love doing?”

Glancing out the window, Wiz said, “The sun, I love watching it rise.” He laughed at Prompto’s wrinkled nose. “It’s a nice reminder that, for right now, things are alright. I can wake up and see the sun rise and be grateful for everything the gods have given me.”

Prompto’s hand froze, and he thought of Gentiana, wondering why mentions of the gods and their messengers kept coming into his life. He pushed her from his mind and resumed sketching thick lines to form the strong back of a chocobo.

“You’re good, did you have lessons as a kid?”

Prompto snorted. “I don’t think I ever was a child.”

“And what do you mean by that?” Wiz asked as he stood and took their empty cups to his kitchen.

Thinking of the best way to answer, Prompto sketched a few more lines. It felt damning to say this - he hadn’t told anyone about his parents and his sister had already known, so no words were ever needed between them - but he liked to imagine it could be liberating. Damnation and liberation, two sides of a coin. “Most parents love their kids. My parents kicked me out when I was twelve and I went to live with my sister when I was fifteen.”

“Three years alone does put a damper on a relationship,” Wiz said lightly, settling back into his seat.
“I was left alone plenty before then, too.” Prompto huffed as he stuck the pencil behind his ear and smudged some of the charcoal to form feathers. If they continued talking about this, he would say something he would regret and he didn’t want pity thrown his way. “I don’t want to talk about my childhood.”

Wiz accepted this as readily as he had everything else, but it didn’t mean he planned on asking anything less troublesome. “Then who hit you? I’m not a gambling man, but if I were, I would bet none of those boys did.”

“You do know I am a criminal right? I’ve been to prison.”

If Prompto were hoping Wiz would back off, he was mistaken when a sharp laugh bubbled out of Wiz. “So have I kid, nearly everyone has these days.” When Prompto gave him a skeptical look, he laughed again. “I was a stupid kid at one point too. I got in a fight at a bar.” Tapping the side of his head, he said, “I don’t even know what started it, but I remember getting hit in the head with a jug and waking in a cell. I wasn’t there long though.”

“There’s a difference between prison and holding you know,” Prompto said but couldn’t keep the smile from spreading - trying to imagine Wiz fighting in a bar was too funny not to. Wiz looked at him expectantly and he fought the urge to touch his cheek. “There was another in our party. We had… a disagreement and he hit me in the face with a horse crop.”

Wiz stared at him, looking for a lie and finding none. “Did you kill him?” he asked, softly. There was no judgment in his voice.

“No.” Prompto snorted, his voice a touch bitter. “No, I wish I had though. I cut his ropes and told him to leave.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll come back for you?”

The question pulled a startled laugh from Prompto. “Oh no, I’m worried I’ll go back for him when this is all said and done. I have a soft spot for idiots.”

Wiz’s eyes lightened as he laughed. “You’re a good kid. Do the others know what you did?”

With a shake of his head, Prompto left it there and thankfully Wiz sensed he didn’t want to talk about it anymore and switched the topic to something much safer. It wasn’t long before Ignis woke and found them still sitting at the table, discussing the best ways to care for chocobos. The small smile he gave Prompto was happy as he pulled out a set of potions.

“Be blessed in your endeavors,” Prompto said automatically before popping the cork. Relief flooded his system as he took his first swallow and the throbbing of his cheek mellowed to a distant annoyance easily pushed aside.

After a quick breakfast, everyone went to pack and when he was back in their room, Prompto sighed. He felt better around Wiz, but there was a tension in his shoulders which dissipated once away from him. The soft trailing of Noctis’s fingers on his lower back helped to get rid of it altogether. Gladio and Ignis were both in the room with them, but Prompto couldn’t help leaning into his hold for a second, no more than that, but the smile Noctis gave him in return was enough.

It put a pang in his chest to look around the room they had stayed in knowing he would have to say goodbye to it. Wiz had put so much love into it that it was almost too much to know it would soon be empty again. Saying goodbye hurt even more. Standing before Wiz as the others said their goodbyes, he realized he didn’t know what to say.
“If you head back this way, come see me. I need someone who knows the birds like you do around here,” Wiz said. Prompto nodded, but without anything to add on, he gave a small smile and turned to where everyone waited for him.

Gladio helped Prompto onto the back of his chocobo, and after a quick final wave back at Wiz, they were off. A heaviness pulled at him - not the exhaustion from the previous days, but the kind that comes from being awake too long.

Ignis eyed him with a thoughtful expression. “We will stop before nightfall so we don’t tire you out again.”

Gratitude was an emotion Prompto knew but didn’t know how to express with anything other than with a small smile and a murmured thanks. He didn’t want to let the silence between them grow - not after how he had been the day before. There were questions he wanted to ask - like if the exhaustion he felt was a result of the infection seeping into his skin or if it was to be expected after all his emotions had been thrown through a whirlwind and spat back out. Even though they were poised on the tip of his tongue, ready to be asked, Prompto didn’t. He was almost afraid of the answer - of finding out if he was weak or worse, if Gentiana caused this from invading his mind. So, rather than talk about himself Prompto gave into some of his curiosities.

“Why do you have an accent?”

Ignis gave him a calculated look, much like the one he had given him the night before, and it wasn’t any less disconcerting the second time around. Prompto squirmed in his saddle. “I wasn’t born in Lucis.”

The simple truth made Prompto want to give up a revelation of his own but instead asked, “Where then?”

A faraway look glazed over Ignis’s eyes. “You’re not a native to these parts so I doubt you would know the name of it. It’s far to the west of Lucis - close enough to be considered a part of the kingdom, but far away enough that no one cared when the plague came through.”

Prompto watched him curiously. Whenever he gave lectures about things he was always animated and willing to answer any question - but here, in the face of his own past, Ignis’s voice had gone flat and Prompto knew repressed anger when he saw it. “How did you end up as Noct’s adviser?”

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Ignis smiled faintly. “My uncle is the adviser of King Regis. When he heard of the plague he tried to find a way to save as many people as he could, but the other lords heard of what was happening, they opposed him. They said the cost of having that many people not contributing to the economy of the land was too high, so my uncle set off on his own to save us.” Sadness colored his words, though the smile remained, and Prompto wished he could reach out and comfort Ignis. “He came too late for everyone but me. So he took me to the castle and let me live there and start an education.”

“And that’s when you met Noctis?”

“And that’s when I met Noctis,” Ignis agreed. “I’ve been at his side for almost fifteen years now.”

Raising his eyebrows, Prompto had to admit he was impressed. Fifteen years ago he wasn’t doing anything that cool - more than likely he had been running around like some kind of heathen. In fact, fifteen years ago was right around the time his sister had been taken away. Shaking himself out of his dark thoughts, he asked, “The accent stayed this entire time?”
A wicked grin spread across Ignis’s face and Prompto stared, shocked he was capable of making such a mischievous look. “Oh, I’m sure if I tried I could mimic the way Noctis and Gladio spoke, but I hold onto my accent out of spite.”

Snorting, Prompto tried to imagine Ignis being petty and he couldn’t. “You know, I’ve often found spite to be a perfect motivator.”

“I agree, hence why I do it. People…” Ignis trailed off and his smile faded. “People were not kind to me when I came to Insomnia and I was called all manner of wonderful things. Xenophobia is destroying the unity of Insomnia. I keep my accent to show everyone who told me I would be nothing that I’ve become something, and one day, I will be at Noct’s side when he becomes king. Together we will change the way our kingdom looks at those from other places.”

Noctis was lucky to be surrounded by such wonderful people who cared for his country as much as he did and cared for him even more. Prompto smiled. “I’m glad you’re with him Iggy, he needs good people in his life.”

“You could stay with him too you know, join his Kingsglaive and stand at his side,” Ignis said quietly.

Prompto wished he could say yes. He wanted nothing more than to do so, but he was bound by duty as much as Ignis or Gladio and he shook his head mournfully. “I need to go home to my sister, she needs me.”

“You and I are very much alike, you know,” Ignis said. “We both have very little family to speak of and are fiercely loyal to them. Gladio has an overabundance of relatives and I often wonder if he is better off than I am because of it.”

“You both have ended up in the same place regardless of the amount of family you have,” said Prompto and Ignis nodded thoughtfully. They fell quiet as they rode onwards towards their goal.

About an hour before lunch, Prompto started to feel the exhaustion of the day catching up with him. He fought to stay awake but found the more he tried, the quicker his thoughts turned back into the slippery slope of uncertainty. Ignis called for a halt when Prompto swayed in his saddle.

Much like the first day on their trip, he was too tired to wait for anyone to help him and swung one leg over the side, falling rather ungracefully onto the grass.

“Prompto? Do you want to eat?” Ignis asked. His voice sounded far away, as if he were at the end of a tunnel rather than right beside him.

Shaking his head, Prompto curled into a ball and sighed, hoping they would let him nap instead of forcing him to stay awake. Some part of him whispered he should be worried about this tiredness, but it was that same exhaustion that was pulling him too far down the rabbit hole to care. His dreams were strange, flickering between the library and the darkness where he could hear voices talking about him.

“I’m worried about him.”

“Is it his wound?”

“No, it’s not infected as far as I know. The antidote took care of that.”

“What can we-”
And back to the library, flickering back and forth and back and forth so much Prompto let out a groan of frustration. One or the other, let him stay in one reality.

When he woke up, he was surprised he was no longer curled in the grass, but instead tucked against Noctis’s side while his fingers carded through his hair. The fingers froze when Noctis saw Prompto blinking himself awake, but Ignis and Gladio hadn’t noticed yet and were talking about a book they had both read.

“How do you feel?” Noctis murmured. His fingers started their gentle movements again, and Prompto’s eyelids fluttered shut as he sighed.

“Strange,” he admitted. “I can’t explain it, it’s just… too much.” He was still feeling the insistent need to sleep, but after allowing himself to feel the gentle touch of Noctis a little longer, he pushed himself up, blinking in the afternoon sun.

“Glad to see you’re back with us,” Gladio said, breaking off his conversation with Ignis.

“Sorry for holding us back.” There was a tugging in Prompto’s chest - a familiar bloom of shame and anger which came from apologizing so much.

“Nonsense, let’s hurry to our campsite so you can get some real rest,” Ignis assured. Nothing else was said - there was nothing they could say when Prompto stood wobbling, too tired to do anything else - but he gritted his teeth and ignored the flash of pain coursing through his cheek as he forced himself to his chocobo.

Helplessness felt a lot like his grip was slipping, and he wasn’t surprised when anger welled in its place. Both his body and his mind were failing him and Prompto refused to be the reason for the quest discontinuing. With a soundless snarl, he slung himself on his chocobo and resisted the urge to yank on the reins when the bird startled under him. Instant guilt bloomed and he pet his chocobo in apology.

Exhaustion killed his anger far more effectively than he would have thought and he ignored the concerned looks shot behind his back, nudging his bird forward only to remember this entire trip he had had help getting onto his chocobo. Too late now, he realized he had given something of himself away, but an hour into riding, he found he didn’t care.

He was debating whether he could perfect the art of riding while asleep when they stopped. Despite the fact they now knew he could get on his chocobo without help, Ignis was there to help him off. Swaying where he stood, Prompto watched as Gladio and Noctis put up the tents. A tug deep in his mind whispered the siren song of sleep and he stumbled into the closest one, falling asleep before he hit the blankets.

Like the night before, his dreams flickered in and out, pulling him deeper until once again he wasn’t asleep - he simply was. Opening his eyes, he found himself back in the library. It wasn’t surprising and Prompto was pleased, because now he had a question for Gentiana. She was already there waiting for him at the table and like last time, there were no lights in the room except the fire burning low in the fireplace. It was real enough to hurt and he wanted to ask if he was only there in his mind. If he were to go through the door to his right, where would he end up? Bowing his head, Prompto took a seat instead of investigating.

“Hello again Prompto,” Gentiana murmured. “I’m glad you are here.”

“Did I have a choice? You’re the reason I’ve been so dead on my feet these past two days, right?”
“It is hard to come to the mortal plane to speak to you. I’m afraid it is as draining on you as it is on me, I am sorry.”

Gentiana seldom opened her eyes, but she fixed Prompto with a fierce stare, one which cut deep into his soul. He was distracted by the thought that she may be a messenger of the gods, but Ignis’s eyes were more beautiful and he hoped she couldn't read his mind when her eyes were open.

“Do you come to offer or to take?”

Tilting his head, Prompto considered her. “Saying I’ve come to take sounds bad but what can I offer anyone?”

Sadness crossed her face and she sighed. “I will see you in a few days. Use that time to rest and to find the answer to what you can offer.”

With effort, Prompto peeled his eyes open. He was tired still, but not the kind of tired he had been before his dream. Now that his suspicions had been laid to rest, he knew it would be another few days at least before he was called upon again. Night had fallen while he was asleep and he could hear the murmurings of the others. Stretching out, he laid in the nest of blankets for a few breaths more to see if he would fall back asleep. When he didn’t, he slipped out of the tent.

Warmth unfurled in his chest when Prompto saw the readiness Gladio scooted over with to make room for him around the fire. There was a desperate wish to ignore that warmth, but when he saw the hopeful look in Noctis’s eyes and the easy smile given to him by Gladio Prompto gave a mental shrug and said screw it. If he was going to fall in love, then damn anything that tried to take it away from him.

“How are you feeling?” Ignis asked as he handed him some cheese and bread. It was soft enough that Prompto wouldn’t have to chew much and he was thankful.

“Good,” he chirped back - and for once, he could say he wasn’t lying.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, commenting, and kudoing!!
If I started up a Spotify playlist for this fic would anyone be interested?
Also, fun fact. The story Wiz told about being in jail was based on a story my dad told me once. He got in a bar fight and someone smashed a tankard on his face and legit crushed the bones by his eye!! It did not end well... for the other guy. My dad beat his ass while holding his eye in so yea my dad was a bad mf. He went to the hospital and they replaced half his face with plastic which was like. WILD TO HEAR ABOUT AS A CHILD. LIKE YOU DID WHAT? but that was a long long long time ago, before he knew my mom.
Also, uhhh if anyone likes the book series Foxhole Court, I actually finally started posting my first fic for that fandom ahh
**Chapter Summary**

They’re getting closer to where they are supposed to be by the day; but before we get there we need a few kisses, a sudden realization, an attempted fight with the gods, some storytelling, and some stargazing. Not at all in that order.

**Chapter Notes**

Hey y'all! Gosh we have come so far, like? Guys, we are getting to the end of this. There's going to be about mmm 17 chapters in part one I think? Thank you to my favorite people as always, I owe you the world and if I ever find a way to repay you for all your kindness and help I will <33 Mils, Angie, Ted I love y'all

Chapter title comes from the song I Found by Amber Run. Usually this song is reserved for another ship of mine but it seemed to fit this chapter so well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“That one is Firestem, the flower who’s heat brought back Shiva’s love for Ifrit,” Gladio said, pointing up to a cluster of stars. They had been at this for an hour, Prompto wide awake and Gladio slowly fading but trying valiantly to stay awake. It was sweet, he thought, that Gladio would be so willing to keep him company and away from damaging thoughts. Gods knew he had too many buzzing around and making a home in his skin.

“At home, it’s called Shiva’s Bane because it was used to drug her. Ifrit had one of the mountain men make it into a drink, which made it so she couldn’t help but fall back into his arms,” Prompto said.

Though the circumstances which had thrown them together were less than ideal, he was grateful for the chance to get to know Gladio. The more time they spent together, the more he found he had in common with him and the stronger the warmth that spread through him in these small intimate moments.

When Gladio rolled over, the dying fire made his amber eyes glow - too much like the gods that had been plaguing Prompto’s dreams, but too beautiful to turn away from. “I didn’t know that the people of Tenebrae hated Ifrit so much. In all your stories, Ifrit has done something wrong.”

“We don’t have much to do in the poor areas except come up with stories, and all stories need a bad guy.”

There had never been a time where Prompto thought about the reason why Ifrit was the villain in most stories, but now he had to wonder if what he said was really true. Uncomfortable with where his thoughts were taking him, he pointed to another cluster of stars. “That star right there? We call it Eos’s Dream because it came into being while she slept. Ifrit tried to steal it since it’s the brightest in the sky.”
Gladio hummed quietly before stretching. “Do you believe in the gods?”

Dropping his arm onto his stomach, Prompto stayed quiet. Before the other day, he would have scoffed and said no - nothing more than a reason for feast days. Now, with Gentiana and the other gods fresh on his mind, he wasn’t sure.

“I’m wary of them,” he said eventually. Afraid that the conversation was suddenly going to go somewhere he couldn’t control, Prompto pushed himself up and held out a hand out to Gladio with a crooked smile. “Come on, bedtime. The elderly need their sleep.”

With a snort, Gladio took his hand and heaved himself up, nearly pulling Prompto back down. “I’m not that much older than you,” he said, “but I won’t argue with sleep. Only if you’re coming too.”

Prompto followed Gladio back to the tent they were sharing and although he wanted to share a tent with Noctis, he wouldn’t complain about sharing one with anyone else. Not when he found comfort with every single one of them - in different ways, yes, but the same feeling was there. Sleep didn’t want to come once they had settled down, but when Prompto tried slipping out of the tent he was stopped by Gladio throwing an arm around his chest and pulling him close. It was an effective way of making sure he didn't move, and Prompto huffed before resigning himself to his fate.

The next few days passed by them smoothly with Prompto snarking at the little things and everyone laughing. He hated to admit it, hated to take pleasure in the absence of Loqi, but Prompto found himself doing exactly that. Loqi had put a wedge between himself and them and nothing Prompto could have done would have changed that. Without the wedge dividing them, it was like it was always meant to be this way - this ease in which they folded into each other.

They were quickly approaching their destination according to Ignis. Before, Prompto had wanted nothing more than to rush there and steal the ring before finally heading home, but now? Now he felt the urge to stall, to pull everyone off the trail for a day of fishing and talking. Through the laughter, he held himself back enough to wonder about Ignis’s offer to stay by Noctis’s side as a guard. It wasn’t possible to do, not for him, but if it were possible, would he take it? Probably.

“You said that you can steal anything. Where’s your proof of that?” Noctis asked during lunch one day.

Raising his eyebrows, Prompto wondered if he should empty his pockets and show them the little comb he stole the day before along with all the small buttons or Noctis’s earring he thought he lost on the second day. Deciding against it, he instead told a story from when he was much younger. “I knew a man once who was a sheepherder, and he was super rich. We… did not get along, to put it lightly.”

The others shared a look - no doubt wondering how and when Prompto would have had a chance to meet such a man when his life had been so spotty. Waving away their unasked questions he continued, “That’s not something I’m getting into today. What matters is he did not like me, and well, I liked to make him mad.” He grinned, remembering many of the fights they had gotten into over the years. “This guy had probably somewhere around a hundred sheep. And then he didn’t.”

Ignis gasped quietly as a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “Prompto, you didn’t.”

“He’s not as rich and he no longer has sheep, but he does have grudging respect for me.”

Shaking his head slowly, Gladio took a bite of food before asking, “Okay, but what did you do to his sheep?”
“All I did was lead them over the hill in the middle of the night and the next morning when he realized they were gone and knew who had done it, I went to get them back. Except they weren’t there anymore so…” He shrugged. “No more sheep.”

He was in a good mood, willing to exchange stories and ride comfortably between them. It felt like he belonged. The exhaustion which had been present the past few days still hadn’t shown up, and he took that to mean Gentiana was keeping to her word. She wouldn’t be back for a while and he planned on making the most of the time given to him. His cheek was his only other bother, still throbbing but hopefully knitting together.

They bathed that night as dinner cooked over the fire, and before he could second guess himself, Prompto took his shirt off when Noctis did. There was the sharp intake of breath behind him, but to his relief no one said anything. He wasn’t sure why he had decided to show them his scars, but now that he had, Prompto cleaned himself with vigor and came out of the river pink and smiling as much as his stitches would allow.

The next morning, he woke up tired - exhausted to his bones as he stifled a groan into Ignis’s back. Why let him wake up at all when Gentiana would come to him in his sleep? *The gods wanted him to suffer more*, a traitorous part of his mind whispered. Ignis rolled over, hair mussed from sleep and blinking in the dim morning light.

“Are you all right?” he asked softly.

Prompto could barely keep his eyes open, but if his nap the other day told him anything it was that Gentiana would only appear at night. Maybe her powers are stronger at night, he mused as the cogs in his brain turned slowly through the gunk.

“Whose power?” Ignis asked. Prompto tried to remember if he had said it out loud and if Ignis’s worried stare was anything to go by, he had. Sitting up, he took in Prompto’s leadlike limbs and the way he struggled to follow suit.

“Messenger of the gods. She comes to me in my dreams,” Prompto mumbled and even talking was too much. He wanted to let his mind slide back behind the glass separating reality and his thoughts. Although he hadn’t planned on telling anyone, the concern was quickly fading into something muted and far away.

Brow furrowing, Ignis ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back and out of his eyes. Prompto wanted to tell him to leave it - he had liked how it looked - but instead, he found himself wishing for one of Noctis’s hugs again. “Prompto, is this why you’ve been so tired lately? What does she want?”

Prompto shrugged - or at least he thought he did, but he couldn’t be sure. He realized that he was sitting up and wondered when that had happened. “I’m not sure.”

“I must confess... I’m not sure what to do in this situation,” Ignis said, reaching out to Prompto’s face gently. He closed his eyes, melting into the touch. It was warm and *almost* everything he needed. The only thing that would have made it better was if everyone else were in there too.

“There’s nothing we can do, she’ll come tonight and not before.”

Ignis pulled his hand away from his cheek and crawled out of the tent as Prompto watched with heavy eyes threatening to close any second. “I’ll wake the others and tell them we won’t be moving on today. You stay here and rest.”
Worry for Noctis came swiftly and cut through Prompto’s exhaustion. He didn’t need anything else to fret about when he already had all of Lucis resting on his shoulders. Struggling to keep his thoughts in order, Prompto said, “Don’t tell the others what’s happening. Please.”

Ignis caught on right away and nodded without hesitation. It was as if the strings were cut on a marionette and Prompto’s bones pulled deep until he slumped back down. Frustration warred through him, battling everything else piling onto him, but the fight was over before he could find the energy to do anything about it. He wanted to shout and yell, wanted to tell the others that he could continue on - it wouldn’t be hard to tie him to the saddle.

They couldn’t be too far away from the ring now and he just wanted to steal it and go home. He knew no one would go for it though and their misplaced concern for him was every bit confusing now as it had been a month ago when they started this journey.

Even though nothing was stopping him from falling asleep, he suddenly found it near impossible. Closing his eyes did no good, his body and mind were so tired and yet the blissful escape of sleep wouldn’t come. He could feel it in every breath he took, weighing him down as if he were nothing more than a large rock dropped off a bridge. Trying to sit up and tell Ignis his saddle idea was no good. He couldn’t move. A frustrated cry tore through his throat before he could stop it.

“Prompto?” Noctis had slipped inside the tent silently and Prompto wasn’t sure he liked how he hadn’t noticed, but when slender fingers found their way into his hair, he discovered he really, really didn’t care. Sighing at the touch, he nuzzled his face into the blankets.

“You doing okay? Iggy said you weren’t feeling well again,” Noctis murmured.

Humming, Prompto didn’t know how to answer. “Can’t sleep.”

Withdrawing his hand, Noctis crawled over to Ignis’s vacated spot and settled into it. “Whenever I couldn’t sleep as a kid, Ignis used to talk to me until I fell asleep.” He shyly reached out to trace Prompto’s lips with his fingertips. “I don’t know many stories, I’m sorry. But I could tell you about my home where I grew up.”

And he did. Noctis spoke in a low voice, his words weaving around banisters and rooms that he had run through as a child, wrapping around his father’s cane and painting the color of his eyes. Noctis talked until his voice grew quiet and Prompto realized he was no closer to falling asleep as he had been before. But now, with Noctis lulled to sleep by his own stories and an arm secure around his waist, Prompto didn’t want to move. He dozed uncomfortably between the realm of his past and the knowledge of his present.

At some point, in the warmth of Noctis’s embrace, Prompto must have dozed off into a real, but dreamless, sleep, because the next time he managed to open his eyes Gladio was rubbing comforting circles into his back and reading a book. Ignis was asleep, tucked on the other side of Noctis.

“Take a long look. This is a rarity you’ll not see again for a hundred years,” Gladio said. At Prompto’s confusion, he gestured with his book towards Ignis and grinned. “Ignis never sleeps during the day. He’s got too much to do to ever relax.”

Prompto stared, despite the pull of unobtainable sleep dragging him closer to the edge of oblivion. “You guys are really busy at the castle, right?”

“If it isn’t one thing it’s a hundred other things that have us running around.”
Fluttering his eyelashes closed, Prompto murmured, “I’m glad I have some use, letting them rest as much as they need.”

Gladio spoke again, but Prompto ignored it and close his eyes. Sleep still wouldn’t come, but at least he could pretend it did. On his back, Gladio’s hand never stopped moving. Hours later, after he and Ignis had left the tent again leaving only Noctis to curl up at Prompto’s side, Prompto allowed the lethargic pull to finally take him down.

There was the disorienting flickering, present and past and before he could even take a full breath, he was there. Fire popped in the fireplace and the rows of books were silent. There was a window to Prompto’s back, and a sudden, vicious need to see what lay outside of it choked him with its intensity. He stumbled to the window and slapped his hands on the thick glass, heaving shuddering breaths. Outside the window it was pitch black, stretching endlessly and not at all bathed in the late afternoon sun. Leaning his forehead against the warmed glass, he fought to get his emotions under control.

“Did you think this was anything more than what I had presented to you?”

Gentiana’s voice was soft at his back and he resisted the urge to start hurling books at her. He had plenty at his disposal. “It’s not a dream, but it’s not real either,” he said flatly.

She gestured to the room. “I wanted something to put you at ease. Would you rather this?” The room flickered to small, pure white room made of marble. The lack of windows or doors devastated Prompto and he shook his head even as she changed it back into the library. “There is nothing beyond this room, I’m sorry,” she said once he was breathing easier. “I can’t bring you—”

“I still don’t know what I can offer the gods that they don’t already have,” Prompto interrupted even as he choked on his breaths.

“An alliance,” Gentiana said simply. “Though I can see you need some directing.”


The second part of what she said caught up to him, and he watched as Gentiana pushed away from the table. Backing up to the wall, Prompto debated which way to run, but Gentiana was already in his face, cool fingertips gently holding his head in place.

“What are you going to do to me?” he asked, gritting his teeth.

She opened her eyes and gave him a rare smile. “Giving you direction,” she murmured before leaning forward and pressing her lips on the mess of stitches on his cheek. Pain flared throughout his body and he choked out a gasp, trying to rip his face from her grip, but as soon as the pain came it was replaced with a cold blast of numbness that made his toes curl.

The library and tent blended seamlessly in a confusing mixture until Prompto found himself flat on his back in the tent for good. With shaking fingers, he traced the path of the cut he had become accustomed to, only to realize there was nothing there. A strangled noise came from his throat as he realized what Gentiana had done with her kiss - she had healed him. He laughed in disbelief.

Noctis’s sleepy voice came from his side. “Prompto?” When there was no reply, he sat up, eyes drawn to Prompto’s cheek. “How?” he whispered.

A thousand different things came to mind - how he had been visited by a messenger of the gods for days now; how they wanted something from him, but he had no idea what; how he had been healed with a kiss and how there was nothing hurting at all.
“Can I kiss you, Noctis?”

Noctis nodded, smile unfurling bright, and that was all Prompto needed before he launched himself at him. It was the kiss of two people who had been waiting for so long and finally had the breath in their lungs to do so. They kissed like they were the air they needed to survive, until their lips were sore and bruised in the best of ways. They laid down, Prompto’s weight pressing down easily on top of Noctis.

With Noctis’s hands tangled in his hair and his heart thudding painfully fast in his chest, Prompto was convinced the heat between them would burn the world to smoke and ash. He wanted and needed more than he ever had before and a sound in the back of his throat begged to come out between his gasps.

Pulling away, Prompto drank in the sight of a disheveled Noctis - of the man who he cared for more than anything. He wanted to weep at how beautiful and cruel it was for the gods to let him have this when they knew he would only leave in the end. Staying away from him was impossible and their mouths found each other again as Prompto fell apart. It was unlike any story he had ever read or heard. The thrumming in his body told him that there was a word for this, even when he vehemently wanted to deny it with every press of their lips. For every lie his mouth told, Prompto gave Noctis the truth.

A realization dawned on him slowly and he knew that no matter what Noctis asked, he would say yes, and just as easily, he knew what Gentiana and the gods wanted him to offer. Too give himself to a cause that would never have been his to fight otherwise, an alliance based on truth rather than the lies he had fed everyone, would mean breaking every other loyalty he ever held up to that point.

Prompto broke their kiss and pushed away Noctis, who froze in confusion. “We need to tell the others."

Shaking, he crawled from the tent into the night and as he waited for Noctis to join him, he put himself back together slowly. What Gentiana - what he - wanted was not going to happen. It couldn’t happen, and it wasn’t fair for the gods to tempt him with the knowledge that they wanted it as well. The smart thing to do would be to break off his relationship with Noctis and the quiet bloom of affection he held for the others, but Prompto loved nothing more than stupid ideas. His lips twisted into a soundless snarl and he swiftly made up his mind.

No matter what the gods wanted, he was going to do as he pleased, as he had every other day of his life. Prompto wasn’t letting this go. They would have to tear these feelings from his cold, dead, hands.

It was foggy, only a few hours away from dawn, but he needed to tell the others the truth - or at least part of it. When he heard footsteps behind him, he turned and met them eye to eye. Ignis was silent, eyes narrowing to his cheek with alarming precision.

Gladio stepped forward, hand hanging in the balance between them as if too afraid to touch and prove it true. “How did it happen?”

Running his thumb over his cheek, Prompto swallowed around the sour taste in his mouth as it pooled low in his stomach. As thankful as he should be for what Gentiana had gifted him with, it came with a price he wasn’t sure he could pay.

“I’m not sure,” Prompto said and hated himself for lying to the very people he had been healed for.
Ignis was not fooled, the earlier confession of Gentiana’s visits heavy in his pointed stare. “You’re not sure,” he repeated, flatly.

Grimacing, Prompto shrugged. “I’ve been dreaming of a woman who claims to be a messenger of the gods. Today she healed my face to prove it.”

“But why…” Noctis faltered and he looked away.

“Why me?” Prompto smiled wryly. “Or someone like me, specifically?”

Noctis refused to meet his eyes, and that was enough of an answer.

“It’s okay Noct, I get what you mean.” The tension in his shoulder visibly disappeared, and Prompto gave him an encouraging smile. He couldn’t fault Noctis for thinking the very thing he thought every day. “Who knows? Who am I to question the will of the gods?”

It answered nothing and everything all at once. No one could argue with that logic, but Prompto knew this was far from over. Fortunately for him, they were all tired and nothing more could be said. They bid each other a good night and in their tent, Noctis kissed Prompto until they fell asleep.

Sometime before dawn, Prompto woke with a giddiness which hadn’t been present for a long time. He snuck silently from the tent to face the cliff behind the campsite. Flexing his fingers experimentally, he crossed the clearing to scale the wall.

By the time he collapsed at the top, alive and shaking with exertion and a healthy dose of height-induced fear, the sun was peeking out from behind the horizon. The night retired and the day awoke with Prompto basking in the rays of warmth caressing his body. He remembered the old thief back at home who had taught him how to climb and how he used to say, “You have to climb occasionally to give the gods a chance at you.”

Squinting in the bright light, Prompto drew himself to his full height and did just that. “I am here, and I will not leave them,” he whispered fiercely. “I don’t know how to give you what you want, but you can’t tempt me like this. Let me fall if you think I’m unworthy of them, but I will try to figure this out first.”

Despite his worry for the future and what it would bring, Prompto looked over the landscape around them and realized he could say he was genuinely happy to be alive. There was a softness to his life he had never had - not like falling asleep in Noctis’s arms, or when Ignis smiled at him, or when Gladio laughed at his stories. He wanted to stay with them, and he would fight for them. He only needed to figure out how and thankfully, he had time.

He was climbing down when Gladio and Ignis stepped out of their tent, yawning and stretching. From over his shoulder, he could see the affectionate way that Gladio ducked down to press a kiss on Ignis’s forehead before glancing up at at the cliff face. Too far away to hear what was being said, Prompto laughed when Gladio gestured up at him and Ignis turned with his hands on his hips.

Jumping down when it was safe enough to do so, he sauntered over to them with a grin. “Good morning.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” Gladio huffed, once he had determined that Prompto was only insane, not hurt.

Waving away the question, Prompto went to wash up. “I was contemplating life and now I’m done sneaking off, promise.”
“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Ignis said, wryly. “Aren’t you afraid of falling?”

Prompto paused to think. He had never had an answer to this question before, but now, with certainty, he said, “The death of all thieves is to fall. My god won’t let me fall. Not yet.”

The conversation ended there and Prompto figured if they truly no longer trusted him, he would have had a lecture of some kind. Instead, the morning went on as usual with breakfast and breaking down of the tents and soon they were on the path to the ring in no time. With Loqi no longer with them and Prompto no longer feeling like he was dying, conversations were light and cheerful, ranging from places they had been to the funniest things that they had seen. Prompto’s stories were wildly different from theirs, but it put a new bawdier spin on things - not that anyone genuinely seemed to mind.

They rode all day, their chocobos picking their way over rocks and following Ignis’s compass. Eventually the river carried itself a different direction and Prompto was glad for their water skins. There was no trail at all by afternoon and they picked through brush and stone which rubbed whatever bare skin was showing. There was a quiet moment of deliberation to decide if they should leave the birds behind. Prompto vehemently argued against it saying there was no telling what could be out there. In the end, they led their chocobos behind them in a single file line. Conversation petered off into soft grunts and curses when their feet slipped on the rocky surface below.

When they stopped for lunch, Ignis explained that there was only one river in the area, the Wennath River and that they would meet back with it by nightfall. “The Wennath carved the cliffs we’ve been following and in spring when it overflows and floods our fields. It adds nutrients to the land, which is why Lucis has some of the best farming on the continent.”

Prompto watched as Noctis seemingly ignored what Ignis said, but he knew by now that the calculating gleam in his eyes meant he was putting away the information to think about later.

Crossing the dystopia, he felt his upbringing making itself known once more. He felt too much like a bug caught in the open and desperately wished to see the sky blocked out by trees. The mountain rose to his left, but rather than closing him in comfortably, he felt as if the mountain was turning its back on him. The thought made him restless and more than once he looked to the sky in search of Gentiana or any of the other gods mocking him.

By evening they had indeed caught back up with the river and following it meant facing the mountains with all the world at his back. As they rounded a large bend, they were met by a river bank, water lapping quietly at the walls of the cliffs which had steadily grown closer together. Prompto blinked. It was a dead end, and he turned back the way they came, wondering where they had gone wrong and how long it would take them to get back on track. He almost missed what Ignis was saying.

"This is it, we finally made it."

"This is what?" Prompto asked looking around. There was nothing here, not ahead nor behind, and nothing they had passed in the last two hours had given any indication of something particularly noteworthy.

"This is where you prove to us that your reputation was well earned," Ignis replied with a teasing smile. Had this been said at the beginning of their journey, Prompto would have thought he was mocking him, but now he could tell Ignis was excited to see what he could really do - for him to show them that this trip was well worth it.
Prompto frowned at the river and cliff walls before scanning the rocky soil stretching to the horizon. As far as he could tell there was nothing to steal, nothing at all. A traitorous part of his mind said it didn't take an idiot to realize that this had been an elaborate set-up from the beginning. Spin a story to a troublesome thief and give him the hope of freedom, take him out to steal some magical ring that may or may not actually exist, have him fall in love with these beautiful idiots, then kill him. Easy.

It seemed a little extreme for Ardyn to have the prince of Lucis to do it so far away when a public execution in Tenebrae would have worked just fine, but then again, Ardyn was nothing if not extreme and always in want of a good joke.

Realizing just how far down his thoughts had spiraled, Prompto firmly focused on the present and the truth that the men surrounding him would do him no harm. If he was confused, it was because he didn’t have all the facts, which was more often lately the case than he would have liked. As Ignis turned back to the cliff wall with his hands on his hips, Prompto decided to give his trust entirely to his companions - his faith, his heart, his life. Even if it meant going against everything he had ever known.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, thank you, thaNK YOU!! You are the best readers a gal could ask for <33 I'm not sure how updating next month (that's sad that I went from every two weeks to once a month ahh) will go because next month is nanowrimo and while I wont be taking part in it, my beta will and I don't wanna ask her to edit on top of all the writing she'll be doing!! But pleeeassee feel free to hit me up on tumblr and I would love to chat with some of y'all!! http://www.prrrrmm.tumblr.com/
Igns, bless him, was kind enough to explain the situation to the best of his abilities. “We’ll have to wait until nearly midnight for the entrance to show up,” he said, which didn’t make much sense either, but Prompto reasoned if it were a magic ring they were after, the entrance would be magical as well.

“Might as well eat and get some rest then,” Gladio said, taking Noctis with him in search of anything that would burn. Prompto stood to help but paused when Ignis took his hand.

“You need to rest for tonight, who knows what you’ll find inside.” His brow furrowed in worry and Prompto reached out to smooth the crease with his thumb - much like he had wanted to do the day before.

“I can steal anything,” he said, reassuring Ignis and himself at the same time. He was beyond scared of going into something he had no prior knowledge of, but more than that he was excited. There was no way it didn’t show on his face and by the time Gladio and Noctis came back, Prompto was bouncing from foot to foot. While Ignis cooked and the sun set he started the long process of stretching - backbends, toe touches, slow finger flexes. It wasn’t until he was almost done that a wave of dizziness hit him. Clutching his head, Prompto let out a low moan and sank to his knees when strong hands grabbed his elbows.

“Prom? You okay?”

Eyes watering, he looked up into Gladio and Noctis’ swimming faces with Ignis just beyond, looking at him with concern. He wanted to reassure them, tried to tell them not to worry, but his vision faded and all the air punched from his chest as he fell through the space of his consciousness.

He knew, rather than felt, when he was somewhere more solid. Blinking his eyes open, Prompto groaned again, this time out of pure frustration. “You have to stop doing this you know.”
Gentiana didn’t look up from the scroll lying on the table before her and frowned like she had seen something distasteful.

As he stepped closer and squinted to read it, Prompto suddenly had the feeling that she would not appreciate him doing that and stopped. Gentiana had never shown any hostility before, but there was something about the chill in the air that sank into his bones and warned him away.

“Do you come to offer or to take?”

Swallowing heavily, Prompto hesitated. Last time he had said he had nothing to offer, but now he knew that was not true. Still, here at this moment, he couldn't do that. “To take,” he whispered, mouth dry.

Fixing him once again with a heavy stare, Gentiana said, “Take what you seek if you find it then. Do not offend the gods.” She added Prompto’s name at the bottom of her scroll and placed a small mark beside it.

He woke to Noctis snarling at Ignis, and although Prompto only caught the tail end of it, he could guess what happened while he was out of it.

“-enough to do this. We need to go home.”

“Noctis, this is not a choice we get to make!” Ignis sounded frustrated, like they had gone through this more than once.

The only one who noticed Prompto was back with them was Gladio, who brushed his hair from his face tenderly. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. It was Gentiana again,” Prompto said, too late in remembering he had only told Ignis about the recurring visits.

By this point, the others noticed he was awake and turned to him expectantly. “Prompto, if you don’t think you are well enough to go on you need to let us know,” Noctis said.

“I think he needs to tell us who Gentiana is,” Gladio interrupted.

Locking eyes with Ignis, Prompto tried to read what was there and upon finding nothing but the unconditional support he had learned to see, he nodded. While they ate, Prompto did his best to tell them the truth, leaving out the parts where Gentiana hinted that the gods wanted him to join the Lucians.

When Ignis asked what the gods wanted, he shrugged and said, “I mean, I’ll say it again but who am I to know what they want?” The lie felt just as disgusting in his mouth the second time as it did the first time. “I think the gods really want this ring found,” he said after a thoughtful moment. They did seem intent on finding the ring, but Prompto couldn’t help but wonder if the gods wanted him to steal it or if they did this to anyone who sought it. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“I don’t like it,” Gladio said.

Prompto laughed more bitterly than he had intended. “I’m not the biggest fan of it either.” With a deep sigh, he rubbed his face and slid his into his long hair as he stood as tall as he could. “It’s almost midnight. Let’s eat and then I can steal this thing so we’ll all be done with this.”

It was another half an hour before they heard what Ignis had been waiting for - a light rumbling
that grew louder and stronger in the space of a few seconds. Standing was hard and Prompto clung to Noctis as they watched the last of the river disappear as if the gods had turned off a giant tap somewhere. Where the waterfall had been was now an empty doorway and Prompto stood with his mouth open in wonder.

“Even with our rest at Wiz’s, we got here a day early,” Ignis said, “The water will begin to flow again before dawn, so you’ll have to be out again before that. The temple will fill up and you’ll be trapped.” Handing Prompto a small pack wrapped in leather, Ignis gave him a once over. “If you want to back out now, please let us know.”

Prompto shot him a grin, excitement growing by the minute, and took the tools. Raising his eyebrows in surprise, he nearly laughed. “These are mine.”

At his side, Noctis shifted and rubbed the back of his neck. “Ah, yeah. They were the ones taken off of you when you were arrested. We didn’t know what you would need.”

He mulled over the words. “It was always going to be me? You knew even then?”

Ignis smiled ruefully. “The man you bragged to in the wine shop was one of King Ardyn’s men in disguise. You all but announced your presence to him, and then us through him. After all, we are all in this together.”

The twists in this tale grew more numerous as the days went by, but as much as Prompto wanted to think about the coincidences and what had been brought about by the gods, he had a job to do. He knew what was in his pack and said, “I’ll need a light.”

Gladio dug around in one of the bags and pulled out a small lantern. “This has six hours worth of light in it. Be back before it runs out okay? Oh, and here-” Digging around in another bag, he pulled out a thick crowbar. “Just in case.”

Prompto didn’t like the thought that he would possibly need it to fend off something from him, but as he took it in hand he had to admit it was a small comfort. A gun would be more helpful, but he had already figured out that they didn’t have any with them forever ago. Turning to the entrance once more, he wondered what kind of thing could be kept as a watchdog in a place that was underwater for more than half the year. Snakes, he thought with a shudder. Snakes could be in there.

“Do you know if anyone has ever tried this before?” he asked Ignis.

“Several attempts have been made.”

“And?”

Ignis looked sick. “No one has ever made it out.”

“Ah.” Gripping the lantern in one hand and the crowbar in the other, Prompto squared his shoulders. It was time to go.

As he scrambled up the stone steps leading towards the doorway, Gladio called, “You have three nights to try. Don’t drown yourself on the first one.”

Taking that as good of a goodbye as he was going to get, Prompto stuck a hand up in a wave and slipped inside the darkened entryway.

It was pitch black and with fumbling fingers he lit the lamp. It wasn’t as bright as he would have
liked, but it was enough to see the marble walls on either side. Before him stood a door, also made of marble, and he groaned. He could only imagine how heavy it was going to be to move it and as he set the lamp down in the ankle deep water still flowing through the room, he entertained the idea of the others coming with him to help. Ignis’s intelligence, Gladio’s strength, and Noctis’s unwavering support had grown to mean the world to him, but now it was his turn to mean something to them.

Pushing against the door, he muttered a quick prayer to the god of thieves. It was nothing more than a superstition ingrained into him by the people who taught him how to be a thief, but meeting with one of the messengers of the gods added some weight to it. Send a prayer when you start your work, send a prayer as you finish, and leave a gift once a month on the altar of the thief god. Since no one knew what his name was, there were small areas that were marked by the symbol of swiftness for thieves to leave little gifts at. Prompto preferred earrings, while the old man who taught him liked to leave brooches.

After what seemed an eternity, the door swung open and more water rushed out, soaking him to his waist. It flowed quickly and he snatched up his lantern before it could be knocked down.

Once through the door, it swung back behind him and Prompto flinched. The room wasn’t small, but the idea of not having a way out put a falter in his steps. Moonlight fell through a hole in the ceiling and Prompto went to stand beneath it, looking up at the night sky. When the water began to fill the temple again, this was where it would come into first. When the room and temple were full, water would continue to flow through the chamber, but most of it would carry over the top to hide the doorway again. It was the work of a genius and he wondered how long ago it had been built. Thinking back to Ignis’s stories, it had to have been at least five hundred years, if it was to hold the ring.

A shiver wracked his body and Prompto shot up another quick prayer. Shaking his head to clear it of any more foolishness, he crossed the room to the doorway on the far side. Like the outer door, this one was made of marble. The latches on it were simple, a stone locking bar fitted into a slot, and Prompto frowned. This was supposed to be hard - that was why no one had found the ring yet, right?

Shoving the door open and stepping through, he jumped as it began to swing shut behind him, almost clipping him as it did. His breath caught in his throat and his hands flew out, nearly dropping the lamp and crowbar, but nothing else mattered except the walls on either side of him. They were so narrow that his shoulders brushed the walls, and the door on the far side seemed forever away. The ceiling was too high for the dim light of his lamp to reach and that was the room’s only saving grace - if he had been able to see it, it would have felt like it was pressing down on him.

“Come steal the ring Prompto, they said, it will be loads of fun Prompto, they said,” he muttered as he stumbled along to one of the doors. “At least the water isn’t as strong here.”

Talking to himself was silly, but he would do anything to take his mind off of the walls closing in on him; anything to keep himself from fleeing back to the safety of the outdoors.

“Gladio, for sure, would not fit in here,” he said as he reached the door and eyed it critically. It was a little easier to take his mind off it when faced with the metal door and locks to match. Strangely, there was no sign of rust. The locks were complicated and it took him several minutes to get the door open and he grinned triumphantly as he poked his head through. On the other end was another door. Grin fading, Prompto sighed and hunted for something to jam under the door besides his foot. Otherwise, opening it to let himself out again would be a pain.
All he had was his leather pack and his crowbar, neither of which he wanted to give up, so in the end Prompto used one of his shoes, which were wet and uncomfortable anyway. Tucking the other shoe in his belt to use later, he wedged the other under the door. Barefoot, he stepped down the thankfully bigger hallway to the other door. He was only halfway when the lamplight revealed something about its surface - it was perfectly smooth. If there was a lock on the door, there was no keyhole on this side to open it.

Cursing loudly, Prompto turned back to the door behind him just as the water washed his shoe from behind it and it began to swing shut.

Prompto was fast - it was his biggest asset to himself and at that moment it saved his life. Throwing himself towards the closing door, he shoved his hand out to stop it. The metal bit into his skin, tearing painfully, and with a hissed exhale, Prompto wedged his other hand into the space he’d saved. This door, like the other, was perfectly smooth on the inside. Nerves jittering, he pulled it open as much as he could before flinging himself out of the room. The door slammed behind him.

Clutching his bleeding hand to his chest, Prompto collapsed to the ground with shuddering breaths. The knowledge that if he had gotten trapped, he wouldn’t have died immediately was not comforting and only worsened his growing fear of this place. Pushing himself up, he cast a quick look at the door once more. He had lost his lamp and crowbar in there and a quick flash of self-loathing took over before he shoved it down. He was a thief, a damn good one too, or he would have been caught. The others believed in him and he needed to get his act together. There was nothing to do but go on.

Enough moonlight filtered in through the holes in the ceiling that he didn’t need his lantern to see by, but his hand had been crushed and several fingers were likely broke. That made it more than a little difficult to open the lock on the second door. He persisted, even with his throbbing fingers and the blood making all his tools slick.

Once it was open, Prompto reached around to check for a keyhole on the inside. He even checked to be sure that the keyhole he felt was a real one, not just a drilled hole meant to deceive. When he was sure that it was a real lock, he wedged his other shoe under the door and crossed the threshold into the pitch-black ahead.

“At least out of everything, I’m not afraid of the dark,” he murmured as he dug into the pockets of his pants.

There were the matches in a silver case he’d picked up at the inn the first night on the road and five or six more on the second night. The ones he had taken from Loqi were wrapped in oiled paper and wouldn’t be bothered by the water. In his other pocket, he had a knife he’d stolen from a man sat next to them during lunch one day and several more pieces of the leather thong to tie his hair up should he lose one and beef jerky.

He ate a piece of jerky while he contemplated what to do. He had no doubts about his ability to open any locked door, so long as it had a keyhole, and he was used to working in the dark. Still, walking in a place protected by the gods made him uneasy and he lit one of the matches. Before him was the corridor mined out of marble and another metal door at the end. Prompto steeled his nerves and went forward, continuing in the dark when the match burnt down to his fingers.

Unlocking and stepping through the door, Prompto frowned. The corridor before him looked no different than the one behind him. Making his way through the dark once more, he brushed his hands on the wall until they touched something cold and perfectly smooth. Blinking in confusion, he lit a match. It was obsidian glass, formed when the rock inside the temple had been heated to a liquid and flowed through this part of the world. At one time, before the invention of guns and
cannons, it had been mined and used for arrow and spear points. Now, it was mostly used for jewelry. The piece before him was small, only the size of his head and perplexed he looked for anything else out of the ordinary.

He walked through corridors all night, determined to mentally map out the maze. At one point he found himself back at the door he had come in.

“Well this is a conundrum,” he murmured with furrowed brows. While it was possible that somewhere he had messed up somewhere, Prompto had enough experience working in the dark to know that wasn't the case.

Lighting one of his matches, he checked the keyhole. Then, with a frown, forced the lock with his tools. His fingers still throbbed and it took longer than he'd like, but once he had it open, Prompto felt the inside of the door with careful fingers and found no opening. This wasn't the door he had come in, but it was identical to it. Lighting another match showed this room was the other end of the trap he had almost meet his doom in earlier. Shuddering, Prompto almost closed the door to be done with it all when his eye caught his crowbar and beyond it, tipped on its side, was the lantern.

"Of course," he said. "I'll just step through to grab my stuff, and the door will close trapping me in here forever. No thank you."

But... The lamp would be useful. Prompto held the door open with his foot while he shrugged out of his shirt and balled it up to fit firmly under the door. Then, half-naked and shivering, he hurried to grab his lost possessions and sprinted out of the trap again.

He discovered some of the oil had spilled from the lantern, in a worrying discovery. There was no way of knowing how much time had passed in the time it took for him to get his items back. With less oil in the lantern, the river could come back at any point and for all he knew it could be as silent as the gods wanted it to be. Chewing his lip, he debated whether he should keep exploring now that he had his lantern or if it would be better and ultimately safer to head back out.

In the end, his need to prove himself worthy to everyone won out. He was cold, hurt, and determined, but he made himself wander back through the corridors he had only seen with his fingertips previously. It wasn't a big maze, at least not big enough to get lost in.

Frustration began to set in his second time through. This wasn't a temple at all, there were no alters or statues of the gods and, most importantly, there weren't any rooms to store the offerings in. Instead, there was only this maze of narrow hallways and one trap near the entrance. The determination which kept him from tipping over into a claustrophobic panic was quickly fading.

The only thing that kept him from completely freaking out was realizing that the glass he had felt was one of many. They were so much like windows that Prompto pressed his face to one of them to see if there was anything beyond the walls, but the glass was dark and impossible to see through. In the longest corridor was an enormous piece of glass. It started above the floor and reached high over Prompto's head. It made no sense, none at all.

Why was he here? Why had he thought this was a good idea? Deprecating thoughts ran rampant like wildfire, spreading and infecting everything. Letting out a laugh bordering on maniacal, he sunk to his knees, ignoring the stinging cold of the water as he did. He was already wet, what was the point? This was the first time in his life he had a way out, a clear exit, that he couldn't take. He had to find the ring, had to prove his godsdamned worth - had to show that Noctis and the others weren't idiots for wanting him. Except, this time the thought of the others wasn't enough.

Panic took ahold of him as walls of stone and glass pushed down on him, suffocating and
unyielding. His eyes swam with tears and he pressed his hands to his chest to remind himself that he could breath. It took too long to realize there was a voice in his head, like a time worn memory speaking gently.

“Prompto, you have to get up. This is not your end. There are those who need you on the outside. You have to get up.”

It wasn’t enough to calm him, but it was enough to kick him into motion. The presence was a balm on his frayed nerves and it left as soon as it had come, leaving him alone once more. Prompto sprinted towards the exit, shredding his bare shoulders on the walls as he pressed on.

At the first locked door, his hands shook so badly he dropped his tools on the floor. Kneeling to pick them back up he realized the water was higher than it had been earlier and his panic grew stronger. Prompto nearly dropped everything again as he worked the door open.

The Wenneth River was coming back, and running wasn’t easy when the water came nearly to his knees. Panting, he rushed to the next door and repeated the frantic unlocking process. As the lock released, the door swung open, nearly hitting him in the face as the water behind it surged in and pushed him backward almost to his knees. Swinging his arms for balance, Prompto dropped the crowbar and couldn’t find it in him to care.

With all the strength that comes from terror, he shoved the last door open, and both Prompto and the water rushed over the threshold as it slammed behind him with enough force to break bones. He landed on his hands and knees and stayed there, soaked, as the terror ebbed away. There was splashing nearby and Prompto didn't have the energy to look up to see who was coming his way. Hands patted him down and distantly he could hear Gladio asking if he was hurt. He didn’t care who answered, all that mattered was the warmth enveloping him as Gladio scooped him up.

Chapter End Notes

Normally I take this moment to say thank you for everyone who has ever read, commented, or kudoéd but I wanna use this time right now to say that the holidays are rough for some. There’s a lot going on - work, school, family, so much stress on top of even more stress. I know Tumblr is basically burning right now, but if anyone ever needs someone to talk to about anything my blog is Prrrrmm. I’m always open to listen and I don’t know if you’ve heard it lately but you’re doing amazing. I love you.
I’d Give All Sorts of Something to Have a Plan

Chapter Summary

In which even more confessions are made, Prompto REALLY hates the maze, a connection is made about someone, and Prompto proves his worth (not that he ever had to)

Chapter Notes

HAPPY NEW YEARS!!!! May I take this moment to bestow all my good thoughts and love to all you lovely people!
Thank you everyone who has stayed with me for this journey and here's to so much more!
Mils; literal sunshine incarnate- thank you so much for editing and our year of friendship!
Angie; hot damn ilu. Thank you for taking the time to listen to my ramblings and for reading all my junk
Chapter title comes from Crave by Waterparks
Check out the playlist here

The next morning found Prompto wrenching himself from Gladio's tight embrace and out onto the bright, sunlit beach. There was a lot to force his disoriented mind past - the suffocating press against his chest, the darkness of the tent, and the rush of water had been too much. It wasn’t a full blown panic attack, but it was enough to make even shallow breaths hard.

He was struck with a sense of deja vu as Ignis peered at him with his head tilted and his eyebrows furrowed. He was sitting by the dying embers of the fire from before, and the sun was high in the sky - higher than it had been the last time he woke. Squeezing his eyes shut, Prompto wished for once to have a few seconds alone. It was hard to take stock of his body when he couldn't prod the areas he wanted to know about. Someone had wrapped his shoulders and chest and his eyes watered as his raw skin flared with pain with every move he made.

Before Ignis could say anything, Prompto blurted out, “I’m okay,” only to wince at how wrecked his voice sounded. He thought back to the last time he had anything to drink and wordlessly, Ignis handed over a cup. It was coffee, unsweetened, but at that point he would have drunk anything.

“You should have told us you were claustrophobic. We wouldn’t have made you go in,” Ignis said after Prompto had drunk half.

Shrugging, he stared into his cup and tried to see why it would matter if he had told them at all. Ignis shot to his feet, and Prompto flinched when he threw his hands up. “You have got to start caring about what happens to you!”

It wasn't what he had expected and as he uncurled from his spot, Prompto could only stare in
bewilderment. Ignis calmed himself but refused to sit back down, instead pacing like an angry lion with too much restless energy and nowhere to funnel it.

Prompto warily watched as he dropped down in front of him. “You are someone precious Prompto and we would never have made you do something that would have hurt you. Say the word and you will never have to go back in there again. We can go home and say this doesn’t exist.”

“Why?”

Ignis blinked, and Prompto took that as a sign to elaborate. “Why do you care so much?”

“Caring for someone you love should be more important than all the treasure in the world, even the ones given to us by the gods,” he said, his voice as soft as the sky above them. Only when Prompto choked on his coffee did his words seem to hit and Ignis flushed red across his cheekbones. “Ah, well there you have it. I am… quite fond of you.” He gestured helplessly until his hand fell back into his lap, clenching and unclenching.

“Oh,” Prompto whispered. He looked back at the tent and then at Ignis. “Does Noct know?”

Shifting to get comfortable, Ignis took his time answering. “Yes, As does Gladio. I told you once, communication is the most important thing in a relationship.”

Prompto mulled over that, realizing for the first time that whatever he had with Noctis, it wasn’t unique. Noctis had this with Gladio and Ignis as well. He wondered how Gladio felt about two of his partners admitting to having feelings for him. Ignis was patient, watching the emotions and thoughts flit across his face. He seemed ready for any questions Prompto may have had for him.

Prompto broke the silence with a soft voice. “I’m going back into the maze, Iggy.”

Something too fast to catch flashed in Ignis’s eyes and he turned to face the sun. Framed as he was, lit with the afternoon glow, he was an angel, and Prompto reached out to touch his back before he could stop himself. Ignis felt the gentle touch and turned, Prompto’s breath leaving him at how heartbroken he looked.

“You don’t have to prove yourself to us,” Ignis said before kneeling and enveloping Prompto into a tight hug. He froze, unsure what to do and Ignis only hugged him tighter.

“Oh,” Prompto whispered, and Ignis released him. As they stared into each other’s eyes for answers not given, Ignis laid a gentle hand on Prompto’s cheek.

“You’ve decided to return to the maze?” asked a voice behind them as Gladio emerged from the tent. Noctis came next, not quite awake but trying all the same.

Prompto shuffled painfully out of the way for them. “Yeah, it’s interesting in there. Scary as hell,” he admitted, “but interesting enough that I want to know more about it.” He rubbed his thumb along his bottom lip, thinking hard. “It was like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

While Noctis returned to the land of the living, slowly and with multiple cups of coffee, Prompto told them of his night in the maze. He tried to be as descriptive as possible; explaining the walls of solid rock and the traps that awaited him. Shivering with the remnants of fear left from his experiences, he gave a shaky smile when Noctis dropped his head on his shoulder - whether out of exhaustion or comfort, he didn’t know. Here, away from it, the maze wasn’t so bad, and he felt confident saying he wanted to go back in, but when faced with the door again, what would he feel?

He napped on and off, feeling the familiar pull of Gentiana. She put a second mark by his name
and opened her eyes to fix him with a concerned look. She seemed about to say something, reaching out to touch his cheek where she had healed him when the dream ended.

That night when the doorway appeared, Prompto tied his hair up in a full ponytail before filling his pockets with more matches and twine, feeling optimistic about what lay ahead. It wasn’t until he had stepped into the darkness that he felt the same ebb of panic rising up, quicker with every passing second. He didn’t know how much it would help, or if it would work to keep his mind off of the pressing walls, but as he sloshed through the hallways, Prompto kept up a stream of prayers - both to the god of thieves and also the one of his country. He could only hope they would watch over him.

Bobbing in the water still trapped in the corner were both of his boots - as if left there for him. Shaking away the crawling along his spine, he put them on and grimaced in distaste.

“Cold,” Prompto muttered.

As he explored, he hummed a song he had heard Noctis singing some days past - a gentle reminder that they were waiting for him outside. He paced the walls, running his hands along the polished surfaces in growing frustration. A voice in the back of his mind whispered that if he didn't find the ring, the others would leave him behind.

Fear was a horrible thing, growing and clawing until nothing else made sense. It built and built until he went from shaking as he made his way down the hallways to tucking himself in a corner with his head tucked between his knees. A high pitched keening noise forced its way from his throat as he gripped his hair tight enough to hurt, but not enough to pull him from his panic.

"I can't do this," he gasped, each breath harder than the last, and he knew he wasn't but gods this was so much like dying. Spots danced before his eyes and he squeezed them shut.

"Prompto," murmured a voice. There was nothing else except a cold hand on his cheek and a numb calmness flooding his body. Taking a steadying breath, he realized that trapped behind a firm wall of ice were his fears.

"Is helping my fears considered cheating?" When he didn't get an answer he called out, "Gentiana?"

There was still no answer and fear stabbed through him, different from his claustrophobia. This one was from the fear of something being down here with him and it not being a mystical messenger. It left as soon as it came - courtesy of Gentiana. He hoped.

Beginning the tedious work of measuring the walls with the twine, Prompto resumed humming Noctis's song. If he ignored the pin prickling sensation of being watched, it was almost a peaceful night, but before he knew it, the water was lapping up to his knees and whatever had tempered his fears broke, the dam of dread washing over him.

Shaking violently, he sprinted to the entrance, once again shredding his shoulders along the narrow and rough hallways. The water was up to his thigh when his bare foot collided with the crowbar dropped the night before. Choking out a cry he picked it up and limped as fast as he could to the door. His exit wasn't anymore graceful than it had been the night before, but all Prompto cared about was the way he was bundled up in arms and two different people pressed kisses into his hair until he calmed down enough to make his way to the fire.

Gladio handed a plate of food to him while Ignis filled a coffee cup. They sat in silence while Prompto choked down his food, desperate to push the maze from his mind for now and to
appreciate the men around him. He leaned his head on Noctis and fell asleep, only to wake when the noonday sun warmed his face.

All his apologies were waved away, and Noctis pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. After eating a little more, Prompto asked for paper and Ignis offered his notebook he had been writing in. Sitting down by the remains of the fire, he grabbed a charcoal stick to mark the measurements he had taken and the maze took shape under his skilled hands while the others watched.

"How long is your rope?" Noctis asked.

Prompto hummed and added another line. "About thirty feet?"

"Thirty feet, exactly," Gladio offered.

Noctis tapped the page, pointing to the spot past the room with the moon opening. "Could there be a hidden room anywhere past here? The walls are so thin everywhere else in the entrance that you would know if one was there, but here, where you said the glass was really thick, is it possible?"

"I don't know," said Prompto. "Yes? There could be hidden spaces anywhere or nowhere. I just don't know."

"You've checked all the walls?" Gladio asked.

"Every inch."

A gentle hand landed on his shoulder, and Ignis said, "If there is a door, you will find it. I believe in you."

Tears welled up in his eyes, and Prompto looked down at his map to hastily scrub his eyes dry. "Thanks."

Curling up in the sand beside the fire, he closed his eyes to walk through the dark hallways in his mind once more. He traced his fingers along the walls, searching everything, but still could not find anything.

Sleep snuck up on him, overtaking with quiet calm. The library flickered into existence once more, and Prompto sighed. Gentiana still sat with her back to the fire, chair open should he decide to join her, but instead he turned and walked through the rows of shelves.

"Why do you walk them when you know they will fade to nothingness eventually?"

He wasn't surprised she had followed him down the rows, his fingers dancing on the well-worn spines of the books. "If this is my last time coming here, I'd like to see it all."

Gentiana tilted her head. "Is it your last time coming here? There is no shame in turning back now."

"You know what I mean. I will not turn back," Prompto replied resolutely.

"Be careful. Do not offend the gods," she replied, and when she turned her back to him, he woke up.

The sun was warm on his face and he laid there for a moment longer. The process of being summoned had either become less strenuous or he was so tired he couldn’t even tell anymore. Rubbing his face wearily, Prompto sighed and stood once he felt like the world wasn’t crumbling beneath him anymore.
Rolling to his feet, he moved to sit near the river and watched it disappear. Dusk set in, dark purple sky edged with the pinks and oranges as the sun dipped below the horizon. He wasn’t alone for long.

“You have a habit of showing up when I have a lot on my mind,” Prompto said lightly. It was a joke, but when Gladio gave him a confused look he explained. “We talked that night by the river, about family and whatnot.”

Gladio huffed in amusement. “I wasn’t aware you had a lot on your mind that day, but since you brought it up, what’s up short stack?”

“I’m not that short,” Prompto mumbled. He thought about his panic and the way it had disappeared the night before. “I’m not sure what’s happening in that temple, but it’s not natural.”

“Can you hear the river coming when you’re inside?”

Prompto hummed, thinking. Maybe his ears had heard something his head couldn’t understand through his panic. “Ignis was right, I’m claustrophobic. I’ve been that way since I was a kid though. My dad locked me in a closet,” he confided after a moment. “He didn’t appreciate that his only son was a thief.”

Gladio opened his mouth to say something, but held back at the last second to collect his thoughts. “Regardless of the fact that stealing is against the law and that as someone in power I look down on thieves - you aside - it is no reason to lock a child in a closet.”

He could have laughed at the anger on Gladio’s face, but then he would have had to explain that his dad had done so much worse to him growing up. “After I got kicked out, it didn’t happen as much, so still your bleeding heart,” Prompto said. “My sister took care of me. But that’s not what I wanted to talk about.”

Gladio gestured for him to continue and he obliged. “I’m claustrophobic. Tight places and and dark places, too. They scare me. In the maze, it’s no different, but last night there was something that put a damper on my fear. It was like it didn’t matter anymore.”

“Something, or some one?” Gladio asked. Shrugging, Prompto stood and brushed off the sand from his pants.

“I don’t want to go back in there. I’m scared now,” he said. His hands shook when he held them up, and he clenched them tightly. “But I will not let anything hold me back.” He wasn’t sure what had happened, nor was he sure what would happen that night, but he would either get the ring for them or die trying.

Before entering the maze, he looked at each of the men he had grown to care for. Prompto could feel the cold of the maze hitting his back and making him shiver and he steeled himself, grabbing Noctis to kiss him firmly on the mouth.

“Come back,” Noctis murmured against his lips. Prompto couldn’t promise anything and placed a lingering touch to his cheek.

Ignis didn’t say anything, but the words from before were heavy between them. Throwing himself at him, Prompto gave him the tightest hug he could manage without hurting himself. Unsatisfied with merely that, Ignis pulled back and placed a soft kiss on his forehead. “Come back,” he said, echoing Noctis’s words.

Moving onto Gladio, Prompto said, “I don’t suppose you want a kiss too?” He was joking once
more, but his wobbling lip kept his tone from staying light. Prompto was scared - the urge to flee so strong, he was sure if his goodbyes lasted too much longer, he would crumble.

It was the heavy hand Gladio laid on his shoulder which settled him enough to take a steadying breath. “Be safe,” he said. “This isn’t the end.”

Prompto nodded and stepped back. He looked at them all once more and turned on his heel.

This time, once inside the maze, he remembered to pick up his pry bar lying abandoned in the entranceway. Scraping his shoulders along the wall, Prompto grit his teeth at the familiar pain and forced his fears away. A gentle, cooling hand laid itself on his cheek once more. Taking a shaking breath, Prompto nodded his thanks, not wanting to waste his breath when there was so much to be done that night. He searched fingertip by fingertip along every stretch of wall from one end to the other, letting the focus of his job sweep him away. When he found himself in front of the largest stretch of glass, he planted his feet and stared.

How many had stood where he stood now? How many had failed and died here? Gentiana’s barrier kept fear from springing up at those thoughts and Prompto found his apathy for the situation unnerving. He was used to a torrent of emotions at all times and this emptiness should have scared him. Fear never came, through frustration followed close behind.

Swearing loudly, he swung his pry bar against the solid rock. It sang, ringing out like a bell, and Prompto cursed again out of surprise and stepped back to nurse his now throbbing hand. The glass was still singing, the song growing fainter by the second, and for the first time, he was struck how much like a window in the night it was.

How much like a window - or like a door.

Forgetting his sore hand, Prompto snatched his pry bar off the floor where it had fallen to clench it in his hand. He took a breath, held it, and slammed the pry bar into the glass. It rebounded, chipping free a small chunk. Prompto turned his face away and swung again, harder, and sent up a prayer as he did. Larger pieces of glass broke off and when he turned back, long cracks spidered out from the place he had struck. Resolve settled over him like a heavy blanket and he turned his face again, swinging the pry bar over and over against the glass door until he felt something break loose and shatter on the floor. Blinking dust from his eyes, Prompto turned back and gaped.

There, beyond the hole which had opened were twelve steps leading up to a room beyond the range of his small light. Tapping his pry bar against the gap to widen it, Prompto jumped back with a yelp as the whole doorway collapsed around him. The glass slipped down, shattering against the floor. Shards shot off like missiles and he jumped back, covering his face with both arms, and when the dust settled he blinked at the doorway now doubled in size.

Picking up his lamp and pry bar, he gingerly made his way up the stairs, prepared for something else to hinder his path, but to his surprise, there were no other obstacles and he made it to the room beyond with nothing more than his old scrapes.

He froze in the doorway, realizing the room wasn’t empty. There at the end of it, up a few stairs, was a woman. She stood tall and proud, her eyes boring into his with an intensity that sent a shudder through his spine. With a shaky laugh, he realized the woman was a statue and as he came close to her, he could see how otherworldly her perfection was. Her long hair was pulled away from her face by a woven ribbon and plaited over her shoulder with glittering diamonds. Painted a light blue, her skin shone like morning frost. He wanted to touch her and see if she was as cold, but refrained. Instead he settled for running his finger on the loose hanging dress on the statue, expecting stone, and almost dropped his lamp. It was made of real fabric, not stone, silky and
sheer. He stilled as he watched the shimmer of her dress move with the movement of a breath.

This was not an image carefully made by skilled hands, this was the goddess Shiva herself - waiting for him. Shaking, Prompto clenched his eyes closed and waited for divine retribution. A cold hand laid upon his cheek and he flinched back, nearly falling down the stairs.

Shiva stared at him with a sad expression. “You have not offended the gods,” she said.

He didn’t move. In the space between one breath and the next, it hit him like one of Ramuh’s bolts. “My God,” Prompto murmured. She tilted her head in amusement and Prompto explained the best he could with his shaking nerves. “You and Gentiana, you’re the same.”

“I’m sorry I deceived you. This could be done by no one other than you. If I had appeared as I am, would you have trusted me?”

Prompto didn’t answer. How could he? To admit that her form shook him to his very core seemed too horrifying to contemplate. What sort of damage would a god do to him for that kind of confession?

“Will you take the ring?” she asked breaking through his shock.

The thought of stealing something from one of the great gods was too awful to contemplate, but nor could he run. His mouth was dry as he asked, “What will happen if I do?”

Shiva smiled. “Your story will begin.”

He wondered if she could see into his heart and soul - if she knew what he had planned. Nausea crawled up his throat, choking him. Once again, Shiva held her hand out, and like a flower unfurling in the spring air, her fingers pulled away from her palm. There, in the center of her hand, was the ring. Shaking, Prompto reached out and took it without touching her. Distantly, the rush of the water began to flow back into the maze, swishing and rumbling like a long forgotten dream.

“Prompto.”

Looking up, he did something few had done since the world was born and made eye contact with the great goddess of Niflheim once more. She offered him a comforting smile and that was enough. Gripping the ring tightly, Prompto turned and ran.

When he reached the staircase, he jumped the first two steps and stumbled down the rest. Without pausing, he picked himself up and ran on. The water rushed, quicker than any of the previous nights and Prompto threw himself into the first door. Fumbling with his tools with one hand, he unlocked it and sobbed as the damn holding back his fear faltered and broke. Rushing up another set of stairs, the water tugged and pulled, rising quickly until he slipped at the top and slid down until he was pinned, unable to breathe.

Prompto fought - to turn over and gain some purchase, to lift his head, anything - but the river held his body down. Fear made his thoughts foggy and when the water pushed him harder he gasped out, losing the last of his valuable air. The river swallowed him up and black darker than any closet or any maze, devoured him whole.
WE ARE SO CLOSE TO THE END Y’ALL
We literally have like... four chapters left ahhhhhhhhHHHHH
Thank you guys for all your comments ;;;; I love you
Hit me up on tumblr!
Push, Shoved, a Little Bruised and Battered

Chapter Summary

Waking up was hard, everything that followed was harder

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! How are we doing?? Thank you all for your lovely comments on the last chapter I LOVE YOU
This chapter has some battle styled violence towards the end so please be careful if that's something you need to skip.
Thank you always to my main three; Mils the best beta on the planet, Angie for always being there for me, and my wife for allowing me to cry about the soundtrack to lotr for two weeks straight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking was a lesson in how much the human body could take before giving up and Prompto toed the line dangerously. The day was already warm and he had washed up on the sandy bank of the river, legs still in the water. He groaned, pain flaring through his entire body as he dragged himself out. Waking up this way was getting old. Pain made everything hard to focus on and exhaustion hit hard as he curled up in the sand. It was there the others found him.

He could get used to waking up in the embrace of others, Prompto thought. Ignis had given him enough potions to numb most of his injuries, the maze was long behind him, and he had never felt safer in his life. He opened his eyes, staring at the ceiling of their tent. Had he hallucinated the entire ordeal with Shiva? Had he succeeded in getting the ring? Clenching his hand and throwing it over his eyes, Prompto froze when he realized something was there. Pressed tightly in his fist was the ring - simple and black, yet undeniable in the power it radiated. He flipped in over on his palm - it was so strange that the future of several kingdoms were resting on it.

“You refused to let us have it,” Ignis said, softly from his side. Prompto hadn’t realized he wasn’t the only one awake.

Rolling over, Prompto held the ring between them. “Would you like to see it?”

“Knowing you’re safe is enough for me.”

A smile spread across his lips before he could stop it and Prompto leaned forward, giving Ignis plenty of time to pull away. When he didn't, Prompto pressed a kiss on Ignis's cheek and hummed in satisfaction. "I did it."

Ignis agreed before hesitating. When he spoke, his words were filled with a quiet sadness. “We watched as the maze sunk underwater and you didn’t come out. We thought.” He broke off, and cradled Prompto’s hands between his. “We thought we were going to leave you.”
Guilt bloomed as quick as satisfaction had and Prompto looked down at the ring once more. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be,” Gladio said from behind Prompto. “We’ve done what we were meant to do with no real disasters.”

It was a warm comfort, lying between everyone, but seeing them was more important. Shifting up until his back was to the tent’s door, he took in the serious expressions of his companions. Ignis and Gladio followed suit, and where Prompto expected to find Noctis asleep, he was laid on his side, clenching his jaw.

“Loqi aside,” Prompto said.

“Loqi aside,” Gladio agreed.

“What happened?” Notis asked, and even though he refused to look at him, relief that he wasn’t being completely ignored flooded through Prompto.

He told them about the glass door and the hidden stairwell leading up to the throne room, but stumbled over his words when it came to Shiva. It felt wrong to talk about her in the light of day and he was unsure if they would laugh, so he explained that the ring was on a pedestal and he took it. Once again he tried to hand it to Ignis, but when he pushed it away for the second time, Prompto got the hint.

“Are you okay to start heading back? I would like to get away from the river as soon as we can,” Ignis said.

Prompto nodded, relieved to put the place behind them, and Gladio and Ignis crawled from the tent to begin cleaning up.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated when Noctis made no move to do anything.

It was as if a switch flipped in him and he sat up so quickly Prompto flinched back before he could stop himself. Noctis froze.

“Don’t apologize. It’s just…” He trailed off, refusing to look up. Scooting forward, Prompto placed a hand on Noctis’s knee in silent support. “We thought you were dead. I couldn’t help but think we had killed you. We forced you and I was going to lose you all for some stupid ring.”

Prompto wanted to break in to tell him how wrong he was, but he knew Noctis needed this off his chest. He sat silently, a reminder he was alive and there by his side.

“I realized how much you meant to me. Not that I didn’t know before, it just-” Noctis broke off, frustrated. “I won't ask you to stay with me when we get back to Tenebrae, but I want you to know it’s an option. I know I’m not the only one who wants you to stay either. We don’t want to lose you again.”

Heart breaking, Prompto gave Noctis a tiny smile. He searched his face, pressing a palm to Noctis’s cheek. Before, he had given Ignis a chaste kiss - a promise of his safety. Noctis’s lips tasted of bittersweet promises not meant to be kept.

“I’ll stay for as long as I can,” Prompto said. What Noctis took from that, he didn’t stay to find out.

Climbing out of the tent, he scrubbed his eyes with his hands to free himself of lingering tears and set about helping Ignis and Gladio. Picking their way back across the rocks should have been a
lively affair, full of happiness and excitement over the ring, but instead the mood was tense and tinged in a quiet sorrow no one attempted to break.

They were crossing one of the smaller streams when a group of mounted men swung from behind a copse of trees. Prompto saw their swords in their hands and didn’t wait to learn anything else. As he searched wildly for anything he could use to protect himself and the others, he nearly missed one of the men coming for him. The only thing he had was the small knife he had stolen from Loqi and it wasn’t going to do anything against a broadsword. Closing his eyes, Prompto waited for the end to come, but a grunt above him made him peel them open once more as Gladio slid his sword into the man's rib cage, before slinging the man into the water.

Prompto realized that without something better to use, he would be nothing more than a hindrance and leapt from his chocobo, dodging the thundering feet of the other mounts and ignoring Noctis’ panicked shout. Running to one of the closer trees, he climbed it swiftly and rushed along the length of a branch. He waited until a man was beneath him and jumped down, knocking him off his steed. There were only four others and Noctis, Ignis, and Gladio seemed to have it handled. Grabbing the man by the shirt, Prompto whipped his knife from the band of his belt and held it under his chin.

“Who are you?”

“I don’t speak to scum of the gutter,” the man snapped. Prompto resisted the urge to shake him violently and settled for a defiant glare. Around them the sound of battle died down.

“Those are Niflheim’s colors,” Noctis said.

“Niflheim colors do not a Niflheim man make,” Prompto responded and gave in to his anger, shaking the man with a snarl.

Gladio came close with a handful of rope. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t have a Niffleheim accent. This man is from Tenebrae.” Prompto’s blood boiled as he tried to understand why they would attack them. Loqi’s words came back to him, and his anger froze into fear.

Noctis echoed his thoughts, "Do you think Ardyn sent them after us?"

"Don't know," said Gladio, “but we can ask when we see him next."

“What do we do with him?” Prompto asked.

Gladio and Ignis exchanged a look. “I suppose we could bring him with us. Bring him to Ardyn and ask him to explain.”

The soldier scoffed. “As if the others are going to see all the dead men lying around and leave you be. You’ll be run down in an hour.”

"In that case, we can always tie you to a tree and let them decide what to do with you," Noctis said, gesturing for Gladio to tie the man up.

As Gladio tied him to a tree a short distance away, a plan began to form in Prompto’s mind. It was a stupid one, but infinitely better than getting caught. Once Gladio returned to them and he was sure they wouldn't be overheard, he said, “We could let our chocobos loose to try and confuse them. If we make our way up through Lucis and cut through Niflheim, they are less likely to catch us.”
He could see them going weighing the pros and cons in their minds. They would be hidden, but slower. No one, regardless of who sent the soldiers after them, would expect them to cut through the land on forgotten paths. Not unless they knew the area as well as he did.

“We could always steal chocobos later,” Gladio said. “I don’t like it, but if we’re seen buying them, the news could spread. Someone has it out for us and we don’t need that.”

“Where would we steal more chocobos?” Ignis asked.

“We’ll have to get them somewhere along the way.”

“You mean Prompto will have to steal them.” There was a rigidity to Ignis’s posture and a crinkle between his brows.

Prompto shot Noctis a confused look and said, “I don’t see the problem here, unless you’re upset about breaking the law, but stealing is kinda what I do best.”

“The law is not the point here. The point is you will be putting yourself at risk for us once again,” explained Ignis.

Prompto failed to see the problem with that as well and Ignis threw his hands up, turning to removing everything from his saddle. After the chocobos had been freed of their belongings, Gladio whooped loudly to scare them off. A pang of guilt hit Prompto and he turned away from the sight of them fleeing, sending up a prayer to his god as he set off towards the mountain trails.

By the time night fell, the mood had worsened and no one was talking. They reached the old town of Burbost later than Prompto would have liked and every few steps he would check behind him to see if anyone had spotted them yet.

Burbost, like many old towns, had long outgrown its walls and he counted it as a blessing as he slipped away from the group. Prompto walked through kitchen gardens, harvesting whatever his hands found in the dark. No one had mentioned taking food, but he wasn’t going to let that stop him from getting what they needed. If they wanted to be upset at him for stealing more than they asked, then they could do so on a full belly.

The stables were in the center of the town which presented a small problem. Chewing his lip, Prompto glared at the cobblestone road. The chocobos’ talons would click against it and echo loudly throughout the town.

“When I said I could steal anything, I never thought livestock would be part of that,” Prompto murmured, trying and failing to see a way around the street. “Things don’t make noise.”

With no other choice but to go on, he slipped up to the window and peered inside. The hostler was sound asleep in his chair and he sighed in relief. Prompto found leading straps and picked four chocobos, prompting them with an urgent whisper as he clipped them to the halters and sent up another prayer up - less habitual and more earnest.

Puzzled at waking at such an odd hour, the chocobos trilled softly - none of which were loud enough to wake the hostler. An obvious solution came to mind as Prompto eyed the cobblestone road, but he was not yet a murderer, so with a deep breath he slipped from the stable.

The silence that followed was so profound, Prompto thought he had gone deaf. Making sure the chocobos were really following, he clicked his fingers near his head. They tilted their heads in confusion, but didn’t make a noise. He knew Shiva had taken an interest in him, but for the gods to help him in something unlawful sent a deep shiver down his back.
Gladio was waiting for him at the town gate. “Any trouble?”

“No trouble at all,” he said. Aside from the fact that he was eager to rid himself of the gods’ attention as quickly as possible. They wanted one thing and he wanted something else. The sooner their interests in him waned, the better.

“Are you alright?” Ignis asked. He took one of the straps and Prompto nodded jerkily as his body began to shake.

“You sure?” Noctis asked, worry pinching his face.

How could he explain to them? The silence of the birds had been undoubtedly more unnerving than Shiva in her temple - maybe because the stables were part of his world and the temple had not been. He didn’t know. For the first time in a long while, Gladio had to help him onto his horse.

Whatever luck had been with them on their journey to Burbost left the moment their chocobos were saddled. The ringing of a bell pierced the air and Prompto whipped around as the town came alive with lamplight.

“The hostler woke up.” Prompto cursed, digging his heels into the chocobo.

They rode like the wind and were midway to the forest boarding Niffleheim when the guards caught up to them. Prompto tamped down a frustrated shout as tears pricked his eyes. They had been so godsdamned close.

Pulling their swords out in unison, Ignis and Gladio shifted their mounts in front of Noctis. Out of everyone in their party, he was the one that needed to be protected the most.

Prompto held out a hand to him. “Give me a sword!”

Noctis had already pulled out one of his, a light one perfect for fighting on the back of a chocobo, and after a moment’s hesitation he pulled his other sword free from its scabbard. It was little more than a practice sword, but better than nothing and Prompto took it.

He should have run, he should have done a lot of things. He had sworn to the gods from the king’s prison that he would no longer involve himself in stupid plans and yet here he was, standing by Noctis’s side and ready to die for him. There were too many guards riding up to all be from Burbost and Prompto remembered the soldier saying more would come. These were Ardyn’s men.

The battle was fast and wild. Fighting on the back of a mount was not something Prompto had ever been trained in and before he could process half of what was happening, he was knocked to the ground. There were still five left by the time he struggled to his feet, holding his bruised ribs. Muscle memory kicked in before he knew what was happening, his blade slicing through the air as his father’s long lessons finally come in handy.

Without a thought, he sunk his sword into his opponent, killing him instantly. There was no time to be horrified as the next man ran forward and Prompto dropped to a crouch, sweeping his sword along the man’s knees. Bile rose to his throat and he ripped his sword free when he was sure the man wouldn’t be moving again. He expected another man to take his place and glanced about the fight when none did.

Gladio and Ignis moved in tandem, fighting two men as if they had done nothing but practice for this moment their entire lives. They probably had. Prompto spotted Noctis, watched him take a man out, when his eye caught on another hidden by rocks rise up with a crossbow. There was only enough time to let out a strangled yell as he threw himself, pushing Noctis down and flinging
Loqi’s knife at the man.

Everything became muddled after that.

Everyone was shouting, and everything hurt.

Prompto could hear them talking of Lucis - of Insomnia - and things went black.

When he came back to, nothing made sense. Everything was blue.

Oh.

It was the sky. Blue, blue, black, then red, blue, blue.

Oh.

It was Noctis above him, murmuring words and brushing his hair back from his burning skin.

Prompto tried to tell them, tried to tell him they couldn’t go to Insomnia. Something - someone - was waiting for him. Either the words never came, or they never heard him.

Everything hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Do y'all remember me saying last chapter how I hated to leave off on cliffhangers?

hahaha oops
Late to the love of my life, but when I die alone I’ll be on time

Chapter Summary

The silence was a palatable weight, pressing down hard enough to strangle. Prompto was no stranger to breakdowns - they had always been too hot and too fast and too much - but this was different. This was agonizingly slow, every breath another crack in the mask he had held onto for so long on this trip.

Chapter Notes

HELlo friends!! Oh my gosh- guys this chapter?? This is where it aaaaall began. There's a scene in this chapter and it's the first thing I ever wrote for this fic. So I'm so excited to finally be here! Thank you to all my usuals; Mils, Angie, my wife. God damn I would not be here without y'all. Thank you to my readers- your comments light up my entire WEEK. Chapter title comes from Cleopatra by The Lumineers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Potions, which were fantastic for numbing and healing minor wounds, were useless against the hole left by a crossbow bolt. Somehow, somewhere, when reality had gotten fuzzy, they had gotten a cart and laid Prompto in the back. He was pillowed by Gladio and Noctis, staring at the sky and wondering why it had to hurt so much. Occasionally the cart would hit a bump despite Ignis’s careful driving and pain would wash over, dragging him back into the fuzzy blankness of his mind. The last time it had happened, he drew in a sharp breath and refused to let it out as Noctis fluttered his hands helplessly at his side.

When Prompto came to, night was falling. There was a clamminess to his skin and an ache in his bones and he knew with certainty that a fever was setting in. Prompto smiled bitterly. It would be his luck to steal what could not be stolen only to die immediately after.

“Don’t smile. I’m mad at you,” Noctis said, contradicting the feather-soft fingers trailing down Prompto’s arm. It hurt, but he wasn’t about to tell him to stop.

Through cracked lips, Prompto replied, “I bet you didn’t expect that from me - knowing how to fight.”

Noctis hummed thoughtfully. “I’ve never seen anyone win against that many men.”

“You still haven’t.” With a sigh, he closed his eyes again. He was tired. “I became a thief to avoid killing,” he whispered. See where it had gotten him.

“We thought you were dead at first.” Noctis looked away. The ‘again’ was implied and Prompto wished he could comfort Noctis with the knowledge that anyone who knew him felt the same. He was always doing something for someone that ended with dragging himself home in need of more...
stitches and bandages. The difference this time was that he had thought he would die too.

Voices floated above him, wavered and indecipherable. They were so far away, and Prompto no longer knew if it was them talking or the gods deciding his fate. He wanted to tell them not to fuss. He tried to explain that he would be dead soon and there would be nothing left to worry about. In his dreams, he relived the moment they pulled the arrow out of his body, over and over. He had felt his life dragged out with it, but in the end it wouldn’t let go, stretching between him and the arrow. He should have died. Perhaps only the gods themselves were keeping him here at this point, but dying would have been so much easier. The pain went on, and on.

“We’re at the castle,” Ignis said as the cart rolled to a stop and Gladio hopped out to find someone to help them in.

“Let me walk,” Prompto said, voice stronger than he felt. His chest filled with boiling cement, hot and cold all over at the same time, but he refused to be carried in when they met with Ardyn again. Nothing good would come of him being off his guard.

Ignis helped him to his feet and Prompto sighed, leaning into him heavily just for a second before pulling away. “I can do it.”

The stairs leading up to Insomnia’s castle nearly killed him and he gasped for breath the entire way, but he did it. When the guards saw who was stumbling in, they exchanged a look and quickly escorted them into the main throne room. Noctis shared a glance with Ignis and Gladio, worry bleeding into their postures.

Standing near the throne with his back turned to them was Ardyn. His hand was laying on the arm of it, and when they entered he turned around his expression was a picture of shocked sadness. If Prompto had the strength, he would have scoffed at the dramatics of it.

“Oh, what a surprise! Prince Noctis and his royal retainers! I see my messengers found you as quickly as I had hoped, though I am sorry—”

“Where is my dad?” Noctis interrupted, and the steel in his voice had Prompto stepping back instinctively.

Ardyn’s mouth dropped into another comical show of shock and he descended down the stairs leading to the throne. “Oh my dear boy, I thought you had gotten the news. Your father, dear King Regis, has passed away.”

Noctis flinched as if he had been struck and Ignis gripped his arm tightly. Unsteady as he was, anger flared through Prompto and he shakily pushed past Gladio.

“Messengers? You mean assassins. You planned on taking the throne from Noctis’s corpse,” he spat. Swaying dangerously, he took a deep breath and nearly cried out from the pain that crashed through his body. He wanted to clap his hands over his shoulder, but he also wanted nothing to ever touch his body again. He settled on glaring daggers at Ardyn.

When Ardyn realized who had spoken, his sadness sharpened into a razor-thin smile. “How could I be so rude to ignore you, dear Prompto? My apologies.” Gladio moved to step in front of Prompto again, but Ardyn spoke again, his voice dripping in contempt. “Though the reason behind it is so unfortunate, it is my pleasure to have the royalty of three kingdoms standing in one room for the first time in hundreds of years - in peace even. Prince Prompto of Niflheim, it is so lovely to meet you now that I know you are not simply a thief.”
The silence was a palatable weight, pressing down hard enough to strangle. Prompto was no stranger to breakdowns - they had always been too hot and too fast and too much - but this was different. This was agonizingly slow, every breath another crack in the mask he had held onto for so long on this trip. Each breath could have housed a thousand centuries and yet no one aged. No one moved towards him to kill him on the spot as he had believed for so long. How many nights had he laid awake in their arms, wondering what they would do if they found out? The seconds ticked by in frozen anticipation and with every heartbeat that Prompto survived, he was sure the next would be his last.

It was Noctis who spoke first, haltingly, as if he expected Ardyn to start laughing at the joke he pulled. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Through his shock, Prompto thought it interesting that Ignis hadn’t bothered to reprimand the prince - no, king. A quick look showed Ignis was having a fast, controlled mental breakdown as well. Gladio was not faring much better.

Noctis turned to Prompto, face drawn and pale. “Please tell me he’s lying. Please tell me I did not just spend Six knows how long, traversing around the countryside with the heir to the throne I am helping destroy.”

Prompto’s silence was answer enough.

Noctis broke into laughter, borderline hysterically as he waved a hand. “Of course, of fucking course.” He looked at Prompto as if seeing him truly for the first time and said, “I need to be alone.”

‘Alone’ meant himself, Ignis, and Gladio and just like that, the truth fell between them and opened a chasm Prompto knew they couldn’t overcome.

He was escorted to a room on the far end of the castle, as far away from the others as they could put him. He didn’t process being stripped or cleaned and redressed, didn’t process anything until the door clicked shut behind the last servant and the room fell silent. He waited for someone to come for him, shivering and shaking until he could no longer stand. Prompto ignored the bed and dropped heavily in the chair, head in his hands as he tried to calm his frantic thoughts and plan as much as he could. The fever made it hard.

Night had long come by the time he finally dragged himself to bed and fell asleep still in his clothes. In a way, he was glad he had stayed up so late. It made the missing warmth and weight at his side less noticeable.

Hands and terror alike gripped Prompto and his thoughts flew to the knife kept under his pillow only to remember he was not at home. He fought, struggling to buck off the oppressive weight and stilling only at the cold bite of a knife at his neck. Sweat plastered his hair to his face and he groaned, desperate not to pass out. He was fading fast. Not even the gods could keep him alive anymore.

A hand clenched painfully at his hair and he was pulled roughly to his feet, the knife never wavering at his throat. Two men dragged him from his room, reminding Prompto of the day this all began when Loqi had drug him downstairs, balance at odds with his. Now there was no Loqi, only unfamiliar faces hardened into stone.
Prompto was weak, the wound in his shoulder burning with every step and dizziness overtook him before long. When his head cleared, they were in a dark hallway under the palace dungeons. Ardyn was there, waiting patiently.

A bolt of clarity as bright as Rumah’s bolts hit Prompto - Ardyn was not simply going to throw him out. Why had he allowed himself to think that? “No. Six no,” he gasped.

“You don’t even know what’s going to happen.” Ardyn’s calm voice was a stark contrast to the hostility radiating from him.

“I think I can figure it out,” Prompto hissed. His breath came too quickly, heart beating frantically as he tried to think of a way out.

Ardyn looked at him with careful consideration. “I would imagine you can, you’re remarkably clever, but allow me to fill you in. You will be taken to a room and we will see what secrets Niflheim is willing to hand over. There are, of course, methods to make sure you give them up. Alus is very good with a knife, it won’t take long.”

Prompto twisted to the man on his left. “Please, go get Noctis and tell him what is happening here. He will tell you that you can’t do this to me.” No matter how mad Noctis was, surely he wouldn’t let them torture him like this.

“What makes you think he would care about you now?” Ardyn asked, shards of ice shooting through Prompto’s stomach. “He’s told me to do what I want. Lucis and Tenebrae matter above all.”

The silence only spurred Ardyn on and he crept closer to Prompto to lean into his space, trailing his fingertips along his jaw as he spoke, soft and calm. “They were supposed to kill you and bring me the ring. I know you had it, Noctis admitted to me you did, but when you were searched it wasn’t there. Wherever you’ve hidden it away, does it burn to know how badly you’ve failed yourself? To have failed your friends? Where is the ring?”

When Prompto remained silent, Ardyn backhanded him with a snarl and he would have crumpled with the force of the blow if he hadn’t been held up by the men on either side of him.

“When you remain silent, Ardyn backhanded him with a snarl and he would have crumpled with the force of the blow if he hadn’t been held up by the men on either side of him.

“He wanted to be here for this, but King Ardyn has some matters to deal with them nobles up there,” Alus said conversationally, as he strapped Prompto’s struggling frame to the chair. “Have you heard about Ardyn’s personal servants? They’re called Magitek.” When Prompto froze he grinned. “Ah - you have heard of them before.”

MT’s sole purpose was to complete ridiculous and mortifying tasks at Ardyn’s whim. He justified it by claiming anyone who bore the MT tattoo was a traitor or someone who had committed an unspeakable crime. It was a Tenebrean practice, one Ardyn himself set into place, but the knowledge of these doomed souls spread and they were regarded with pity and fear. No one was willing to tattoo over it, so the only way to remove the tattoo was to chop your own hand off.

Prompto was mad, gods he was mad. He wanted nothing more than to crack his sternum open to let the fire that engulfed swallow the world. Words, sharp as knives and cold as the fjords of Niflheim cut his mouth when he refused to let them loose. Only one man was deserving of them and he wasn’t even the one holding him down right then. No, Prompto would save his words. He would hurl them at Ardyn as he killed him, if he was able to kill him. If he came out of this alive.
He barely registered Alus removing his shirt, until his arm was wrenched back hard enough to jostle his wound.

“We can’t question you if you’re dead from a botched murder attempt,” Alus said, pulling a needle and thread from a pouch at his side.

There was a sick sense of relief when he threaded it through Prompto’s torn skin. At least now he wouldn’t die from bleeding out. He knew how terrible open wounds were in a cell - hell, he had suffered from them recently in Ardyn’s own castle. Exhaustion sank deep into him until he hardly realized Alus’s had pulled away and he was left alone in the darkness.

Breathing heavily, Prompto scanned his surroundings. He grit his teeth and pulled ineffectively on the straps on his wrists and ankles, realizing he couldn’t escape them without further harm to himself. For every hour he was left down there, he was sure no one would ever find him.

When Alus stepped back into the room, a blade in hand, terror spiked through him once more. “You could just tell us where you hid the ring, and we would let you go.” He paused, waiting for an answer that never came. “No? Just remember that everything that happens from this point on could have been avoided.”

There was no hope of getting away and nothing made much sense after that. Darkness sank into his soul and his mind. Despite the promises he made to himself that he would never give anything up to Ardyn or Alus, fear wrapped around him like the arms of a long lost lover. It was too tight and never ending. Regardless of whatever foolish bravery he subscribed to, deep down he knew it wouldn’t matter if he talked or not. When it came to the torture, the truth would not matter at all.

“You are quite the interesting boy,” Ardyn said, his words wrapped in silk. He trailed his fingers over the raised lines now maring Prompto’s wrist. If he had any energy, he would have flinched away. “Your father was nothing more than a soldier and your mother a thief, but they met and had you. Then you met Aranea -”

“Queen Aranea,” Prompto snarled. He may not have had the energy to protect himself, but he would die defending those he loved.

“Yes, yes, but she was only queen after she was taken in by the last king. Unfortunate that you had to be separated for so long,” Ardyn murmured as he slipped in front of Prompto. “Though I must say, it was lucky she was able to find you again after searching for years. Why was it you were so hard to find I wonder? Was it your fear of your father?”

Staring ahead, Prompto clenched his jaw. Bound to the chair as he was, he couldn’t punch Ardyn in the face like he really wanted. He settled for pretending he was anywhere other than where he was.

“Nevertheless, she found you and made you prince and all the people adore you because they think they know you. Now you run around doing her dirty deeds, sneaking into my kingdom, trying to fool me after she has already denied my hand for marriage three times. Then you hide the one thing that could have made you worth anything to me.”

“Do you ever get tired of hearing yourself talk?” Prompto sighed and regretted it an instant later when his head was ringing with the force behind Ardyn’s blow.

Although he never raised his voice, never spoke louder than a conversational tone, Prompto knew better. He had seen him get angry more than a few times in the past few days and Ardyn had no
qualms about taking it out on him. The stinging in his jaw was proof of that, but it didn’t mean he felt the need to really pay attention to his own past thrown back at him.

“What I want to know is how she knew to come for the ring when she did,” Ardyn said, as if Prompto had never spoken.

“Did you honestly think that was my first time in Tenebrae? If someone was talented enough to steal the king’s crown, do you think they would not be talented enough to sneak in and search through your papers?” Prompto spat.

“Now you’re just bragging, though you do have a point. I suppose if you knew we were looking for the ring and thinking of making a deal with Lucis, you would want to make yourself undeniably desirable to us. No one would care for if a thief with no known family suddenly disappeared. Clever indeed.”

Ardyn’s hand reached up between them, brushing his fingers against the sore spot on his jaw. “Too bad you’re marked for me now. No one will ever want you again. Not that anyone would after they found out you had been lying to them this entire time, but I assume you already knew that.”

Shame burned in Prompto’s eyes. There was nowhere he could go to hide from the truths laid out before him. He was marked as one of Ardyn’s own, and even if he never did anything for him, anyone who saw it would instantly be wary of him. A traitor for life.

Would Noctis think he sold them out to Ardyn? Would Ignis ever look at him with softness in his eyes again? Prompto choked on a sob and fighting the tears threatening to come was like falling into a well - you could only paddle so long in the hopes someone would lower a rope. The chances of it happening were slim to none.

When he found his voice again, he asked, “Did you kill King Regis?”

“Why? If I admit that I poisoned him and trying to kill Noctis with the arrow you so rudely blocked, will it break you faster? Because I did.”

Prompto held his breath when Ardyn’s breath fanned across his face.

“I would kill you too if it didn’t bring me so much joy to see you sad.” Stroking the stark lines and numbers on Prompto’s wrist, Ardyn laughed softly and stood. “Farewell for now. Your prince is very distraught, you know. The death of his father and the betrayal of one of his new friends has been very hard on him.”

“I didn’t betray him,” Prompto shouted, and the door clanged shut behind Ardyn’s flowing robes. “I didn’t betray anyone!”

But Ardyn had told nothing but the truth and there was nothing he could do to change it as Alus and the other guard stepped in to take over.

When he was left by the guards in his cell, Prompto dropped as gently as he could on all fours and lifted a hand in disgust. The cell flooded with several inches of water once a day, when the river around the castle flowed quick. Too tired to stand to get away from it, Prompto crawled to a corner where it was less wet and curled up. He prayed to Shiva, his patron goddess of home, and wondered if she had been a figment of his imagination all along. There was no answer and he slept.

Pain woke him, but when he opened his eyes briefly and realized there was no one in the cell to deal out fresh abuse, he slept again. He knew he should have tried to stay awake, but he hardly cared when his body begged for rest. Sometimes, in his deepest sleeps, he thought he could hear
Noctis or Ignis calling his name and he would stir, struggling to pull himself out of the darkness only to wake alone.

Days passed, and when he was not in Ardyn or Alus’s company he refused to stray from the corner unless food was brought in. On days when his aching body was too stiff to move, he left it. He wondered if anyone was looking for him.

Life continued in this manner until the fateful day Alus dropped his key. Prompto’s fingers were stiff, every part of him hurting, but he moved the fastest he had since being thrown down here and snatched it out of sight. After that, it was just a matter of waiting.

The cells in Lucis locked automatically when they closed, a good thing for him, and when Alus left Prompto got to work. The bolts in the door of the cell turned over as the door swung open with a barely audible squeak. Prompto winced and held his breath, waiting for the thundering feet of guards to come charging his way, but when nothing happened he sagged in relief. The lamps in the hallway weren’t burning, but his eyes had adjusted from being in the dark for so long and he made his way easily once he determined no one was coming for him. He stripped his boots off and left them shoved in a dark corner, allowing him to slip even more silently than he had before.

Unfortunately, there were locked doors in his path and without his lock picks, Prompto found himself frustratingly stuck. He debated whether or not he should climb through a nearby window - the only source of fresh air in the entire dungeon. It would have been a tight fit, and a hard one considering how battered his body was. Exhaustion weighed down on him like the sun setting on the mountains, slowly and all-consuming, but getting out of here and getting home was more important. The ring was something he could come back for. Somehow.

Before any more plans could come to mind, a cold breeze wrapped around his legs like a persistent cat and Prompto warily turned in its direction. Either it was Shiva helping him at last, or a cruel trick of his mind.

Throwing caution into the wind, he followed the cold air until he found a tunnel he had previously passed by. It was small, only the size of a door in both width and height, but Prompto had crawled through worse so he squared his shoulders and pushed through. There was a stone door at the end that had a simple fastening on the inside, something he could disarm without the need for lockpicks.

The hallway dumped him out in a dark part of the castle and the cold air continued to tug at him. Slinking through empty hallways, he found himself in front small room that looked like it hadn’t been touched in months - hardly more than a storage room to hold winter linens - and after a long pause, he ducked inside.

The door clicked behind him softly and with it the cold air dissipated. Muttering curses under his breath, he caught the door handle in his hand, ready to wrench it open, when the sound of voices came from the other side. He frantically turned around and flung himself into a hiding spot among the trunks and sheets.

The voices paused, and with a hammering heart Prompto waited to see if they would move on. Any luck which had come his way was gone and the door creaked open as two shadows slipped into the room.

“Prompto, are you in here?”

It was a soft whisper, but he would have recognized Gladio’s voice even in death. There was nothing he wanted more than to come crawling out and to plead for some form of comfort, but the
aches in his body reminded him that the sooner he escaped from the Lucians and the Tenebrae King, the better. He didn’t think Gladio would turn him in, but he hadn’t believed he would be discovered as a prince either.

“Prompto?” Ignis called.

Tears sprang to his eyes, heart clenching. It was unfair, it had always been, and he always knew how stupid he was to fall in love with them. Squeezing his eyes shut, Prompto held his breath to keep from making a sound.

“Prompto, please. We want to help you.”

It was the crack in his voice, like Ignis was struggling not to cry, that broke him. He stumbled from his spot, finding Ignis and Gladio searching around chests and anywhere small enough to fit him. They whipped around at his footsteps.

“Oh Six, what have they done to you?” Gladio whispered, his eyes widening as he tried to take in every cut and bruise at once.

Ignis reached him first, catching him in an all-encompassing embrace and Prompto finally let loose the tears he had been holding back. “I’m sorry,” he cried, words muffled by Ignis’s shoulder. “I lied to you, I lied to all of you.”

Gentle hands carded through his hair, knotted as it was, and pressed a kiss to the crown of his head. “We can talk about it later, but right now we need to get you out of here,” said Ignis. “The guards are searching for you. The sooner you get home, the better.”

He was not saved, not yet, but he wasn’t alone, and when Ignis took his hand to lead him down hallways no one knew about, Prompto felt as safe as he could possibly feel with the memories of hands on his skin and bruises littering his body.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a ride, BUT! I didn't leave off on a cliff hanger! What did you guys think??
Okay but seriously. I love you guys. Thank you so much.
(P.s, so who's played kh3 yet?? I haven't beaten it but I've def cried like fifty times already)
Cold Conquered Seas They Mean Nothing To Me

Chapter Summary

It hurt, made worse by the words Ardyn had casually thrown in his face time and time again. He’d known this was going to happen and there was no one for Prompto to blame but himself. He had ruined so much - a wall between them built with words and titles. This is what he had hoped to avoid, but the truth was out and nothing could ever go back to the way it was before. Simple touches couldn't happen without thought anymore. Every word and exchange held significant meaning.

Chapter Notes

Hello all- how are we doing? College Graduations are coming up and I'm in charge of ordering all the caps and gowns on campus so it's been... hectic lately haha But! Here is our second to last chapter y'all. One more for CWS and we're done. I'm not ready ;;;; Thank you to everyone; my people, (Mils, Angie, Ted) and the friends I've made along the course of this fic, (Munchy) and to everyone who has been with me every step of the way. I love you all <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ignis led them through the halls with quick, sure steps, ducking into shadows at the slightest worry of being seen. They followed warily, Gladio ready to catch Prompto should he fall. He refused to be carried, leaving no room for argument. “I move quieter than you and can slip into the shadows if anyone stops us.”

Maybe before they would have argued back, but now there was something new between them - a shift in their relationship. It was subtle but enough to make his heart ache all the more for it. Echoes of their previous conversation rang in his ears, regardless of how much he tried to block it out.

“We’re going to help you get back home.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re Prompto - a friend.”

“Don’t you mean Prince Prompto?” His voice twisted bitterly, forcing the knife he dug into himself even deeper.

Ignis grimaced before smoothing his expression into a forced calmness. “We would have done it regardless.”

It didn't feel final, but rather all they could say on the matter. There was too much danger, the stress between them palpable, and Prompto wondered how much of it was real and how much he’d made up in his head.
With bare feet he had to step gingerly. The concentration it took made his pain and dark thoughts manageable. They took so many twists and turns, that he lost track of where they were.

Despite the reassurance that Ignis must know where he was leading them, Prompto couldn't help his shaky smile when they found themselves outside. He dropped it when Gladio glanced over at him and hugged his arms to his body. The temperatures outside were vastly different from inside, and he willed his body to warm up. Gladio moved closer and for all his steel earlier Prompto couldn't help but sink into his side.

Ignis peered around them, the silence broken only by the sound of lapping water. They were on a narrow footing of stone that ran under the walls, and he led the way around the castle. The river around Insomnia was good for defense, and to get to Niflheim they would have to cross it at its thinnest.

Getting through the surrounding town was harder than slinking through the castle. Without moonlight to guide the way they moved carefully and unsteady as he was on his feet, Prompto was still a thief and his training had not left him. Where his steps were silent as a falling leaf, Ignis and Gladio were not as graceful, their every step as loud as cannon fire. Despite it, they made it through the town with no mishaps and Prompto relaxed.

Hands on his knees, Prompto took deep, gulping breaths, before pushing himself upright.

Ignis stepped close to him, pitching his voice low and breaking the silence that had cloaked them. "Prompto, how are you holding up?"

He couldn't find it in him to hold eye contact and shifted away. Regardless of their feelings towards him, he knew them well enough to know Ignis wouldn't appreciate a flippant response, nor would he allow them to continue until Prompto answered. It did, however, give him a chance to catalog all his aches and pains away from Ardyn's horror.

"I'm not... okay. But I'll live," he answered roughly. His throat hurt from screaming and not enough to drink, and he hoped that would be enough.

Ignis hummed, looking down the road to where the castle still sat proudly on the hill. “We should rest. We’ll be going uphill and we need to be prepared for it.”

Despite the pull of his limbs and the heaviness of his eyes, Prompto shook his head. “We need to keep going, they’ll catch us- they’ll-” he shuddered, a coughing fit interrupting the dark place his mind had gone. It was all too easy to guess what Ardyn would do to him if he was caught again.

“We won’t let that happen, Prom,” Gladio said, reaching out to pat him on the shoulder only to pull back at the last second.

It hurt, made worse by the words Ardyn had casually thrown in his face time and time again. He’d known this was going to happen and there was no one for Prompto to blame but himself. He had ruined so much - a wall between them built with words and titles. This is what he had hoped to avoid, but the truth was out and nothing could ever go back to the way it was before. Simple touches couldn't happen without thought anymore. Every word and exchange held significant meaning.

Jerking away from Gladio’s hand, Prompto curled against a tree and tucked his feet underneath him. "Fine, just- don't," he said. He didn't even know what he was saying anymore - words falling from him heavy as boulders and sinking into the space between them.
The river they were following lapped at the shore, quiet and soothing to his raw nerves. As his eyes fell shut, he could see Ignis and Gladio drawing near each other, their murmuring voices floating across the clearing. He ignored them and slept. If he dreamt, it was only repeating what had been behind his eyes since he had been taken down below the castle.

When he opened them again there was enough light to see the colors of the world. Gladio had wrapped his overshirt around him and was nowhere to be found while Ignis sat on the stone wall a respectable distance away.

Jerking his head around, Prompto immediately wished he hadn’t. His body had stiffened while he slept and every movement sent stabs of pain throughout. Where did he go? Scrambling the best he could off the cold ground - When did fall begin? - he backed away from Ignis who watched in concern.

“Prompto?”

It was only his name, spoken softly, and yet Prompto flinched at the unexpectedness of it. Ignis’s face, which already held such sadness, seemed sadder now.

“Gladio went to get some chocobos so that traveling will be easier for you.”

“Why?” Prompto asked.

Ignis made a small sound of frustration and pushed himself off the wall. He stopped when Prompto took a step back. “Prompto, you know we don’t feel anything but friendship for you. Nothing has changed since finding out the truth of your position.”

Nothing but friendship. The twisting knife dug deeper and Prompto ducked his head to blink tears away. “Right. Then why isn’t Noct here?”

A dark shadow crossed Ignis’s face and he hesitated. “Noctis is preparing for the painful transition into becoming king. He doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t know you’re helping me or doesn’t know I was trapped in his dungeon for Six knows how long?” Prompto snapped. Gritting his teeth, he tried to shove his pain away before it lashed out in another poor show of anger. Dropping back down into his spot, he curled up.

“Prompto,” Ignis said, somber enough to gain his attention again. He waited until Prompto cracked an eye open. “Does Queen Aranea know where you’ve been? Does she know the danger you’ve put yourself into?”

“No,” he said. “I left without her permission some months ago after I heard that a manuscript about the ring had been found in Tenebrae. I have a friend there who keeps me up to date on everything and this involved my country.” Prompto shrugged and closed his eyes again. “Aranea told me not to go and I didn’t listen, but I’ve never been good at following rules.”

There was a breath of a laugh from Ignis at his side. “Prompto, why did you—”

“Lie?”

“No, I was going to say hide your true identity.”

“So you’re asking why I lied.” Sighing, Prompto gave up on sleep. “I knew I couldn’t find the ring on my own, not after Ardyn burnt the papers. Only a thief can steal it, and if you had known who I was you wouldn’t have let me come along. My nation would have been destroyed without any of
my people’s knowledge of how it came to be.” Prompto shook his head ruefully. "I couldn’t let that happen. I’ve been a prince for less time than I’ve been regular Prompto, so it wasn’t hard to go back to that.”

Ignis’s brows furrowed. “What was your plan after you stole the ring?”

“Bring it to ‘Nea,” Prompto said, simply.

“But you-”

“I know .” He sighed. Shuffling into a sitting position, he glanced at Ignis’s harried expression. “I knew Ardyn was in Lucis, because Loqi told me before I cut him loose and I had a suspicion he would know who I was. He’s relentless when something doesn’t add up.”

“So that’s why you-”

“Why I put it in your pocket before we went into the castle, yes. Do you still have it?”

Ignis nodded and reached into the pouch at his waist. He pulled out his fist a moment later and unfurled his hand like a blooming flower. Sitting there, on his palm, was the ring. Prompto reached out with shaking fingers to touch it once more. “It’s yours, we aren’t giving it to Ardyn.”

A bitter laugh escaped him and Prompto took the ring. “How kind of you.”

“And how does Loqi fit into your plan?”

Prompto debated not answering. He didn’t have to anymore, could pull rank and - no, he had never been the type to do that. “I didn’t know he was from Niflhiem until the day we all found out. I had a few suspicions - the fair skin, the jumpiness around Cor. It made sense. But he knew who I was the entire time.” Prompto frowned, dragging his thumb across his bottom lip as he thought. Loqi had given him so much from day one.

“When I was caught, he knew and he stopped the guard that was beating me and said he would take over. I thought he was a sadistic fuck, but honestly, he made my time in jail so much nicer than it could have been. After that first day, no one laid a hand on me.”

Ignis raised an eyebrow, undoubtedly thinking of the way they had all thought Loqi was responsible for his scars. “I didn’t know he could be so kind.”

“I didn’t realize until it was too late. He kept hinting that Ardyn would find out, and he knew he would never mesh with us. Every moment he was here, he risked giving me away. It was hard for him to not show me the respect he thought I was due and so he subtracted himself from the equation so to speak. He went back home to report to Aranea, so I’m guessing she knows where I am now.”

It was easy - sitting there in the early dawn’s light with Ignis at his side - to forget anything bad had ever happened between them. It was like being in the tent with him again, simple and soft. But there were bruises and a new bandage around his wrist that was hard to ignore. He wondered if they knew what Ardyn had done to him.

“Hey, Ignis?” Prompto asked, his voice small and unsure. At Ignis’s quizzical glance, he looked down at his wrist. “Did Ardyn talk about me when I was down there?”

Like a summer tempest, Ignis’s face transformed from calm, serenity to a thundercloud threatening to spit hatred any second. His voice when he spoke remained as even-tempered as always. “We had
no idea you were there at all. He told us you escaped the moment you were placed in the guest room."

It didn’t surprise him, it sounded exactly like what Ardyn would say. Prompto’s brows furrowed in confusion as he tried to put together puzzle pieces that didn’t match. “But, you found me. How?”

Before Ignis could answer, a low rumbling filled the air and Prompto’s eyes widened in fear. The only thing keeping him from leaping into the river was the knowledge that he didn’t have the strength to swim to safety.

With a quiet sigh of relief, Ignis said, “It’s Gladio.” They watched as he rose over the hill on a chocobo, two more in tow. “There’s a bridge where the river is the thickest and we’ll cross there into Niflheim. There’s not much we can do for food, I’m sorry.”

Feeling battered and far too empty inside to find it in himself to care about anything other than the trip ahead, Prompto made for the chocobos. He paused to let one smell him and get acquainted before eyeing the distance from the ground to the saddle. With help, he clambered onto his mount and after checking that they were good to go, they set off with an easy pace.

“This sucks,” Prompto complained, letting the scratchiness of his voice distract him from his other aches for the moment.

“We’ll get you home and to a healer soon,” Ignis said. “Niflheim’s border can’t be too much farther.”

“There’s a fort across the bridge that works as a checkpoint. If we go there, we can get an escort to the castle and won’t be stopped. I’m just glad we aren’t in a carriage.” At Gladio’s questioning expression, Prompto explained, “I always feel like a bear in a circus when I come home in one.”

They weren't going as fast as he would have liked, but it was better than walking. Throughout the ride, Prompto kept his mouth shut and thought about what returning home would be like. He had crossed his mind on and off through his time in jail and as they had traveled before, but everything was different now.

They rose above the river, the path becoming a trail of dirt packed on top of stones. As they rode, the sun came out in full force, the early fall not yet cool enough to be comfortable in midday. As they went through a narrow pass in the rocks, Prompto turned back to look over Gladio’s shoulder. When he saw what Prompto was doing, he turned as well and cursed.

“Ignis, there’s a dust cloud behind us. It’s chocobos on the road,” he called.

There came a curse made beautiful by Ignis’s accent and Prompto would have laughed if fear wasn’t already clawing its way up his throat. They tried to hurry, but Prompto’s battered body stripped him of the strength to move any faster than they were. They would be overrun before long.

Though the overpass hadn't been for another hundred yards, they miraculously made it before the soldiers came into view. It was little more than a makeshift bridge built messily out of fallen logs.

“We can’t cross with our chocobos, it will collapse under the weight,” Ignis said, his mount dancing uneasily before it.

“We’ll have to leave them and cross on foot,” Gladio agreed.

Too tired to agree, Prompto slipped from the saddle ungracefully and it was only the luck of the
gods that he didn’t land on his face. He knew the chocobos would be safe and taken back to the castle, but there was a hollow pang in his chest as he hastily said goodbye.

Crossing the wet logs was difficult and more than once Prompto was convinced that his companions would fall into the raging rapids below them. If they fell, there would be no hope to swim ashore, sucked under and drowned in an instant. It reminded him too much of the water rushing into the maze and he shuddered as he followed behind them. They made it across when the mounted men rose over the hill.

“Gladio! Help me break the bridge,” Prompto shouted. “They’ll have to cross later if we do and it’ll buy us some time.”

Gladio looked behind him at the men beginning to dismount and he and Ignis rushed to Prompto’s side to shove the logs into the water. There were shouts from the soldiers and a sharp crack on the rock beside them. Panicked, Prompto looked up to see guns pointed their way.

“This is taking too long,” Gladio huffed as Ardyn’s men continued to shoot at them. He reached for the sword at his side and with a heavy swing, splintered the wood. With a swift kick at the weakest log, Gladio came close to destroying it just like that.

Prompto stood back, allowing him to work and watching nervously as the men still on chocobos also pulled out their guns. Crossbows would have been far more dangerous and accurate, but for once in his life Prompto was happy with the dramatics Ardyn was inclined to. Guns were more impressive, but no one could use them like Niflhiem soldiers. Put a gun in Prompto’s hands and he would have been able to pick off the men in an instant.

With the bridge too damaged to worry about anyone crossing, Ignis pulled Prompto with him and they took off through the rocks. Even dashing as they were, the men stubbornly tried to shoot at them and a bullet hit the rock closest to Gladio. Stumbling along, Prompto choked back a building sob of frustration and rubbed his face when he realized his cheeks were wet. His fingers came back red and confusion settled over him. Around the corner and safe for the time being, they paused to get their breath back.

“One of the rocks must have hit you,” Ignis said when he saw Prompto touching his cheek.

Sure enough, there was a deep cut and his fingers shook when he saw how much blood poured out of it. Memories threatened to overtake him and he shut his eyes to force them back. A cool breeze curled around them and he shivered. The cold intensified and numbed the pain. It was one more thing on top of multitudes of other aches, but this one Shiva showed her approval.

“We have to keep going,” Ignis said, pushing himself away from the rock side he had been leaning against.

Too tired and sick to argue for more time, Prompto stumbled to his feet. It wasn’t even the type of sick he had felt when Shiva wanted to talk to him. In fact, other than her subtle nod to him, she had been completely silent and that made him worry more than anything else.

As they walked and night fell, a chill came that neither Gladio or Ignis seemed bothered by. It could be Shiva, but he doubted it. Teeth chattering, Prompto forced himself to keep behind Ignis and Gladio. One step at a time, they grew closer to his home. The mountains cut the sky ahead, a wall of comfort as they were swallowed up. Prompto could see specks of light signalling the capital city. They were silent as they walked, but he wasn’t sure if it was out of necessity to stay hidden or if it was because they didn’t know what to say anymore.
The road, bathed in moonlight, ended at another bridge and Gladio paused before resuming the lead at a brisk pace. There was a squat tower sitting in the middle, acting like a checkpoint between the two countries and stationed with Niflhiem men. As exhausted as he was, Prompto followed the quick pace Gladio set. The gate was open despite the late hour and off duty soldiers were scattered around playing dice or talking.

Prompto directed Ignis and Gladio’s attention to the three who should have been watching for people approaching, but were instead arguing with another man, hands gesturing and voices rising. The soldiers didn’t see them until they were almost upon them, and for a moment all they could do was stare in shocked silence.

Ignis was the first to regain his composure. “Loqi?”

Prompto swayed and Loqi flicked his eyes over him. “Oh thank Six, I was afraid you had done something stupid and gotten yourself hurt,” he said drily, and Prompto huffed a laugh. “Welcome home, Your Highness.”

“I’m glad you’re still as insufferable as you were before,” Prompto replied, leaning on Gladio who held him up without complaint. He could no longer pretend he didn't need it. Shivers racked him and his head felt too full of cotton to hold himself up anymore.

Loqi shook his head with a small huff and looked at Gladio and Ignis. “Welcome to Niflhiem, I suppose.” Turning to the other two guards who looked chastised, he said, “Ready chocobos for us, we’re leaving as soon as possible.”

The soldiers scrambled off and Ignis asked, “What did you do to them?”

Prompto laughed. “Biggs and Wedge are always slacking off. They get in trouble at least once a week. More importantly, how did you know?”

Eyebrow raised, Loqi seemed more comfortable than Prompto had ever seen him. “To come here?” he asked. “You always come home from Lucis this way. That’s what the Queen said when she sent me here to meet you. I’ve been here for about two weeks waiting.”

Nodding sleepily, Prompto pointed to a seat by one of the fires. “I need to sit. Tell me more later?”

Loqi laughed and waved him off, and Prompto took a moment to give him a genuine smile. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Gladio followed him to the bench and Prompto ignored him to lean back against the wall and close his eyes. He fell into a much welcome sleep to the sound of Loqi rounding on Ignis and Gladio with his questions.

He woke later in a carriage. There wasn’t anything in him to be surprised at the change. Loqi nudged him. “We’re almost at the palace. Stay awake, your sister will want to see you.”

“Tell her to wait, I want to sleep.”

Loqi sighed as if he had expected that. Ignis and Gladio, however, exchanged a glance of disbelief.

“Maybe it’s not my place to say this-”

“Then don’t say it,” Loqi interrupted.
“Maybe it’s not my place to say this, but Prom- Prince Prompto, don’t you think you should see the queen?” Ignis said, bullying past Loqi’s words.

Prompto shrugged with his good shoulder but didn’t answer. He stared out the window, watching familiar buildings fly past. “I knew I would end up in a carriage at some point,” he murmured mournfully.

“Prompto and Prince Prompto really are the same person, aren’t they?” Gladio said, laughing quietly.

Eyeing them for a second, Prompto left them to their thoughts and went back to staring out the window. When they arrived in the courtyard, he refused any help in.

“I cannot be seen as weak in front of my people,” he said, though he had never felt further from being strong. They pushed through the double doors leading into the entrance hall and trooped in. The clatter of their boots on marble floors announced their arrival better than any herald.

Although the hour was late, servants and onlookers appeared and followed, curiously murmuring around them. Lights were still burning in the lesser throne room, which is where Prompto knew his sister would be, and the great knot of people they had collected moved in that direction. By the time they left the entrance hall and crowded the doorway of the brightly lit throne room, Prompto felt like the center of a circus on the move. All they needed now was dancing bears.

In the room beyond was a group of people talking in a small cluster. One of the women pushed through, odd in that she didn’t wear a dress but the crown nestled in her long hair dismissed her fashion choices outright. Quirking an eyebrow, she eyed them and sighed. “Oh. It’s you Prompto.”

He couldn’t find it in him to be embarrassed in front of his queen. Prompto was tired and all he wanted was to escape under some blankets in his room and quietly unravel from the horrors he’s experienced. Hand shaking like a leaf in fall, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the ring. It was such a boring little thing, but no one in the room could doubt what it was.

He had prepared a speech - worked on it all the way to Tenebrae, practiced it in jail, worked on it laying in the tent beside Noctis - but with everything that had happened, he couldn’t remember it. Giving Aranea a small smile he knew she would be able to decipher, he dropped the ring into her open hand.

Handing it off to someone behind her, she reached for his cheek and he melted into her touch. With a fond smile, she said, “Welcome home, Prom.”

Chapter End Notes

So I've said this a few times, but we only have one more chapter for Come What Sorrow. However! Please be sure to subscribe to the series because we have a second part coming up. I didn't want this fic to be a million chapters long so that's why it's split up the way it is. I hope everyone liked this chapter and I can't wait to cross this finish line with y'all <33
So we keep holding on, you've had me all along

Chapter Summary

Amen, amen! but come what sorrow can,
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
That one short minute gives me in her sight:
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
Then love-devouring death do what he dare;
It is enough I may but call her mine.

Chapter Notes

This is it y'all. Last chapter. Thank you to everyone. I couldn't have done it without Mils, Angie, Teddy, Munchy. I couldn't have done this without you- my readers. Very quickly, for those who aren't versed in Shakespeare, here is the translation of our summary hahah It came from Romeo and Juliet which seemed fitting for our boys. Romeo’s replies that one short minute with Juliet is worth more than all the sorrow in the world. He also says that as long as she is his, he doesn't even fear death. And if that doesn't remind you of Prompto in this then whooo boy. Idk what does lol
Chapter title comes from: The City by Louis the Child.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been almost a year since Prompto woke in his own bed. Nothing in his bedroom changed, yet he had. It was still too warm to use the fireplace in his room, but he had many good memories of curling in front of it with a stack of books by his side. On the other side of his room by his window was his book laden table and his chair - currently occupied by a pensive Gladio.

Under the considerable weight of his stare, Prompto shifted, thoughtless of his injuries. There was a stab of pain, muted, but it made his breath catch regardless. Taking stock of his body, he exhaled. The healer must have come at some point to dose him with lithium - a numbing antidote helpful for sleep.

Even with the effects of it, sweat beaded his brow as he clenched his fists into his blanket. Prompto expected a lecture, the showdown he deserved. Instead, Gladio said, “You never mentioned you live in the library.”

Prompto blinked, huffing a small laugh as he settled against his pillows. “You never asked. This the old librarian's room, I don’t actually live in the library itself.”

“Close enough.”

Reaching over, Gladio took Prompto's hand in his own and pressed an impossibly soft kiss to his knuckles. Prompto didn't pull back. Rather, he thought of how his pale hand seemed so small in Gladio's tan one and - and his barcode was on full display.
Wrenching his hand away from Gladio’s, Prompto curled around his wrist. It was too late, everyone had seen. There had been a vague hope in the back of his mind he would be able to keep it a secret forever, but fate had other plans.

“I’m sorry,” Gladio said.

Something broke in Prompto. He was expecting anger, and instead, he had pity and the lingering warmth of a kiss. He had no idea what he was supposed to do anymore. If life were as simple as two roads to choose from - one leading to his heart and the other to his duty - he would be stuck right in the middle. There were too many lies told to know where he stood with anyone and being marked as a traitor put his life at risk as a prince. And yet, here Gladio sat apologizing for things he didn't do.

It was more painful than anything Prompto could have ever imagined. There was nothing he could say to his apology. Laughter bubbled out of him, burning his chest and spilling from his chapped lips. He couldn't stop it, and he knew what he sounded like - self-deprecating and horrible. But, it was either laugh or tear himself apart until he was nothing.

Looking at Gladio was worse, and Prompto dropped his arm over his face, blocking out the indecipherable look on Gladio's face. When had he stopped being able to read people?

He petered off, not enough in him to continue. He must have been going insane, it was the only thing that made sense.

"Who taught you to fight like that?” Gladio asked.

Searching through his shattered memories, he remembered the fight at the foot of the mountains. Gladio was doing what he could to distract him. Nothing had changed between them after all.

It felt like years ago, but thinking back, he had fought. He had saved Noctis and he had killed someone. Shuddering at the memory, Prompto said, "My father."

"Your father?"

"He wanted me to be a soldier like him, remember?"

Gladio frowned. "Where is he now?"

The way he asked - protectively, worried, with care - brought a smile to Prompto's face. "Why? Are you planning on fighting him? Everything I told you happened like eight years ago, big guy."

He hummed thoughtfully. "Anyways, don't bother. Aranea exiled my parents or something, I don't actually know. When she found out what happened after the last king took her in, she was pretty pissed."

“How did she get taken in?”

Scoffing, Prompto shook his head. “You want to talk about politics, now? No thanks, not while I’m dying.”

“You’re not dying Prom.”

“Bold assumption.”

Gladio's snarky reply died as Ignis and the royal healer stepped into the room.
“Oh,” Ignis said, his eyes flicking from Prompto to Gladio as the healer pushed past him. “You’re awake.”

Prompto blinked. “Yes?”

The healer, an older man who had known Prompto since he was a teenager, pointed a finger at Gladio and said, “You were supposed to come get me the moment he woke up.” When Gladio looked appropriately abashed, his finger swung to Prompto. “Your Highness, do you remember nothing?”

Shrinking back into his pillows, Prompto looked between Ignis and Gladio. “I remember coming home and handing off the ring. Then...” Prompto trailed off, furrowing his brow. What had happened next? “I went to bed, right? And you came to see me.” But why was there a gap in his memories? Why couldn't he remember the healer coming in?

The healer sat beside him, taking Prompto's arm in his hand to examine the cuts and bruises there. "You didn’t come out of your room the next morning. When we found you, the infection and fever had caught up. You were touch and go for a few days."

"Touch and go? A few days?" Prompto asked. "What do you mean?"

“We weren’t sure if you were going to wake up,” the healer said gently.

“Oh,” Prompto said, his voice faint. He couldn’t watch as the healer examined his wounds and when he tugged at his shirt Prompto took to staring at Ignis. Focusing on the gentle hands on his back would be a quick way into dark memories.

There was so much unsaid between them, and the heavi ness pressed in from all corners of the room. Prompto was suffocating on it, unable to think of anything to say to clear the air.

“Gladio, there is a meeting we must attend. Queen Aranea wants to meet with us once more,” Ignis said, his words both what they needed to breathe but not what they needed to hear.

Nodding slowly, Gladio stood. There was more he wanted to say, Prompto could see it in the twist of his lip and the furrow of his eyebrows, but he clenched his teeth and left without another word. Ignis followed behind and the second the door closed behind them, Prompto deflated.

The healer pulled away from him and sighed. “Your Highness, your wounds are not bad but the infection is still healing. You’ll have to stay in bed and rest. Please stay in bed and rest.” He tried to smile, a reminder of days past when Prompto would do the exact opposite of his words. When he didn’t smile back, the healer patted his hand gently and hobbled out of the room.

The room was completely silent. Prompto debated falling back asleep, but he knew there was too much to be done now. Dragging himself out of bed, he stumbled to the chair Gladio had vacated. He collapsed and ran his fingers through his hair.

“Six, this sucks,” he said dryly. He knew the healer was right - his wounds had gotten infected and he had had a fever. But, there was still a deep ache in his bones; he was a long way from being normal. Looking out the window, he stared at the same scene which had captivated Gladio before.

The mountains stretched forever, seemingly to the end of the world. They were once jagged teeth cutting the sky, but now they were soft and rounded with age. The entire time he had been gone, they had called for him and now they were more comforting than anything else. There had been a time, in Ardyn’s hands, he had thought he would never see them again.
“You’re back home.”

Maybe if he hadn’t been so tired, Prompto would have jumped. Instead, he continued to stare at his mountains. “Is this what you wanted? Is this what the rest of the gods wanted?” His voice was slow, heavy, and unlike him. He sounded as world-weary as he felt.

Shiva stepped closer and Prompto could feel the cold radiating off of her. “In a way. You have only done part of your tasks. There is still so much you are meant to do.”

Scoffing, Prompto shook his head and turned to face her. She was as stunningly beautiful as he remembered her from the maze, but keeping his eyes on her was impossible. It only fueled his anger. “I’m done. I’m done being a pawn for the gods. They can go fuck themselves.”

“Are you saying that because you were hurt, or because you hurt the ones you love?”

Prompto froze. Clenching his fists, he shoved one word through gritted teeth. “No.”

Shaking her head, Shiva reached out to touch him but stilled her hand when he jerked away. “You say that, but you will continue on the path the gods have laid for you because it is the only one. The longer you resist the worse it will be. You know what we want.”

There was so much he wanted to do; explode, shout, kick things. He wanted to fight the world, but he couldn’t. So he turned back to the window and watched the sun slip below the horizon. When he looked back, Shiva was gone and he shivered.

She wasn’t mad at him and somehow it was worse than if she was. If she wasn’t mad, then she believed he would follow through with the gods’ plans. Prompto hated her.

Night had fallen, and he should have lit a candle, but Prompto couldn’t drag himself out of his seat. There was a quiet knock at the door and for a second he debated telling whoever it is to go away, but even that was too much effort.

Ignis cracked it open and whatever he was going to say died on his lips as they locked eyes. Understanding passed between them and without a word he lit the fireplace, chasing dark shadows far away and bringing in warmth. Prompto was reminded of the night at Wiz’s, another fire a million years away.

Watching him, Prompto tried to think of something to say - anything to break the awful silence he threw them into. Settling on the bed, Ignis clasped his hands together and Prompto’s eyes stuck on them. They were bare of his gloves and he could see the tiny pin pocket of scars on the back of his hands. They were the hands of a fighter after all.

“Will you not talk to me anymore?” Ignis asked, his voice mournful and soft. It hurt because he wasn’t supposed to be hurting. He was supposed to be angry - he and Gladio both, but they weren’t. Why weren’t they mad?

It was out in the air, spoken without him realizing it, and Ignis answered, “Why should we be? We understand your reasonings.”

Prompto looked up, meeting his eyes and Ignis offered a small smile. “Prompto, you always said you had a responsibility to come back to. Knowing what it is doesn’t change anything. It was a shock at first, something to unravel and think about, and we were hurt that you felt you couldn’t tell us the truth. But that is on us, and not on you.”

His eyes were swimming, but Prompto could not bring himself to care. “I thought - You said-” He broke off, turning back to the window, and wiped his face. “I thought when you said we were
friends it was your way of telling me everything was over. I thought I had lost everyone.” Taking a
shuddering breath, he turned back to Ignis with a wobbly smile. “I’m sorry.”

Standing from the bed, Ignis knelt at Prompto’s side. “You needn’t apologize for anything. Take
your time, heal, and we will be here in whatever fashion you would have us. Should you only wish
to be friends, then we will be. If courtship is what you wish, then we will do it honestly.”
“Even though I’m a prince?” Prompto asked, his voice impossibly small.

“Even though you’re a prince,” Ignis agreed.

Relief was flooding him, but Prompto didn’t mind drowning in it if it meant he hadn’t lost
everyone -if it meant every vile word Ardyn had whispered to him was a lie. “Ignis? Could you–”
He paused, building courage and fighting a blush,“Could I have a hug?”

Smiling fondly at him, Ignis reached out. Prompto knew he was trying to move slow, to not scare
him, but he couldn’t wait. Surging forward, he threw his arms around Ignis’s neck and breathed in
the comforting smell of him. Tears pricked his eyes again, and Ignis rubbed comforting circles on
his back.

“We are here for you, even Noctis. Don’t push us away, no matter what comes,” Ignis said.

Nodding, Prompto pulled back and wiped his eyes again. “Ignis- I want to, I still want everything.
But–” He looked at his wrist, barcode still on display. “I can’t let anyone see us together and know
I’m a marked traitor. Noct can’t have someone like me around.”

Ignis didn’t look away from his eyes and when he spoke his voice was fierce. “What he did to you
does not define you. You are Prompto, a prince and a thief who has sufficiently stolen our hearts.”

There was a beat of stunned silence, and then Prompto was laughing. His ribs ached and he had to
keep wiping tears, but it was so good to laugh - and to mean it. “You’re so corny! Of all the thief
jokes to make, you chose that one?” he asked, gasping for breath.

Ignis flushed pink across his cheekbones and the tips of his ears. “I wasn’t meaning it as a joke,”
he sputtered, but it was no use - Prompto was laughing again.

“You’re so corny,” he repeated, giggles fading as he gazed at Ignis. “If I can’t say sorry, I’ll say
thank you instead. Thank you Ignis.”

Standing, Ignis pressed a careful kiss on the crown of his head. “Get some sleep. Your sister will
be coming to see you in the morning and I don’t want her to hate me more than she does already.”

Prompto sobered. The scant few seconds he remembered of seeing Aranea the day he returned was
hazy from the fever, but he knew she was proud of him and all he had accomplished. He also
knew, whatever storm she brought in the morning, he could do little more than weather it.

“Good night Prompto,” Ignis said, slipping out of the room.

In the following silence, exhaustion sank heavy on him. He fell asleep before he could push
himself out of his chair, and when he woke later, the room was pitch black. The fire Ignis had built
earlier was no more. Casting his eyes about the room, he waited for Ardyn to step out. Logically,
he knew he was safe in his room. But logic and his fear warred with each other with fear winning.
Muscles locked, Prompto couldn’t move.

Dawn came and with it the lightened sky, reaching out with hesitant fingers to brush color back
into his room. Prompto drug himself onto his bed and crawled under the covers. Sleep calmed the
angry pulsing behind his eyes and soothed the ache in his body.

When he woke later, the room was brighter and he sighed in relief. Rolling his head to the side, Prompto stared at Aranea. He waited for her to speak and ran his fingers along his blankets. It was comforting, the fine linen a wonderful sensation beneath battered fingers.

“We can’t let this slide.”

Prompto knew this - knew it all the way from Lucis and knew it deeper still when Ignis spoke the night before.

“Do you love them?”

Prompto froze and looked carefully at his sister. In every way, she was regal. She cared less of the opinions of those who meant nothing to her, wearing pants like a man and a thin ruby circlet as the only symbol of her status. It was the way she carried herself which inspired the loyalty of her people. Aranea could be ruthless, but here, as she asked her question, that person was miles away. In her spot was the person Prompto had grown up with. There was nothing but concern in her eyes, and her normal relaxed posture was tense.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“I thought they must have feelings for you, too,” she replied and Prompto ached to dig for more details, but it had to wait. “We can’t let this be known by the world. If Tenebrae thought we were strong enough that the throne could be taken only through trickery, then we must prove we are.” She reached out and took Prompto’s hand in her own. “The Lucians will pass the message of war to their king. We’ve dispatched someone to Tenebrae as well.”

“War then,” Prompto said, tugging his hand out of hers.

“With luck, they will back down and give us our demands.”

Prompto shook his head. “Noct won’t. His barons will push for war, and they will make him prove to them that he is ready to be king.”

Aranea had nothing to say and, with a frown, she stood. “Get some rest, shortcake.”

Her departure was swift, and Prompto was left in the silence of her wake. He knew it wouldn’t last. Loqi had accompanied his queen to Prompto’s chamber and without asking, he claimed Prompto’s chair.

“So you love them after all,” he remarked, and when Prompto said nothing, he settled more deeply in the chair with a satisfied sigh. “I knew it.”

“Oh?” Prompto asked, still distracted by thoughts of looming war.

“Your fire has been tempered. Only one thing does that to a man.”

Prompto laughed. “I’m pretty sure I swore up and down when I was in Tenebrae I would never again do anything stupid. Surely you heard me enough to know that’s true.”

Smiling, Loqi shook his head. “Oh, it’s true I heard you, but you are a liar at heart. All thieves are. I think your temper is there, so is your cunning and intelligence.” At Prompto’s raised eyebrow, Loqi gestured at him. “You like to pretend that you are stupid and incapable when you are the most capable person I know.”
“You don’t know me at all,” Prompto replied. “I’m doing what a normal person would do - resting and healing. And when I’m done, I’ll be a chocobo farmer. I was offered a job you know.”

Mirth left Loqi’s eyes as he leaned forward, and the intensity of his stare surprised Prompto. “You are not just anyone. You are a Thief, the queen’s own. You do things no one else can do, and you steal the impossible.”

“Not anymore,” Prompto said, looking away. “Thieves aren’t very useful in a war.”

“She won’t send you on the frontline.”

“No, she won’t.”

Loqi leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. “I’m sorry, for what it’s worth. You didn’t deserve to go through what you went through.”

“But I did. How else could I have secured the ring and our country?” Prompto asked. The silence was his answer and he decided to ask the question he had been wondering for weeks. “What did you do? That night when I cut you free.”

“I ran, and I kept going. All the way here. The second the queen saw me enter the courtyard she summoned me and made me recount everything. She knew if I was there, something had happened to you,” Loqi said.

“She would have guessed by then I had gone to Tenebrae.”

Huffing a laugh, Loqi shook his head. “She knew the day you left, Your Highness. You may be the Thief of Nifelheim, but to those who know you, you are not as hard to read as you might think.”

A smile spread across Prompto’s face, small but there nonetheless. “Maybe you do know me after all.”

“I’d like to,” Loqi answered.

“Thank you, Loqi, for everything,” Prompto said. The smile Loqi sent back was more comforting than he would ever admit.

When night came, Prompto expected it to be easier. It had been a long day, the healer in and out, and with how little sleep he had gotten the night before he expected to be tired enough to fall asleep instantly. His body was begging for it; the dull ache behind his eyes returned and there was a fuzziness to his thoughts. Almost dizzy with fatigue, Prompto blew out his candle and the room plunged into oppressing darkness.

He hadn’t expected to freeze. Moving to relight the candle was impossible. Flicking his eyes to the corners of his room, Prompto waited for the inevitable moment Ardyn would reveal himself. He knew it was impossible, and yet, there were so many times he had slept and dreamt of home to wake to Ardyn’s face. It was hard to realize this wasn’t a dream once more. He was safe.

As suddenly as it was dark, it was light - bright and ethereal - and Prompto shied away from it. There, at the foot of his bed, was Shiva in Gentiana’s form.

“You were uncomfortable with my appearance earlier, does this make you feel more at ease?”

Prompto didn’t want anything to do with her, but he was terrified she would take the light with her if she left, and so, with his heart in his throat he nodded.
“There was much left unsaid between us earlier,” she said. “There are questions you wish to ask me.”

“How?” Prompto asked, all thoughts of wanting nothing to do with her pushed away. “Ignis and Gladio, how did they find me?”

“I led them to you, as I led you to them.”

Thinking back, he remembered the cold curling around his legs, tugging him towards the storage closet. He gripped his blankets tight in his fists. “Why didn’t you just lead me out of the castle?”

“It was not your destiny to go alone.”

Prompto shook his head, releasing the blanket to gingerly touch the raised tattoo on his wrist. “And was this my destiny? This, and to stand by Noct’s side?”

“Noctis will be the greatest king the world has ever known. A king among kings, destined to become a god himself. He will bring back the old religion and rid the world of the sickness that ravages it.” She smiled at Prompto, and he almost believed it, “You will be the pillar of support which will help him on along his path.”

“Pretty sure he could do that with the other people in his life. I’m not sure if the gods noticed, or cared, but Noct is doing pretty well in the love department.”

“So were you,” Gentiana replied and Prompto’s face flushed. “You could leave with them when they travel back to Lucis.”

Prompto shook his head. “There’s a war now, that’s not possible.”

War. As much as he didn’t want to think about it, it was coming and it would change everything for them. Niflheim hadn’t had a war in hundreds of years. In open combat, they would most likely be crushed after Tenebrae or Lucis figured out their strategies. There was the possibility of any of them dying.

“Things do not always happen the way we think they will. But know, it will be the happy ending you wish for in the end.”

“And what will happen if I don’t help Noctis?” Prompt asked, dragging a hand over his face. When he lowered it, Gentiana had come closer.

She opened her eyes, gaze soft with pity. “Then he will win.”

Prompto swallowed dryly. He felt like he was choking. “Ardyn?” he asked, even though he knew the answer. When Gentiana nodded, he barked out a laugh so harsh it felt like it had been ripped out of him.

“It must be you. You must build bridges, not walls my Thief.”

She pressed a kiss to his forehead and after a lingering touch to his cheek, she was gone. The room was slow to darken and in the time he was given, he lit the candle on his bed stand. Unable to stay in bed any longer, he dragged himself back to his chair, hating the monotony of the action.

He spent the night wrapped in his blanket, deep in thought. It was only when he couldn't think anymore that he fell asleep. Dreams came fleetingly, and when he woke he was alone. Bored and restless, Prompto went to his door.
There was a guard there, someone he didn’t know, but they had no issue ordering him back to bed. He debated leaving through his window, which he had done plenty of times before, but the idea of slipping and falling to his death was undesirable.

He was settled in his chair with a book when there came a knock. Whoever was at his door would come in regardless of what he said, so he said nothing.

“Hey,” Gladio said, poking his head into the room.

There had always been a building crush on Gladio, small and present, such a simple thing shouldn’t have given him butterflies. But there it was, light and soft. Prompto wanted to grab it with both hands and never let it go. Gladio’s kindness was nothing new, it had always been there and he knew he was more susceptible to it now that he was in a bad place mentally. Still, he couldn’t stop the tugging of his heart.

He smiled tiredly. “Morning.”

“You look rough,” Gladio said as he came to sit on the edge of Prompto’s bed.

Prompto shrugged and fingered the spine of his book. “It happens when you escape from jail. Even more so when you get back and find that your country is about to go to war.”

“About that, listen.” Gladio trailed off, and Prompto’s interest piqued. It wasn’t often Gladio was at a loss for words. “We have to leave. We need to get back to Noct.”

Prompto’s interest crumbled and he turned back to the window, rethinking his decision not to climb out of it.

“We’re at war, Prom,” Gladio said softly. “We need to be at his side.”

There was nothing Prompto could say. The words were stuck in his throat and if he tried to respond he would choke.

“Would you look at me?

When Prompto did, blinking back tears, Gladio took his hand again. “I couldn’t let this be the last time we talked to each other and not tell you how I felt.”

“What?”

“I’m not good at love confessions, poems, or romantic gestures, but I need to let you know how much I care for you,” Gladio said, pressing another kiss to Prompto’s knuckles.

Laughter bubbled up and he didn’t try to stop the way it spilled out. Tilting his head with a fond smile, Prompto asked, “What book did you read that from?”

“Shut up and just let me kiss you. Please.”

Prompto’s face heated up and he hesitantly pulled his hand away, placing it on Gladio’s jaw. “Okay,” he breathed, leaning forward.

Gladio surged up, threading his fingers through Prompto’s hair and pressed fast, butterfly kisses over his cheeks. Laughing, Prompto closed his eyes and let him do what he wanted. Kisses were pressed on his nose and over his eyelids, as if every freckle was something to be loved, and when no more kisses were forthcoming, he opened his eyes.
“Can I have a real kiss now?” he asked.

Gladio complied, his lips finding their place on Prompto’s. He had been kissed by all three of them now, and every one of them had been different. Noctis was hot and impatient, Ignis soft and invasive, but Gladio’s kiss was searing and passionate and safe.

“Oh thank the Six, you’ve finally stopped pinning for him,” Ignis said from the doorway.

Pulling away from Gladio, Prompto gave Ignis lopsided smile. “Which one of us are you talking to?”

“Does it matter? You were both lovesick.” Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to Prompto’s forehead. “Unfortunately, it is time for us to leave.”

The smile dropped from Prompto’s face and he leaned away from Gladio’s embrace. “Oh,” he said in a voice much too small.

“Please do not be sad, this is not the end for us. We will see each other again.”

“Iggy’s right. The war will be over before we know it and then we’ll find a way to make this work,” Gladio said.

Prompto nodded and forced a smile onto his face. They were holding it together for him, he could do the same. Pulling them both into a hug, he held on tight and breathed deep. So much had happened since the day he had met them - they had all grown and changed. He had to hold out hope that they were right.

“We’ll meet again,” he whispered fiercely.

As Ignis and Gladio rode out on chocobos, Prompto watched from his window. It was as if a piece of him left him. He missed Noctis too and jealousy raised its head that they would get to be with him.

“Prince Prompto,” a guard called from his doorway. “The Queen wishes to see you.”

Prompto turned back one last time, but Ignis and Gladio had disappeared behind the first ridge of the mountain. “War then,” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is y’all. The end of part one. What did you guys think?? I really strived to give almost everyone closure in this chapter, while also leading up to everything that will be part two.
I'll be taking a small break before writing part two? But I signed up for the Promnis Big Bang so look forward to that!! ilu all so much ;;;;;;
Thank you all <33

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