The Descent

by HurricaneSkyline

Summary

If they can pull themselves together, maybe they'll find a way to deny the prophesy.

That is, if there's anything left worth saving.

Its debatable.

Notes

Welcome! I hope you enjoy your time here.

Spotify playlist:

https://open.spotify.com/user/5ojawsgf5nutw5kpxc2mw8ikw/playlist/4CdirIcywWrEdNAHrVJD0c?si=QX62jyMLSCihpy6e2UsC4A

Please feel free to leave me feedback if you're willing.
In retrospect, he should have seen it coming. Just one more straw on the mountain of ineptitude. This is the inevitable avalanche. A mudslide of a not quite lifetime of guilt and crushing inadequacy joining forces with his crippling emotional constipation and tendency to just take without question to crush the only good thing in his life he couldn't screw up.

It feels like all that weight has yanked Noctis' guts right through the steel grating at his feet and stopped somewhere around the center of Eos.

Noctis wants to scream again, but saying anything at all is remarkably like swimming through molasses. Noctis is a weak swimmer. He can hear his own voice spewing pretty words. Platitudes are so little so late now and he's never been so terrified of harming his friend as he is right now. The mental flash of the ring pulling charred flesh from Ignis' finger along with it makes him drop the hand like it still burns. The biting sting from the Ring of the Lucii doesn't properly register when Noctis slams it into position on his own hand.

The stink of charred meat and burnt hair fills his nostrils as he breathes in to beg, to plead, to demand the Crystal give back just this one thing. Of all the things that have been taken from him, Ignis is the final step too far. Never mind that Ignis did this to himself. Noctis pulls his guts back up out from the abyss and pulls the magic from the Crystal. He will fix this.

When Noctis takes a look back across the ruined chamber toward his friends he feels like maybe, just once, he's done something right.

He's the most calm he can remember ever being when he steps into the Crystal.
Chapter 1 - Duct Tape Fixes Everything (We're Fresh Out)

Chapter Notes

Chapter specific warnings located in end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Riverside - Agnes Obel

“What happened to all the MT's?”

“Are you really gonna complain?”

“No, I really am not.”

Prompto is somehow fidgeting while in a light jog to keep up with Ravus. Gladio can keep up easily enough even carrying a very much dead-weight Ignis. Every few minutes he summons a revolver in the customary blue flourish of magic from the Armiger and spins the cylinder a few times before dismissing it in another flash of sparks. Gladio very much wishes that there were anything to distract him from the couple hundred pounds of limp, stinking, filthy, bundle of gangly limbs wheezing softly in his arms, but there isn't. The wheezing is a little concerning, but it means Ignis is still breathing. Gladio decides this makes it a good thing.

He might be easier to carry if Gladio wasn't trying so hard not to breathe too deeply himself. No one was crude enough to mention the smell of shit on top of everything else. After all, that's just what happens when people die. Dignity has little meaning to the dead. But Ignis isn't dead. He should be dead. Prompto summons his revolver again. Spins the cylinder. Fiddles the safety back and forth. Runs right into Ravus when he comes to an abrupt stop at his airship. If getting a carbon steel barrel to the lumbar region hurts, Ravus doesn't say.

“I will return you to Altissia,” Ravus does say before a neat and casual about face. He sounds even more subdued than on the trip over. Sitting next to your sister's corpse for the better part of a week will do that. His head tilts down just far enough to be perceptible, his mismatched eyes on Gladio's charge. “You will not, however, be bringing him onto the ship as he is.”
“What's that supposed to mean?” Prompto is cradling his revolver to his chest like he thinks someone's going to take it.

“He means he isn't gonna take us until we clean Iggy up a bit.” Gladio says as he shifts his grip on Ignis. The adviser chokes a little at that and three pairs of eyes snap to his newly scarred face. Ravus recovers first.

“The corridor to your immediate right leads directly to an ablution chamber. Feel free to vandalize the lockers until you locate suitable clothing,” Ravus stops for a moment, considering. “I would highly recommend the both of you take the opportunity to bathe yourselves as well.”

“Like you smell any better,” Gladio grumbles as he turns. Prompto chuckles when Ravus tries to discreetly sniff at his flesh and bone shoulder, his lip curling and pale hair rustling as he shakes his head at his own aroma.

“I will utilize the facilities upon your return. Do not take your time. I do not care to discover exactly how long this ice magic will retain its effects.”

“Right-o,” Prompto tosses behind him as he trips on nothing and stomps on the back of Gladio's heel.

It's only about twenty seconds of travel down a claustrophobic hallway that Gladio has to duck under two exit signs to navigate before it dead ends into a kind of barracks. Prompto bites his lip and contorts his jaw as he examines a wall of dented, chipped lockers. Gladio carefully arranges Ignis on a nearby bunk and sucks in a deep, fresh breath. He's careful to set aside the red-soled boots, but the rest of the clothing is a lost cause. Prompto summons something out of the Armiger on the edges of Gladio's vision, and he hears the metallic thonk of a broken combination lock just as he's cradling Ignis' skull awkwardly in his forearm to remove his ever-present pendant chain.

“Where did you get a bolt-cutter?”

“You know I pick up tools when I can. For my machines, you know?” the gunman dumps the bolt-cutter on the floor at his feet and rifles through the contents of the locker. He's gotten lucky. This one is overfull with stacks of clean towels.
“You don't need that for your weapons, Prompto,” Gladio says as he drops Ignis' necklace into the inside pocket of his leather jacket. “That's for breaking and entering.” He gently shifts the adviser's head around and off the sad, flat pillow. Better that his airway is clear. He's not going to be comfortable regardless.

“Are you really gonna complain, big guy?” Prompto dumps an overly tall stack of sad, flat towels at Ignis' feet. It lists off to the side and the top few spill onto ancient linoleum. Neither acknowledges it.

“Just go run me some water. Warm, not too hot.”

“Run it in what? The mop bucket?” he gesticulates toward the corner near the open shower room door where a mop bucket of questionable color and fortitude sits full of mildewed mop and several well-abused bottles of military cleansers with names Gladio can't read.

“Nevermind. Just go start a shower and put a chair in there.”

Gladio turns back to his task feeling too big and clumsy all over. The tiny skull buttons of Ignis' shirt resist his best efforts. He grunts at the salt-stained, torn coeurl print and rips it open, tiny buttons flying. Those buttons shouldn't have challenged an Amicitia. Suddenly Gladio feels very small.

“You okay, big guy?”

“Yeah, I got it,” he sniffs a bit. Allergies, naturally. Prompto wanders back into the showers. They don't talk about the bruises across Ignis' ribs so dark they could see them through his undershirt. Through the occasional smear of rusty, dried blood, Gladio tries not to think too hard about exactly what could have caused the bruising. He doesn't think about the lingering burn scars scattered across porcelain flesh or the way the body in front of him hisses and pants even in unconsciousness when he pulls the undershirt over Ignis' shoulders. His allergies are acting up again.

“Why didn't the Crystal heal all of that?” Prompto whispers. He's taken off his vest, boots, and gloves somewhere, but a hand twists over and over the opposite armband. Prompto's eyes are violet in the sickly light. He chews on his lip and watches Ignis' eyes move underneath his eyelids.

“Hell if I know. Grab a potion?”
The smaller man pulls one of Noctis’ magically enhanced energy drinks out of the Armiger and wraps Ignis’ bare hand around it. It takes both of Prompto’s smaller hands to wrap around Ignis’ to break the curative. They watch the green sparks glow and the light settle back into the sickly bulbs of the barracks. They watch as the potion has no visible effect.

“Think maybe they're broken?”

“Nah. These injuries aren't normal. Gonna have to heal the old-fashioned way,” Gladio is whispering now as well. It feels wrong not to whisper. He takes a deep breath in and lets it out slowly before his hand hovers over Ignis’ belt. “If you don't wanna stick around for this, I don't blame you.”

“It's not... I wanna help too.”

“There's nothing to help with now. Go take a shower while I take care of this and you can help when I'm done here.”

Prompto tries to stare the shield down, but it's a half-hearted effort. He shuffles into the shower, shedding a holey sock along the way and tossing it carelessly into the sad mop bucket. Gladio waits until he hears water hitting tile before he moves again. This is not what he envisioned when he had entertained the thought of getting into Ignis’ pants. Then again, Gladio was absolutely certain its never going to happen. Now it is happening and he wants desperately for it to not happen. At least this way he was never going to be able to look at Ignis in quite the same way again. Gladio tells himself this is for the best and yanks salt-stained jeans down long legs. He holds his breath. It's not as bad as he imagined, but then again this is probably a good thing. It's less awkward somehow.

By the time he finishes, there is a pile of sad, soiled towels tossed in the opposite corner of the room and a sad, battered Ignis lying on the sad, scratchy blanket covering the bunk. Gladio begins to think maybe he's not holding together as well as he had hoped. The shower is still running when he painstakingly gathers up Ignis, and Gladio holds his breath but doesn't hear any more gasping. He feels a spike of panic, but it settles when a exhale tickles the hair on his arm. The shield gives the sad mop bucket a dirty look as he passes.

Prompto has set up a cheap, sun-bleached plastic chair in the middle of the room. As self-conscious as the younger man usually is, he doesn't bat an eyelash at his or Ignis’ nudity and his hands are steady as he holds their friend up in the chair. The armband is still there, but Gladio has learned that with the gunner some things aren't worth questioning. Prompto says nothing while Gladio disrobes and tosses his clothes in the dry corner near the door. It goes without saying that they're unlikely to find anything in a size he can wear here. He'll make due. Prompto carefully, gently, washes Ignis’ hair while Gladio gives himself the fastest shower of his life. He has a split second to consider whether he should be as thorough as he normally would, but Prompto's eyes are
locked onto Ignis through his own straw colored hair heavy with water. The rivulets trailing down his face only look like tears as he brushes the corner of a wet towel over the angles of the adviser's face with care that Gladio was sure five minutes ago Prompto couldn't muster. The military soap is green, stings everywhere undesirable, and leaves everything in its wake with an undefinable chemical fragrance. He imagines it would be called mountain breeze or something equally stupid.

Done with his own bathing, there's no putting it off any longer. Gladio is half expecting to hear Ravus' nasal superiority from around the corner. Prompto swallows thickly as Gladio gathers up Ignis' limp form again. It takes some awkward maneuvering, but they both come to the silent conclusion that getting Ignis into the shower spray means Gladio has to kneel and hold him. The shield tries and fails not to sigh with relief. Prompto doesn't hesitate. He uses just as much care to wash the rest of Ignis as he did with his head. Gladio feels something like shame, something like guilt, and definitely like he's missing something important as he watches Prompto work. None of these are novel emotions. Only the scenery ever changes.

They don't talk. Prompto breaks open more lockers while Gladio dries himself and Ignis with another stack of towels. He suddenly doesn't know why he was so hesitant to begin with. He feels like he's shrinking again. Too small and too big at the same time. It doesn't help that it takes five towels just to dry himself off. Prompto finds half a box of candy bars masquerading as granola and shoves them into the pockets of the Imperial uniform pants he's pulled on. Gladio grunts at his own filthy clothes, but pulls them on all the same. They put another pair of uniform pants onto Ignis, but Gladio declines the matching t-shirt Prompto hands him. They find a jacket instead and Prompto wrestles it onto the adviser's uncooperative torso while Gladio shoves the Crownsguard boots back onto Ignis' bare feet. They don't bother with underwear or socks. Prompto abandons his Crownsguard uniform except for the boots and vest along with Ignis'. Gladio picks up the bolt-cutter off the linoleum and pushes it back into the Armiger.

This time, when they return down the hallway, Gladio wraps Ignis' long legs around his waist and holds him close to his chest. This time, he lets the shallow breaths against his throat ground him. This time, he welcomes the weight.

The opposite bench has a corpse on it. Lady Lunafreya's skin and hair are frosted with ice. Noctis had gotten creative with a magic flask. She's just as frozen in time now as she is frozen with the cold. There's nowhere to lay Ignis without the two of them having to sit on the frigid metal hull of Ravus' ship. Gladio sits with the adviser's legs in his lap. Prompto sits with Ignis' head on his leg. The gunner is chewing at his lip again, eyes on Lunafreya, the hand not holding Ignis' arm to his chest absently petting at soft, flat, ashen blonde hair. Gladio wants to be jealous, but he's too tired for
that. He's not so callous anyway that he would take what little comfort Prompto had managed to find in all this. Gladio doesn't want to watch that anymore, and he doesn't want to see Lunafreya anymore, so he sits and pretends to examine the ink on his own forearm.

“What are we gonna do when we get back to Altissia?” The question nearly startles him, but Gladio has far too much pride to show it.

“Dunno. The man with the plans is kinda out of commission.”

“So when Iggy wakes up? We'll know then?”

“How the fuck would I know?” Gladio regrets it immediately. The flash of hurt through Prompto's gaze is unmistakable. The gunner looks like he's going to say something, but yawns instead. Gladio sighs through his nose and rakes a hand through his hair. For once, not screwing up would be nice.

Ignis chooses that moment to start coughing. Prompto cradles his head and shushes him gently. Gladio tries to hold him still, but the hacking and gasping continues for a minute and he's too afraid of hurting Ignis worse. The adviser's eyes are open, but unseeing, hands grasping for something not there. Gladio is relieved when the seafoam eyes are shuttered again. They wait and listen until Ignis' breathing evens out. It sounds more normal now, the slow, heavy breaths of a deep sleep.

It's another twenty minutes before Ravus returns. He spares one look for his sister and none for the other three men. No one has anything to say, at least not in present company. The trip from Graela back to Altissia is four solid days of engine drone, oppressive lack of dialogue, another ice flask, and all too occasional bathroom breaks.

“Are we absolutely sure that it's just Ravus' arm that's magitek?”

“I'm gonna need you to not talk to me while your dick is in your hands.”

“It's not my dick.”

“Fine. Do not talk to me while Ignis' dick is in your hands.”
“Rude.”

Gladio is absolutely certain that he never wants to ride in an airship again by the time they make it to Accordo. Ravus dumps them at some random pile of rubble in the vicinity of the Leville. They only get a handful of lingering stares at the Imperial clothing before they manage to duck into the hotel. Their bags have been put into the lost and found, but the staff is unerringly professional and their gil and phones are exactly where they left them. Prompto digs through Ignis' knapsack for their collective funds while Gladio charms his way into a room.

“So now what?”

“Will you stop asking me that already?”

“Right. I'm gonna go find some food,” the gunner wanders off with enough gil to buy a banquet, but Gladio doesn't see the point of arguing. He wants a shower, and food, and sleep, but sleep wins out and he passes out in the bed that doesn't have Ignis dumped onto it. When he wakes, it's to the smell of cheap take-out and expensive soap. Prompto has already showered and changed. He looks over to the other bed, and he's slept clean through the blonde redressing Ignis in his own clothes.

“I looked for a spare pair of glasses, but I couldn't find any. Bet he has some in the Regalia,” he mumbles around a mouthful of some kind of flaky pastry. Gladio likes Accordan food just fine, but none of it is remotely pronounceable or recognizable. He's hungry enough to not care.

“He stashed a pair in the glovebox.”

“Huh. Weird.”

“What's weird about it?”

“You'd think he'd keep gloves in there.”

“He keeps those in there too,” Gladio squishes one of those tiny single-serve sauce packets between his thick fingers and listens to Prompto laugh. He only ever gets half the sauce out.
Later that afternoon, Ignis sits up like he'd just had a pleasant catnap. Gladio isn't sure if he should feel relieved or concerned, because now he won't stop talking. He's mumbling a frantic stream of garbled information that the shield doesn't feel equipped for accompanied with seafoam eyes flicking back and forth like he's reading something in the middle distance.

“Wait, what do you mean he's supposed to die?”
“Will you shut the fuck up for five damn seconds?” Gladio's giant ham hand gestures vaguely in the stale air between himself and Ignis. The adviser's fuzzy jaw slams shut with an audible click. Prompto winces empathetically at the sound of it. He would try to defend Ignis, but a little breathing room is sounding more and more like a good idea with every second. Ignis' face is flipping through entire chapters of emotions when he's only ever shown any of them the book jacket. Prompto wants to understand, but it's just so hard with his stomach twisted into knots and brain screaming at him, and the pain in his chest, and yes the floor does sound like a very good place to sit right now.

Gladio's gone still and silent except for fast, huffing, angry breaths. He can't see him through his own hands covering his face, but he's sure that if he could the unmarked skin between the lines of black on his arms would be an interesting shade of red. Prompto can see Ignis' knees next to him. Sees pale hands covered in tiny, paler, hair-thin scars with slightly overlong, ragged nails run palms over thighs over and over. There's a circle burnt around the middle finger of his left hand. It still looks raw. The tiny, sparse hairs on his right forearm and knuckles are missing on the left. The gunner's palms are sweating too, but with his fingers in his hair he can't do the same.

“Slow down. Answer the damn questions. Okay?” He's not afraid of Gladio, really. Everything is scary most of the time. Right now, the scariest thing isn't even Gladio's temper. “Why is Noct inside the Crystal?”

“It's... the soul of the star. Of Eos. The Draconian is inside. The Revelation,” Ignis' voice is hoarse and straining but runs away from him the instant his mouth opens. He snaps it closed again when the shield's hand makes a 'shut it' motion.

“The Revelation of Bahamut. The prophesy, right?”

“Yes. Noctis must reflect.”
“What the hell does that mean?”

“I am uncertain.”

“What part of this bullshit means Noct has to die?”

“He won't. I refuse.”

“Is that why you put on the ring?”

Ignis' eyes drop to his hands. His chin follows suit and drops to his chest. Prompto doesn't want to look anymore and closes his eyes behind his hands. He can feel the bed frame at his back start to shudder when Ignis starts to jiggle a leg up and down. He wants to touch him. Wants to ground the adviser and ground himself, but Ignis is awake now and has always shied away from physical contact. That opportunity has passed and the gulf of Noctis' absence grows wider.

“Fine. Don't answer.”

“I can't.”

“You can't or you won't?”

“He was going to kill me.”

“That's the shittiest reason I've ever heard for someone to commit suicide! What the fuck is wrong with you!” Gladio's gesticulation increases with his volume. Prompto's anxiety rises accordingly. Not for himself, but suddenly he's afraid for Ignis. He imagines Gladio grabbing the adviser by the shoulders and shaking the answers out of him. The thought cuts off abruptly at Ignis' head snapping up again, gaze sharp as his daggers.

“I do not answer to you, Gladiolus,” Ignis seethes and red creeps up the sides of his neck and into his ears. This is new. This is bad.
“Is that really how you wanna play this? You're seriously going to pull rank right now?” Gladio's eyes are so narrowed they look like black holes in his red face. A line of sweat runs down his forehead and he blinks it away.

“Guys? Can we like, do this later maybe? When we're not in a hotel or something?” Prompto would like to think that his voice only shakes a reasonable amount. He misses Noctis so much it's tangible. Gladio huffs and looks away, and the anger seems to escape him with the exhalation. He just looks tired now.

“I'll be back later. I need a walk,” the shield mumbles as he shuffles through the suite door. His jacket is still draped around one of the chairs at the glossy side table. His phone is still in it. Prompto decides that's good enough reason to expect Gladio to come back and pushes the associated nerves to the back of his mind. Ignis is staring at his hands again, thumb running back and forth along the burnt groove the ring left in his finger.

“There's food. It's cold, but there's a microwave.”

“Do you think I was trying to kill myself, Prompto?” Ignis sounds small and looks smaller and Prompto has to wrap an arm around himself to curb the urge to hug him. It barely works.

“Of course not. I don't think Gladio thinks that either.”

“Could you possibly do me a small favor?” Prompto watches the adviser's throat work through a thick swallow.

“Anything, Iggy.”

“Never stop being you.”

The urge to smother Ignis with hugs is gaining power at an alarming rate.
It's only 6 PM according to his phone, but that's dark now even in early October. Prompto's not entirely sure what day it is through the lines and cracks in the glass of the device's screen, but it does say Wednesday and he decides that's good enough. His stomach is growling but Ignis inhaled the leftover take-out after a very long and thorough shower. The hotel suite is humid but cool with the air-conditioning humming in the background. Ignis is shuffling through his dufflebag. Gladio still isn't back. Prompto fiddles with his hair in the reflection of his phone's selfie camera that he never uses. He's running low on fiber cream. He's not sure he can get more. He drops his phone on his belly and watches Ignis instead. The adviser has lain out the contents of his bags onto the opposite bed and stands over the display with a hand on his hip and idly grasping the suspender hanging off his waist.

“Prompto, I imagine I already know, however I must ask.”

“Sorry dude. Your clothes were trashed.”

“Nevermind that,” Ignis sighs, “Do you know what happened to the chain I wear?”

“Oh, your skull necklace? Um... no. Sorry, Iggy.”

“Are you certain? I was sure I still wore it when...” his words taper off into another sigh. There's some pinching around the corners of his eyes and that furrow between his eyebrows that he gets when he doesn't understand something. The new scars make it hard to focus on his gaze. A cut here, a lingering burn there, the gouge out of the bridge of his nose, all distracting.

“Gonna have to ask the big guy. He's the one that undressed you.”

“Gladio undressed me?” Ignis is very still now. His accented voice is not even, but measured. Prompto isn't sure what to think about that.

“Uh, yeah. You were pretty gross, dude. Sorry. We had to kinda clean you up before Ravus would bring us back here.”

“We?”
“Not Ravus. Just me and Gladio. Promise,” the gunner tells himself that this is a normal amount of concern for someone that has just found out his friends had to bathe him while he was unconscious. For all he knows, it probably is. Prompto is the authority on nerves after all. He has no personal experience with Ignis' point of view. Ignis makes an aborted shudder, but still looks uncharacteristically uncomfortable after the motion. “No sweat. It's okay, Iggy.”

“I understand.”

“Actually, it's probably better that you don't. If I were you, I wouldn't ask the big guy for any deets.”

“Oh. Well, I'm quite certain that I will be doing no such thing. Please allow me a moment to mourn the loss of whatever propriety I had remaining.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“I believe I've had nightmares about this very thing.”

Prompto's ability to fight the urge to hug Ignis is under siege.

Gladio finally comes back sometime in the middle of the night stinking of alcohol sweat and salt. Prompto shuffles over when he feels the giant hovering between the foot of either bed. He welcomes it when the shield's weight on the mattress pulls Prompto's smaller form toward the middle. Maybe he can't have hugs, but the weight and heat of Gladio's back against his coaxes him to sleep.

“Got everything?”

Gladio strongly resembles a pack animal. Bags and straps and even a couple of garment bags are
hanging off him at every angle. He gently shoves Prompto off when he tries to take some of the burden. No point arguing. If that's what Gladio needs right now, no one is going to protest. Prompto feels a bit guilty for giggling at the concept of the shield needing to protect their bags, but only a little bit. The wall of luggage grunts in his general direction.

Ignis flows through the crowds congesting narrow streets and around the piles of rubble like water over river stones. Prompto awkwardly dodges elbows and small children that have escaped their parents. Gladio barrels through the crowds like a Garulessa. It's so unfair. He nearly runs into Ignis when he suddenly stops, the crossed lines of the adviser's suspenders stopping Prompto short. He feels the vinyl of a gymbag brush the back of his neck as Gladio brings up the rear.

“You boys have some nerve.”

“Ah, Mr. Sophiar.”

Prompto ducks his head to see Cid's red jacket under Ignis' arm. The arm goes down again and Prompto has a second to think about how Ignis wasn't wearing any glasses so that must have been really awkward. Ignis clears his throat in an effort to cover. It doesn't work. The gunner lets himself smile at that. Can't embarrass Ignis when he's in front, right?

“Where's your Prince?”

“I would very much prefer to explain that only once, if you don't mind.”

“I do mind. Couldn't even manage a lousy phone call.”

“Ah, yes. Unfortunately, his Highness was the only member of our retinue to obtain your cell number.” That's not quite true, but Ignis' phone is definitely somewhere in the bottom of the Celluna Cascades.

“Was?”

Ignis doesn't have anything to say to that, but the tall fringe of his hair tilts as he looks away from the old mechanic. Prompto chews at his lip. The wall of luggage sighs heavily.
“Never you mind then. We're gonna have to get outta here anyhow. Weskham cut off my tab.”

“Of course. If you would be so kind as to lead the way?”

“Sure. I would. If that damn woman hadn't confiscated the keys,” Cid grumbles and spits on the wooden decking of the pier.

“I'm sorry?”

“Wait, what?”

The pack animal groans.

“So you got drunk.”

“Not drunk. Just havin' fun is all.”

“And you did donuts around the pier.”

“Can you really call it donuts if it's on water?”

“Please, gentlemen. Tell me you didn't damage any property.”

“Have you seen this place? I dunno 'bout you lot, but one bit 'o rubble looks a damn sight like the next!”

“Are you gonna tell us how to get the keys back or not?”
“Easy. Weskham is awful close to that sorry excuse for a secretary, if you know what I mean. Just gotta call him up.”

“I'm certain First Secretary Claustra has earned the privilege of her office. I must insist that you not use her gender as grounds for dismissal of her professionalism, or to delegitimize her achievements.”

“I ain't. First Secretary is still a secretary.”

“I dunno, dude. She's kinda a bitch.”

The pile of luggage shifts and jostles with laughter.

It's muggy and loud out on the pier, but the luggage is soft enough to sit on. Prompto can feel a headache coming on by the time the First Secretary shows up. He nearly drops his beloved camera trying to shove it back into his bag when he hears her unmistakable voice carry over the background murmur of the people and the foreground bickering of the gulls. Her attendants stand behind her and Weskham leans back against a pole.

“I would require an explanation from your King. However, it is clear you no longer accompany him.”

At least Ignis has managed to stand on ceremony. Prompto doesn't see the point since Cid hasn't moved. Gladio tries for a few seconds, but the mire of straps and cloth sucks him further down with every movement. He will be missed.

“I will be concise. You will give me information in exchange for the return of access to your King's vessel,” she sounds exhausted, but somehow looks exactly the same as before Leviathan. He's almost impressed, but Prompto dislikes her too much to allow the feeling.
“Of course. Do you desire we relocate?”

“My attendants are discreet.”

“What would you like to know?” Ignis sucks in a lungful of air and lets it out slowly.

“Firstly, is King Noctis alive?”

“Yes.”

“Is he indisposed?”

“Yes.”

“Are you really gonna tell her anything she wants?” Gladio has finally managed to right himself. A gymbag slips from his arm and thumps on the deck softly. Cid clears his throat and snorts as he walks onto the boat. The shield doesn’t wait for a response and follows.

“I see no reason why I shouldn't,” Ignis says without looking back.

“Did he receive the blessing of Leviathan?”

“Yes.”

“Is the Oracle still alive?”

“No.”

“I see. Is High Commander Fleuret still alive?”
“Yes.”

“He has returned to Gralea then?”

“No. Tenebrae.”

“Do you have any information on the state of the Empire?”

“I... Personally do not,” Ignis turns over his shoulder toward Prompto. It takes him a second of lip chewing to figure out that was the adviser pleading for help. Lots of new things happening lately.

“Oh. Um... Ravus said that the Empire is basically gone. Nothing but demons, really.”

Camillia pauses for a moment and considers.

“You understand, I'm sure, that I find quite a few issues with what little information you have already given. Yes?” She's clasped her hands in front of her now and starts a slow pace along a plank of decking, the clunk of her sensible heels echoing through the wooden slats. She doesn't wait for an answer. “Giving no notice, your retinue flees my city with Ravus Nox Fleuret. You return unannounced eight days later, in the same company short one King of Lucis, and wearing Imperial military garb,” she's still talking, but Ignis looks more and more like a kid getting scolded with every word. The shells of his ears are pink, eyes wide and frowning.

“You have the audacity to remain in my city two days after your return, give no briefing, and attempt to leave my city without any effort to reconcile. Now, I'm informed you are on a first name basis with the High Commander of the Imperial Army. Have I understood the situation clearly?”

Ignis looks like a sad chocobo with his chin in his chest like that. Prompto can't be sure it isn't the hair.

“I would also take this time to remind you that you owe me a boat,” Ignis cringes, then winces when the expression pulls at the scar on his lip. “In light of recent events, I find that returning your vessel would not be in the better interest of Alitissia in the wake of the Tidemother's awakening.”
Ignis is looking a little green. Prompto to the rescue.

“But you already let us put our stuff back on the boat.”

“Ha! He’s got you there Camillia! You’ve had your fun. Stop harassing these boys. They have more important things to do, I’m sure,” the adviser looks up at Weskham in relief. The First Secretary purses her lips at Weskham as he smiles at her and tilts his head. She tilts her head toward Ignis, and an attendant comes forward to hand him the keys to the boat. Ignis breathes like he’s just run a marathon.

“Young man, look at me,” she commands, and Ignis does, of course. Her face is as blank as ever, but Prompto swears she’s smiling. “You very nearly single-handedly gave me back my city.”

“I had help.”

“And I have spies. False modesty doesn’t suit you. I would care to know where that awful Chancellor Azunia whisked you away to.”

“Zegnatus Keep. However, you should be made aware that he is not what he seems. He is the Accursed.”

Camillia is taken back at that news. At least, Prompto thinks she is. She’s as stiff as her teal pantsuit.

“I see. Then the prophesied hour is upon us,” She continues as she walks back up the pier. “That answers the rest of my questions. Accordo will prepare for the darkness. Good luck, gentlemen.”

Prompto decides to himself that the First Secretary isn’t so bad after all. He grabs the fallen gymbag off the decking and tamps down the Hug-Monster by pulling gently at a suspender over the back of Ignis’ shoulder. They walk together onto the sleek boat, gunner hugging the gymbag to his chest and adviser trailing and cradling a set of keys to his own.
Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

Just so you know, Ignis is now a delicious cinnamon roll.

I'm gonna see what happens when you take two cinnamon rolls and smash em together. Eventually. I did tag this as sloooow.

Ignis is OOC technically. Don't let that scare you off, please. Also, I won't say precisely what's going on there, but I can assure you it's realistic. I didn't pull his behavior completely out of my butt. Once its more clear, I'll tag appropriately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Flaws - Bastille

“Y'all let me know when he gets his story straight.”

“Ignis... Buddy, are you absolutely sure that's what happened?”

“That doesn't make any sense, Ignis. It can't be both at the same time,” Cor peers up at him from the tacky, threadbare couch cushions as he speaks. Leans closer. Too close. Ignis fights the urge to back away. Look away then. Push up glasses that he isn't wearing. Damn it all.

“I know what I saw.”

“Do you? Because I think you're making some of this crap up, Iggy,” and of course Gladio sees through him like rice paper. It would be too easy to brush him off if it were only the shield. Perhaps even Gladio and Prompto, but the ramshackle house is too full of bodies and too stale air and Ignis thinks that maybe the vice in his chest wouldn't feel so tight if they weren't all just staring at him.

Except that he is telling the truth. Or he was certain of it when he said it, but now that Ignis thinks about it, Cor is right. It can't be both. Don't they know staring is rude?
“Okay, so you don't know which part actually happened, or you aren't sure if it was either one?” Iris truly is a kind soul. Ignis scrabbles after the lifeline she's thrown. It slips through his fingers.

“Both.”

“Gladiolus.”

“Sir.”

“Until Ignis can give us a more accurate statement, I need your version of events,” Cor is rubbing the fatigue out of his eyes. That's a pleasant feeling. He's making Cor tired. Now a smattering of guilt to add to the vice around his ribs. Lovely. “The short version.”

“We get to the Crystal. Iggy's layin' there half cooked wearing the damn Ring of the Lucii. Noct loses his shit, takes the ring, and forces the Crystal to heal him up and then walks into it.”

“I'm sorry, you wore the ring?” Monica has the decency to at least look alarmed for him instead of at him. Very kind, really. Oh, here's the staring again. The vice is difficult to speak through. This time the staring is concern. That won't do.

“My Grandpa said only the Kings of Lucis can wear the ring. That if someone else puts it on the magic hurts them. Well, really he said it kills them, but you're still here so I guess Grandpa isn't always right?” and now the children think him either an imbecile or a liar. Possibly unhinged. The latter option seems the most likely. The former option feels so much more accurate.

“Your Grandpa wasn't wrong,” Cor's eyes are hard as he looks up and down Ignis' form. He lingers again at the new scars. Mortifying. “Igny, take off your gloves.”

Ignis flicks his eyes to meet Gladio's and finds no support there. If Cor's gaze is diamond, Gladio's is adamantite. He allows himself a deep breath through the squeezing sensation and peels the charcoal glove from his right hand.

“Seriously, Iggy. What's gotten into you?” Excellent question, Gladio. He rips the other glove off and takes what little satisfaction he can from the room's attention falling to his hands instead of his
face. Small mercies. He can't help but run his thumb against the inside of the perfectly ring-shaped scar. It stings, but it isn't unpleasant. Ignis ignores the implications of the pain loosening the vice in his chest a turn. He doesn't need to look up to read the room again. The concern is suffocating.

“You should be dead. You understand that, right?”

“I would rather appreciate if that particular conversation topic were dropped.”

“You really don't get it, do you?”

“I know full well what I've done!” but that's not entirely true either, and now he's shaking just a bit and flushed up to his ears and they're still staring.

“No, you don't! You were dead, Ignis. Just because you were still breathing didn't make you any less dead you fucking idiot!”

“Gladio, go take a walk.”

“He needs to hear it, Marshall.”

“It won't change anything.”

Gladio looks shocked. Maybe hurt? That's not a common look for him. Awkward. The shaking doesn't stop when the front door slams. Ignis hopes his heartbeat will settle back down into his chest where it belongs sometime this week. He watches Iris pull Talcott downstairs by the arm. Monica and Dustin follow. Prompto stays, but he twists his wristband and pulls his shoulders in. The guilt is still there, but Ignis still doesn't know why. The rug under his boots could use a cleaning. He blinks at the floor instead of looking at Cor.

“Ignis, sit.”

“I'd rather not.”
“I didn’t ask.”

“I…” Ignis balks. He had known looking at Cor would be a mistake. Just one more failure to add to the list. Surely it could reach Lestallum by now. Smirking at his own joke would likely not go over well at the current juncture. He sits in the chair at his back that Dustin vacated. The seat is warm. Unfortunate. Cor breathes in deep and just holds it for a moment. In the few seconds it takes until he lets it go, the hardness around his eyes softens back into something manageable. The vice loosens again.

“Let’s try this again. Did you see the visions before or after putting on the ring?”

“Both.”

“Dammit, Ignis. Work with me here.”

“Before, someone spoke to me. I don’t know whom. She showed me the future. Or, more accurately, the future with the prophesy fulfilled.”

“She? Nevermind, that’s not important. So, a future that requires his Highness’ sacrifice?”

“I won’t allow it,” the vice tightens again. Ignis’ pulse shoots up into this throat again. Predictable.

“We’ll get to that later. What about after you put on the ring?”

“I saw.. Well, I think it was the Lucii. Everything was very blue. Not terribly descriptive I’m afraid. They didn’t show me anything, Either that or I don’t recall.”

“You couldn’t possibly be less helpful right now. Just go get some rest and come back when your head is back on straight.”

Humiliating, but at least it’s over. Let no one call Ignis ungrateful. He most certainly does not run from the room. Cor has already left.
By the time Ignis wakes again, he can hear the sound of someone washing dishes downstairs. The vice is blessedly gone. For now. Prompto is propped up on a couple of pillows next to him fiddling with his camera. He decides not to question why he's slept soundly with an awake Prompto this close. The proximity feels familiar. In the tent he had always slept next to Noctis with the vinyl wall of the tent on his other side. He couldn't sleep otherwise. If Noct flopped over in his sleep he would always turn toward the blonde on his other side. They are cuddlers. Ignis tells himself he is not.

The problem with lying to himself is that the lie doesn't make him feel any better. He doesn't feel worse at any rate. Baby steps.

Prompto has seen that he's awake, but the gunner is just as comfortable with silence as Ignis and the click of the worn buttons on the Lokton is familiar. The adviser peers through thick lashes up at Prompto's face, the wan light from the camera screen casting shadows that shift and dance with each click of the button. It's something he supposes. Ignis lets the comfortable silence settle him and examines his hastily manicured nails and scarred fingers between flashes. The shadow on his sharp jawline scrapes subtly against a bicep as his thumb finds the groove and he decides this is an acceptable habit.

“Did you want dinner? Monica cooked some kind of casserole. It's pretty good,” Prompto's voice is even and calm and quiet. Ignis blinks slowly. “I can bring it up here for you.” Answering verbally seems like far too much effort, so he shakes his head and buries his face in his elbow. Funny that all of this seemed so much easier until they returned to Caem. He contemplates whether he's just being stubborn or if he really isn't hungry. No appetite, but thirsty. He decides right then that he'll only get up to use the bathroom. That requirement is still quite a way off. No one needs him for anything anyway. There are footsteps in the hallway outside the room, and something must have given him away.

“Don't worry. Nobody else is coming in here tonight. Nobody to impress,” Prompto's words should trigger some response, but Ignis doesn't want to contemplate that so he just lets out a low hum. He thinks that maybe he shouldn't be grateful that the nights are so long now that means several hours more peace. He doesn't quite manage it.

“Are you my warden or my guardian?” Ignis can't be sure Prompto can hear him through his own forearm. He just now realizes the fine hair on his skin is missing. Hmm.

“Whatsoever you need me to be, buddy.”
“Yourself will do just fine.”

“I didn’t forget,” Prompto is looking down at him now, camera lying on his flat belly. Beyond all the eyelashes and fringe flattened with old product, the inscrutability on the gunner’s face is too indistinct to place meaning to. If there is any to be found, it can stay right there until Ignis is ready for it. Prompto seems to feel the weight of the admission and goes back to his camera. Ignis has to squeeze his eyes shut against a wave of too much emotion that he’s not equipped to handle. He’s not sure what it is, but it’s not the first time he’s felt it. He knows it won’t be the last. He lets it pass, but instead of fading it settles into the all too familiar pressure inside his chest. So much for peace. He sniffs.

“If you wanna talk, I’ll listen. No pressure,” the feeling comes back with a vengeance, huge and hungry. “Or you can recite recipes, or sleep some more, whatever you want.” Ignis can just barely push words past the vice and over the chasm.

“You talk. I’ll listen.”

“I dunno, Iggy. I think maybe you could use it more than me.”

“I can’t. Not now.”

The silence stretches. The camera screen shuts off for want of attention. He can feel the heat of Prompto’s open hand hover over his shoulder. He grits his teeth to hold back whatever sound tries to claw its way up his throat when the hand withdraws. Ignis doesn’t really hear whatever nonsense Prompto rambles on about until he falls asleep, camera fallen to the mattress between their bodies. Ignis lies in the dark and wishes for coffee. At least then he could have something else to blame for his difficulty falling back asleep.

The next day is unseasonably cool. Ignis twists and flips through some moderate exercise. He has no explanation for how he can look like he’s been hit by a car but still feel fine. Physically anyway. The adrenaline and the stretch feels good until he twists a touch too far to the right. Just a twinge. Nothing notable. The bruises that show through his careworn undershirt are more green than purple now. Still gruesome, but innocuous. Iris pretends not to watch him train as she weeds around her carrots. Her gaze is unsettling. Ignis chooses to end his exertions in favor of examining his unease. Her behavior is fair game. He doesn’t straighten his shirt or pull his pants up from where they rest low on his hips. Iris’ gaze doesn’t leave him until the house blocks her view. Curious.
Ignis crouches and sneaks carefully around the house. Iris is already gone, garden abandoned, culled weeds scattered in the loam among tiny orange carrots far too young to harvest. He hums low in his throat. Either Iris is more concerned about his well-being than he imagined or Ignis needs to invest in more clothing. He'd be willing to bet every gil he has and the Regalia the issue is the latter. Even he isn't that oblivious.

It's two more days before he decides this is definitely a problem.

“Gladio.”

The pile of blankets on the pallet at his feet grunts.

“Kindly speak with your sister.”

“About what?”

“Oh, she knows.”

“Are you pulling my leg right now?”

“No, however, if Iris pulls many more of those poor carrots ogling me while I train, we will be having quite the unfortunate harvest.”

“You've gotta be kidding.”

“You know I wouldn't.”

“That's the part that worries me.”
Iris is very careful not to speak to or look at Ignis after that. At all. He would feel bad about it, but this had to happen. The girl's blushing is almost amusing.

“Ignis, I was wondering if you would like to cook dinner tonight,” Monica says and he can feel his face do something too quickly to rein in as his chest tightens. His thumb rubs at his glove where the scar is underneath. Takes far too long to form a response.

“I understand,” She says, and she turns away.

Monica is long gone and already gathering cooking utensils before Ignis can move from where he stands in the makeshift foyer. He can't get out of the house fast enough. Gladio finds him hours later in the Regalia's driver's seat clutching the steering wheel, forehead resting on the leather. The vice is very tight today.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like, Gladio? I'm doing nothing.”

“This doesn't look like nothing,” the shield throws one leg after the other over the passenger side door and slumps into the seat. The leather creaks.

“It doesn't? Noctis is in the crystal and I'm doing nothing. Noctis is the sacrificial lamb for a 2000 year old prophesy and I'm doing nothing. We have been back in Lucis for a week and I have done nothing. The world is ending, I'm the only person who has the slightest notion of what is happening, and I have done exactly nothing!”

“Neither has anyone else! Why are you special?”

“I was willing to sacrifice myself to save Noctis, and now that I have another chance to do so I have no idea what I'm doing!”
“Iggy, nobody does! You gotta breathe, man.”

“Gladio, let us not fool ourselves. I only continue to draw breath as a fluke of circumstance.”

“Well, now we're making progress. Next, let's go over what has you strung so tight, because if you don't figure it out soon you're gonna snap.”

“I'm not certain that hasn't already happened.”

This was a mistake. Abort. Ctrl+Z. Retreat. Too late. The shield's glare is amber lava. Surprisingly, Ignis feels shame more strongly than anything else now. The anger is gone from him. The ability to carry wrongs and resentments never came naturally to the adviser. Gladio, on the other hand, has absolutely no issue expressing his rage. Ignis feels a spike of fear. Gladio doesn't yell or shout, but his words rumble with restraint and blister with heat.

“You have got to be the saddest sack of shit on Eos. Ignis, we are all fucking clueless. We all miss Noct. You are not special for that. You don't get to have a pathetic pity party because you don't know what to do with yourself when you aren't wiping the Princess' ass. You're right about one thing, though. You are the only person on this rock with any of the information. So, how's about you pull your head out of your ass and help us save the fucking world, because until you figure it out the rest of us are all just waitin' for the axe to fall.”

“You really do have a way with words, Gladio.”

“Go fuck yourself, Iggy.”

“Likewise.”

Gladio's rage burns bright enough for the both of them in that moment, and Ignis is staring up into the sky with his scars stinging from his goofy grin that he hates because there's just no dignity in showing that much teeth unless you're a Seadevil. Now he's sure that he's lost it. There's no justifying feeling this good only because everyone else feels just as bad. Ignis can't bring himself to mind at the moment. Gladio's elbow hits the Regalia's door with a sharp crack and he grunts his offense at the paneling under a muscled, inky arm. A laugh bursts from Ignis sharp as the crack on the door and the anger is wiped from the shield's face by a fond smile as quickly as it came.
“That's our Iggy.”

Another two days and Cor and Dustin are gone, hitching a ride with Cid, off to gather hunters and loose Kingsglaives for an effort to push back into Insomnia. Monica stays in Caem with the children. Talcott makes an effort not to look upset, but Iris encourages him to wave with her.

“So, Lestallum first?” Prompto is pulling handguns and machinery in and out of the Armiger as quickly as Ignis can recognize them. What exactly, if anything, the gunner is checking is a mystery.

“Yes. We must gather information, as much as we can, before the situation gets too dark,” Ignis explains as he takes his place in the driver's seat of the Regalia.

“There is so much room back here now.”

“I'm glad someone can find some good in all this.”

“All yours big guy. Enjoy it.”

The sky seems lighter than it has in days. The pressure in Ignis' chest feels the same. He hopes this new normal lingers.

“Ooh! Wait, Iggy! Can we take a picture over there?”

“You wanna take pictures without Noct?”

“Uh, duh. How else are we gonna show him Roadtrip Redux?”

There’s a groan from the backseat when the Regalia pulls over and a whoop from the passenger
seat.

Chapter End Notes

- Third-person PoV of Major Character with unspecified anxiety issues
Prompto’s fiddling with something he’s pulled out of the glove compartment draws Gladio’s attention from a cheap paperback romance novel that’s so tiny he can wrap one hand nearly all the way around it. Why is everything so small all the time? A few painstakingly accordion-folded papers spill from the open compartment along with a driver's manual covered in soft, gray plastic.

“Prompto, kindly replace the paperwork,” Ignis doesn’t even look, but he’s got his Ebony now so he’s calmer. The fact that the more caffeine the adviser gets into his system the more together he is makes less and less sense all the time. The shield sits up and spreads over the middle of the backseat. From this view, he can see the dim glow of the LCD digital clock in the dash. 1544 seems awfully soon for it to be early evening, but that’s less surprising every day.

“Why aren’t you wearing these?” the blonde asks and Gladio feels the scar splitting his face wrinkle along with his expression. Prompto’s holding Ignis’ spare glasses. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Ignis still had another pair. He had assumed not since the adviser hadn't worn them. Several minutes worth of road passes in the low buzz of the tires on the pavement before Ignis comes up with something to say.

“It seems I no longer need them,” he sounds like the answer was pulled out of his throat like a fishhook.

“But you didn't really need them to begin with? Isn't that what you said? Or the big guy said?”

“That wasn't precisely accurate,” more fishhooks. Gladio wiggles his sweaty toes inside his boots. The laces on the right boot are too tight. He had to tie the frayed ends around a grommet together a
few weeks ago and most laces are too short too begin with for boots that big. He'll have to remember to find some laces, or at least something better than this.

“So... You don't need them now, but you only sorta needed them before, but you did? That makes about as much sense as anything. Good talk, dude,” Prompto rambles off and snaps the hard case closed around the frames. He gathers up all the paperwork and the manual with them and shoves them back into the glovebox together. Ignis chooses to ignore this.

“We should find someplace to spend the night.”

“I'm cool with camping.”

“You always say that, dude!”

As much as they liked to badger Noctis about being lazy and unhelpful, Gladio has to admit that setting up camp takes a lot longer without him. Grudgingly and only to himself, though. Pulling random crap out of the Armiger over and over was only funny the first few times. He refuses to acknowledge that Ignis and Prompto don't seem to have quite as much trouble. There's a tire iron laying next to the campfire, and what he thinks is Ignis' sewing kit under the empty camp chair that no one remembered wasn't necessary anymore. It got really quiet after that. The extra camp chair is still there across the fire. Prompto is holding a pot full of bottled water over the open flame to boil for Cup Noodles. As much as he likes them, something about the way that the adviser hadn't pulled any piece of his camp kitchen from the Armiger other than that one pot bugs him. Ignis sits with his gloves off and hands in his lap, staring and rubbing at the scar on his left. Gladio sighs.

“So really. What's up with the glasses?”

“Is it really so important for you to know?” they both sound tired. Gladio's skin feels too tight with energy. Maybe some push-ups after noodles.

“You can act like there isn't anything weird about it all you want to, Iggy, but I'm the world record-holder in never letting anything interesting go,” he wiggles the pot around in the flame. The water takes so damn long to boil.
“The Crystal did something unexpected.”

“Yeah? What?” Gladio thinks that was more grunting than words, but Ignis has had years to get used to that.

“It seems to have cured my myopia, however...”

“Spit it out, Iggy.”

“The sight in my left eye seems slightly dimmer, for lack of a more accurate term. I can't imagine why.”

Prompto is pouring steaming water into a careful row of styrofoam cups. Ignis stares into the campfire now, thumb still worrying back and forth. Gladio thinks he might be angry for a second, but it passes with a deep breath.

“You really can't remember?”

“No, Gladio. I cannot. Ardyn attacked me, I put on the ring, and I fought him. Everything after that is scrambled and indistinct.”

“Wait. Why did you have to put on the ring to fight Ardyn anyway? I thought he was just the creepy chancellor?” Prompto is pouring more water from a plastic gallon jug and into the pot, steam rising around him from the cups of soup and the hot metal.

“Ardyn is the Accursed,” the adviser stops talking when amber meets seafoam. Something flashes across the green in response to whatever is in the shield's gaze, but Gladio's brain is frozen and the chill that races up his spine seems so much colder with the flames at his feet.

“You never said you fought the damn Accursed, Ignis.”

“Did I not? I could have sworn...”
“You said something like that when you talked to the uh... First Secretary? I dunno what any of that means though. It's bad, right?”

“Yeah, Blondie. It's bad. All this crap makes so much more sense now.”

“Which crap? The darkness? Noct getting up close and super personal with the Crystal? Or just Iggy trying to discover a new recipe by putting on Noct's ring?”

“Not fuckin' funny, Prompto.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Right,” the gunner sucks his teeth and it reminds Gladio way too much of Noct. The sound used to drive him up the nearest wall every time. Now it makes him sad enough to tamp down the anger. Enough to not jump head-first down Ignis' throat in frustration. The man just never got it. It occurs to the shield that this frustration used to be directed at Noct. He wonders if Ignis had noticed yet that he's the new target and catalyst. He decides that he doesn't care. Cor isn't here to fend off his words, Prompto wouldn't dream of it, and Ignis seems to have forgotten how to defend himself. He's also a captive audience, bound to the glowing runes of the haven as much as anyone in the night.

“Ignis, look at me and listen. I'm only gonna say this once, and we're never gonna talk about it again. Got it? I'm gonna say this, then we're gonna eat some damn noodles, okay?” Ignis does look then, face carefully blank in that expression that Gladio knows means he knows that what comes next will hurt.

“When we got to the altar, you were gone. Lunafreya was already cold, but Ravus insisted that he owed you and we dragged Noct on Ravus' ship,” Gladio has to stop. Already this is hard. The anger is gone and it leaves him cold. A pale, freckled hand passes him a cup of soup with a fork sticking out of the top. He clutches it in his too big hands and lets it warm him.

“Ravus said that Ardyn had taken you to Gralea. He didn't explain. For the first two days, we sat in that airship with a corpse and Noct unconscious. For two more days we sat on that airship with a corpse while Noct cried. He begged Ravus, Ignis. Begged him over and over to tell him where you were, what that fuck Ardyn was going to do with you. I was so sure Ravus was gonna dump us all out into the ocean, but he didn't. He just said over and over that he owed you and he didn't know.”

Prompto slurps noodles. Curses quietly as he drops one on his pants. Picks it off and eats it
anyway. Gladio wants just a little of the preternatural calm that overtakes the gunner when things get bad like this. He's never envied Prompto before. He can dwell on that later.

“We got there and Ravus can't open the doors fast enough to get us through to the Crystal. Noct stole his keycard and warped all over the place. All we could do was try to keep up. I was so sure Noct was gonna hit stasis doin' that crap, but he didn't,” Gladio keeps talking even though Ignis' eyes are back on his lap. “We got to where they keep the Crystal and it looked like a wrecking ball went through there. Ardyn wasn't there, Iggy. You were. Noct was screaming your name.”

“Truly?”

“What about that is hard to believe, Iggy?” the adviser just sits. Gladio decides it's not worth pulling an answer out of him right now. He breathes deep.

“You were laying there with that fucking ring on, burnt all to hell. Your whole left arm was covered in it. Went all the way up your face and in your eyes. I don't think you could see anything. Iggy, your skin looked like burnt cigarette paper. You were fuckin' dying, Ignis, and maybe I'm glad you don't really remember because you kept asking for Noct, and you fuckin' apologized for fuckin' dying, and everything about that is just so fucked I can't...”

“Hey, Big Guy. That's enough.”

The hand on his wrist stops the volume, but Gladio isn't sure if it's the sight of Ignis' head in his knees and arms wrapped around it or the sound of Ignis swallowing sobs or maybe it's the horrible sinking feeling that comes with making Ignis cry that makes him shut his big mouth.

It's the realization that he has no frame of reference for this that steals the breath from his lungs and makes the corners of his eyes water. Allergies.

Gladio is absolutely certain that he is the worst friend that has ever lived and definitely the biggest bag o' dicks on Eos.

He's shaking and taking great, gasping breaths around a hopeless attempt at keeping it quiet. Prompto is frozen with indecision, open hand hovering over Ignis' shoulder, violet eyes bright and expression taut. Gladio can see his throat work in the firelight. He wants to say that maybe that isn't a good idea, but then again his mouth has already caused enough grief for one night. Gladio hears a low keening from Ignis, and Prompto's brows lower, decision made, at the same time as he lays his
hand out flat around the curve of the other man’s shoulder.

The contact makes it worse.

The panic falls off the gunner’s face faster than Gladio’s guts can tie themselves together at the sound. The sobbing is heart-wrenching and horrible. Ignis sounds more animal than human now. Gladio feels just as clumsy and useless as ever when Prompto knocks over his camp chair and a couple of noodle cups to drag Ignis down out of his own chair and onto the stone of the haven. He tries to gather the taller man up in his arms, but Ignis grabs at the gunner like he’s drowning. The embrace tightens until they’re sitting on the ground so close at every available point of contact that they look more like a knot than two people. Ignis is still crying and shuddering, but the sound mostly stops after only a minute. Prompto aborts the weak attempt to pull away by turning Ignis’ face into the juncture of his neck and shoulder. The adviser seems to accept the hold, and makes no further effort to fight it.

Gladio watches and thinks. The soup in his hands is already going cold. He sets it aside with the others. Examines his own feelings on all of this. Inadequacy, check. Guilt, check. Shame, double-check. Ignis is quiet other than the occasional sniffle, and now the barely-there murmur of soft words in Ignis’ ear is audible.

Somehow, witnessing this doesn't seem strange or out of place. Gladio can't find any discomfort at the situation that doesn't stem from his own actions. Prompto hasn't changed. He's seen the grace that Prompto uses to navigate emotional minefields like this before. He wonders when he first noticed it. Sometime during the drawn out disaster they called a road trip, but he can't place it. Maybe because it was there all along? There doesn't even seem to be a difference between the Prompto that holds Ignis now and the one that cared for a convalescent Ignis with every ounce of dignity and nonchalant respect that the situation called for. That Ignis deserves.

As for Ignis himself, well. There’s just confusion there now. He had known that the adviser wasn't coping well, but where was he hiding all of this? Or, he thinks, how long was he hiding all of this? It comes to Gladio in a moment of clarity. The adviser had already told him. Hell, he had known. Ignis had reached the end of his rope years ago. He feels cripplingly stupid.

Noctis is gone. There’s no reason for Ignis to hide it anymore.

Sunrise is just after 10am and Gladio can’t muster the concern for that on top of everything else.
There are ants marching in and around the camp helping themselves to the sad, cold noodles around the firepit. They're sluggish with the chill in the air. Gladio watches them as he shoves objects back into the Armiger at random. It's not like it matters. Without Noctis they can't organize the mess unless they pull everything out and reorder it, and there's no time for that now. He's starving, but Ignis' red-rimmed eyes look hollow and he's not about to ask him for anything at all. Both the adviser and the gunner are careful not to disturb the insects' careful lines, Prompto jumping around them and tripping over himself in the effort, and Ignis gracefully planting his boots between. If Gladio didn't know better, he would think they planned it.

“How are you not cold? Really.”

“I'm huge. It helps. Don't you have a jacket or something in the Armiger?”

“Yup! Can't find it... I really should invest in shirts with sleeves,” Prompto says and Gladio can't help the crooked smile that brings to his face. It feels wrong right now, but that will pass.

“What about Iggy? His jacket is long gone.”

“Oh, him? Pssh, he's a furnace. Pretty sure his parents named him for it.”

“Iggy, that true?”

“I haven't the slightest,” Ignis' voice is raw and rumbly and soft all at the same time. Gladio hates himself for a second for relishing the sound.

“Really? I feel like fire is a really weird name for a baby.”

“What, you mean like nightlight, or quicksilver, or oh, how about sword lily?”

“Wait, is that what my name means? That is freakin' sweet!” Prompto pumps his fist and nearly spins off the edge of the rock.

“How did you never look it up?”
“I dunno, dude. At least it's not a flower.”

“Hey, I'm not ashamed of it,” he wishes that sounded more convincing.

“Actually, nightlight is a great name for a baby. Almost too good. It's like Noct's dad was trying to make up for having to hear 'king king' his whole life.”

Gladio snorts. There's nothing left on the haven but ashes, noodles, ants, and runes. They should make it to Lestallum today. The shield holds out hope for extra-long bootlaces as he squeezes his bulk into the backseat of the Regalia. They won't be riding with the top down today.

“So, wait. Iggy, why don't you like, ever talk about your parents or family or whatever? Wait, don't answer that. Sorry, probably taboo.” Prompto has to close the passenger door a second time when he does it too softly. The second time is too hard and all three men wince at the slam. “Sorry! Sorry.”

“It's alright,” Ignis seems torn over whether or not he wants to wear his gloves. He shoves them between his thigh and the driver's seat. “I have nothing to offer,” he says as the car's ignition turns over. Gladio wants to press him, wants to know, wants fiercely to get information he's wondered about but was too stubborn to ask for years. He doesn't do that. With his mouth, he's more likely to make sure he never gets to know.

“What? Nothing at all?” Prompto's exuberance blows away like a feather in a hurricane.

“No. Nothing worth sharing.”

“What about your uncle?”

“What about him?” Ignis hadn't brought up his uncle. Not one time since they'd left Insomnia had the adviser so much as offhand mentioned the man who was his guardian when they were children. The man was most certainly dead, and Ignis spoke of him like they were discussing the weather. Gladio can't even remember his name, and now he wonders if he'd ever heard it. The adviser pulls out of their impromptu parking spot smoothly, perfectly at ease.
“You.. I mean he raised you? Or you lived with him when you were a kid?”

“I lived under his roof until I was able to care for myself.”

“Um... How old were you?”

“Pardon?”

“When you moved out?”

“Ten,” he says like this is the most normal thing in the world. That explains quite a bit. It creates more questions too. The kind of questions that make a man like Gladio, a man that grew up with a family that loved each other openly and unconditionally, very uncomfortable. He presses his lips together and concentrates on the feeling to keep his big mouth from opening. It's hard.

“Oh. Well, that's... Um. That sounds lonely,” Prompto says in a voice that gives away a bit much and now Gladio feels like he's intruding. He can just imagine the fidgeting with his damn wristband.

“I'm sure you understand, Prompto,” well shit. He really could have used a good day. With that thought the shield feels like crap again, because here he is worked up over how his friends' lives are depressing. Bag o' dicks.

“Well, I mean. You never talk about your parents either.”

“Nothing to say,” he repeats, and Gladio wishes he could blame his sudden mild nausea on carsickness and not the fact that he has been something like friends with Ignis for at least a decade and he never once even considered where the hell Ignis even came from. It hits him with all the force and weight of a tidal wave. He does not know this man. They have never been friends. Correction: Ignis has been an amazing friend. Gladio doesn't even know what that word means anymore. Fuck.

“Nothing...”

“It's hardly a concern. I simply cannot remember.”
“You don't remember your parents?”

“I have no memory whatsoever before age six. I was a ward of the crown. My uncle had little patience for children and less time. I was kept too busy training to be whatever his Highness needed to think on it.”

“But six was when you came to the Citadel, Iggy,” Gladio manages to stop before his big mouth starts vomiting questions.

“Yes, it was. Nothing to tell.”

Prompto stares out the passenger window. With the top up and the early cold snap, the gray skies make it feel like winter is already here. Gladio shudders. Ignis turns on the heater. Fuck.

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Chapter End Notes

- A conversation between Major Characters involving an insensitive and semi-graphic description of traumatic events that results in an emotional breakdown
- Non-graphic discussion of childhood neglect
“Iggy. Hey, wake up.”

Ignes is tired. He's tired all the way to his bones. His eyes burn and his eyebrows are furrowed with the effort of staying awake. There's a stress headache wrapped around the back of his skull, and he wants nothing more than to sit on the floor and start crying again, but that hasn't really helped, he doesn't believe anyway, and it's definitely not going to make him feel better at this point. At least he knows now that his friends really don't care either way if he has some sort of breakdown. The knowledge is freeing, but still he would rather it doesn't happen again. He wouldn't say no to the... Well, hugging he supposes. His chest is so tight it hurts.

“I'm not sure they have anything in this entire town that isn't pastel. Like, they do know that there are other options, right?”

“We can ask 'em where another place is. Maybe outdoors stuff.”

“Um... Iggy?”

“Yes.”

“You good, buddy?”

“I'll be alright.” He hopes this is the truth. Hopes Prompto will let it go. Wishes against everything
he's ever been taught and trained that he could just ask to be held. Ignis is starting to think maybe he isn't okay. The notion jacks up the stress another notch, and at this point he's just making new notches. They don't have time for this.

“There's a place the hunters buy from down a few blocks.”

“Ooh, badass.”

“You've been a hunter for a long time, idiot.”

“Yeah, but we never actually looked like hunters.”

“Probably because half of them look related.”

“That's weird. Like, super weird. They even have the same hair. Whoever's in charge of the NPCs really needs to add some new options.”

“What the hell?”

“You know. If we're characters in an RPG, then all the randos are like non-playable. NPCs, get it?”

“I guess there's not really a better reason. Unless they're all inbred or somethin'.”

“See? You get it!”

The air is still in the cobblestone and concrete alleys of Lestallum, just cold enough to be bracing but not actually chilled. Or at least he thinks. Prompto and Gladio seem to feel the temperature more than Ignis, but that's nothing new. The adviser had never been particularly sensitive to the weather. Considering the last year and some months, he should count himself lucky. Possibly even more so for the uncertain future. At least he has something going for him.

The other two men lead the way, occasionally bumping into one another far harder than necessary
and Ignis feels himself smile a bit at the way Gladio barely moves at the game, but Prompto, swallowed up like a child in the shield's jacket, flails dramatically every time. Ignis is hopelessly lost, too used to following Noctis' lead, so he's happy to just follow. Happy to not have to come up with a plan.

Ignis would never have cause to admit it out loud, but he isn't anywhere near as intelligent as people make him out to be. He's well-read, clever, and persistent. Everything else was either molded through extensive training and tutoring or is covered with a more than healthy splash of creativity and resourcefulness. A large part of his job was ensuring that Noctis believed that his adviser is a highly intelligent, proper, dignified, and basically infallible man. None of those things are true.

Noctis believed so strongly in the farce that it didn't seem to register when Ignis did something completely boneheaded. For example, not knowing what the Chancellor of Niflheim looked like even though Ignis had sat in the council in Noctis' stead for years. Or the time when they infiltrated a Nif airbase in revenge for Jared Hester's murder. It was Ignis' own plan to abduct Brigadier General Caligo Uldor and creatively press him for information. Not that Ignis doesn't know how to do such things. He just hasn't ever had to use that bit of training. However, the entire endeavor wound up being absolutely useless because Ignis thought it would be a good idea to leave the man in the hands of the hunters. It was not a good idea. It was a distinctly terrible idea. A terrible idea that came back to bite him in the ass in the worst way. Caligo still died, by Ravus' hand technically, but Ignis really would rather have not had to flee for his life on a speedboat he barely knew how to operate. It had a steering wheel and a throttle. Good enough. Nevermind what felt like hundreds of absolutely stupid half-baked plans and near-total failures during their months on the road, or even that humiliating interrogation in Alitssia just days before.

None of them ever seemed to figure it out. Ignis is a much better actor than he ever was as an adviser. Certainly a better chamberlain. Good at throwing knives and jumping about like a squirrel. But now he's nobody's chamberlain and nobody's adviser and who is he really when he's neither of those?

Ignis realizes his feet stopped moving some time ago. He whips his head around, suddenly frantic, and green eyes widen as he realizes that they've left him behind. They've left him behind, and he's lost, and useless, and stupid, and pathetic, and they don't want him anymore. The band around his chest is too tight, he can't breathe. He feels sick. His back slams into the brick wall behind him and his legs give out. He presses his face against the cold bricks and the roughness catches on his suspenders and scrapes against still healing scars. It doesn't ground him like he hopes. Ignis can't hear, can't think, can't breathe. There's black closing in around his vision and he knows he's going to pass out.

“Iggy! Ignis, hey! Dude, you gotta.. Gladio!”

“What the fuck?”
“I dunno, man!” This hurts a lot more than Ignis thinks it should. He's trying, he is, but his throat feels like his heart is trying to choke him, and his chest is too tight, and it hurts, and he can't.

“What do we do?”

“What are you asking me for?”

“You're the one that's good at this kinda shit!”

“He's having a panic attack, dumbass! Pretty sure us panicking isn't gonna help Ignis calm down.”

“Then stop yelling at me already.”

“Sorry, just. Lemmie just.”

He can feel cold hands on his face distantly, thumbs stroking his cheeks. Something is set against his forehead and Ignis thinks it might be Prompto's own because he can feel the smaller man's warm breath.

“Iggy, I need you to listen. Nod if you hear me.” He thinks he nods. Can't be sure.

“Okay, you're hyperventilating. I need you to not do that.”

“Really, Blondie?”

“Shut up, Gladio. Okay, I'm gonna start breathing really slow. I need you to follow best you can, you ready? Nod for me.” Ignis does. Then Prompto stops talking and starts breathing audibly. Ignis can feel the slow, steady exhalations cross his cheeks, but he can't follow, he can't do it and the panic rises.
“Gladio, get over here.”

“What?”

“Now. Get behind him and wrap him up. Like, hug him. Squeeze hard.” A grunt and a shuffle of boots on asphalt. Gladio's wide chest against his back. Big, heavy arms wrapping around him, pulling in his arms to his own chest and squeezing tight.

“Good. Okay, now just breathe with me, Iggy.”

He feels Gladio's head fall to rest against his shoulder. All the extra weight holds him together enough to concentrate on Prompto, focus on the pressure and the warm breath. He can smell the sweet, artificial mint of Prompto's toothpaste. He can feel the chill of Gladio's fingers gradually warm from his own heat where they wrap around his wrists. By the time Ignis can breathe well enough on his own again, he realizes he can taste blood. He's bitten down on his tongue hard enough to bleed.

“He's bleedin', Prompto.”

“Let him up, then. Nothing we can do about it right now, really.”

Prompto wipes at his lips with something that feels like a paper towel, but he has to spit blood onto the asphalt anyway. The gunner doesn't complain, just cleans him up again. It makes Ignis feel like an infant, but he's so tired now its all he can do to stand. He tries to lift a foot, but only manages to shuffle forward an inch, muscles trembling in waves up and down his body. He can barely see his own boots. Gladio's hands are on him again and Ignis tries to shift away.

“None of that. C'mon you, get up here.”

He doesn't have it in him to protest when Gladio picks him up like a child, his legs wrapped around the bigger man's waist, chest to chest and Ignis' head on the shield's shoulder. They're moving, but he doesn't know where.

“Whr... we gon?” Gladio's chuckle rumbles all the way through him and into Ignis.
“The hotel, silly. You didn't think we were still gonna go on a shopping trip, did you?”

“Mnn... Wast ob gil. Stayin' tha car.”

“Are you crazy? We're not going to leave you in the damn car, Iggy. Holy shit.”

“Not enuff gil.”

“We got plenty of gil, this is Lestallum, remember?”

“Yeah, no more fru-fru special! But you're getting your own bed this time, Big Guy. You sweat. It's gross.”

“No complaints here.”

“Whooohoo! I can't believe I'm saying this in Lestallum, but yay heat!”

Ignis sleeps for a time. He wakes, but doesn't move. Assesses himself. He feels terrible. His chest is sore in a way that he knows isn't from the bruises lingering on his ribs. He aches all over mildly. His throat hurts. His tongue hurts as well and feels a bit swollen. His eyes still burn behind his lashes. Someone has lain him on his side facing the wall with no windows. The skin on his left cheek feels tender. He can hear the shower running through the wall. Prompto is seated at his back, propped up against him like he's a pillow. Ignis thinks about saying something or moving, but if he moves, so will Prompto, and Ignis isn't ready for that. Isn't ready to give up the peace yet.

“I know you're awake. I'll let you pretend to sleep if you can honestly tell me you're okay right now.”

“I'm... better.”
“That's fair.”

And Prompto stays. And Ignis wants to cry again, but this time he doesn't understand why. He's getting what he wanted. Why is he still so damn sad? The tears come anyway, and Ignis lets them. He's keeping up appearances for no one. Prompto doesn't care that he's a mess. Gladio just rolls along with it like the boulder he is. Prompto responds to him with too much understanding. Gladio responds by hardly reacting at all. Ignis is endlessly grateful for them.

“Hey, you okay? You need a hug? Some water? Go pee?” Ignis smiles gently despite the tears. They're burning his face a bit, but that's okay. The water stops running through the wall. He can taste salt. There's a metallic clang and a shouted curse, and Prompto laughs when Ignis does.

“You hungry? We got some of those skewers. They're cold, but microwaveable if you take out the sticks.”

“How do you do it?” Prompto's rambling stutters to a halt.

“Dunno what you mean, buddy.”

“Deal with me. Treat me with such kindness.”

“Uh, dude, did I do or say something to make you think I didn't like you?”

“No, I just... I don't understand where all this comes from.”

“You'd do the same thing for anybody. Everybody, actually. Why don't you think you should get the same thing?” Prompto turns around to peer down at him now. No point trying to hide the tears. No point trying to hide at all.

“I really don't think I would. Could rather.”

“I don't get it. I don't get you. How can you say that?” Prompto spits out the words. He's angry? Ignis feels a rock in his guts. Prompto springs up from the mattress. Ignis is so sure he's done with him, that whatever he said wrong is the last straw, the end of Prompto's patience with his weakness.
He can't help it when the hole in his chest opens up and the tears start again in earnest. The gunner stalks around the end of the bed and sits on his heels in front of Ignis' face, and he can't look at him like this. Ignis turns his face into the pillow.

“What happened? Why's he cryin' now?” Gladio's voice is softer than he's ever heard it. Ignis doesn't understand. They should have left him in the alleyway.

“I'm not mad at you. C'mon, look at me.” Ignis shakes his head. Gladio sighs.

“Look, Iggy. I know my track record for empathy isn't exactly great, but if you don't talk to us I don't think whatever's eating at you is gonna just go away.”

“Was he ever like this before? Like, even when he was a kid?”

“Me and Iggy didn't really run in the same circles. He stayed at the citadel. I stayed at my family's estate. We went to the same school for only a while, but we were a year apart. They pulled us both out at some point, I got sent to another school, he got private tutors, and after that I hardly ever saw him until Princess moved out of the Citadel.”

“So you don't know?”

“Nah, but if I had to guess, I'd say not. I mean, not where anyone could see anyway.”

“I don't get it.”

“I always wondered what would happen if they got separated for some reason. Kinda didn't actually want to find out.”

“I'm still here, you know. You could talk to me instead of at me.”

“Sure, we might, if you were gonna tell us anything useful ever.”

Stellar. Now his friends think he's a basket case. Its fine. Its true enough, he supposes.
Chapter End Notes

Third-person PoV by Major Character depicting a Panic Attack, including build-up and aftermath
The hinges of the door squeak when Gladio comes back. He tries to tiptoe around the half-open door. Prompto wants to laugh, but squashes it.

“The shops are open, but most of the street vendors ain't,” Gladio whispers. Well, tries to whisper. He's not that good at it. He holds up a cardstock box. “Got donuts.” He leans against the doorjamb of the tiny bathroom. His jacket is actually zipped up. Today will suck.

“What do you have against vegetables?” Prompto scrubs his damp hair with a hand towel. He'd accidentally dropped his bath towel in the shower. Sigh.
“Nothin’. It was either that or some kinda spicy soup shit.”

“Hey. I like spicy soup shit.” He flips open the cap of his fiber cream. Squeezes. Dang. Looks like this is it unless Lestallum, land of pastel menswear and exactly two hairstyle options, has something somewhere. Prompto has doubts.

“Yeah, well it's not Iggy's spicy soup shit.”

“No, it is not. Dunno that he's gonna be up to that for a while.”

“You noticed too?”

“Hey, I notice things!”

“Well, soup ain't really all that filling. How's he doin’?”

“Asleep last time I checked.”

“Gonna have to get him up.”

“Yeah.”

“Paper, Rock, Scissors for it?”

There's a huff from the other room. Prompto smiles. That sounds more like it. If he were being honest with himself, he'd admit that all of this was starting to get frustrating. He's not blaming Ignis or anything, its just... They're supposed to be figuring out a way to save Noctis' life. Ignis is entitled to however many breakdowns he needs, but it would be nice to actually make some kind of progress.

If Prompto were being totally honest, he'd admit that there's not actually anything stopping Gladio or himself from doing some of the shopping at least. The problem with that? Well, Ignis had this thing about money.
When they originally left Insomnia, nearly a year and a half ago now, Ignis had been the only one who even knew what gil was. That they'd been sent from the Crown City with essentially nothing and a car that belonged to King Regis but somehow broke down maybe an hour outside Insomnia was just the first pebble on a mountain of grief. If it hadn't been for Cindy giving them back the gil that Cid tried to swindle them out of, they wouldn't even have been able to afford bottled water. Prompto remembered Gladio and Ignis seeming stressed, but playing it off and joking around with Noct about Luna. He didn't realize for a long time, and he's sure that Noctis never did, that if not for Cindy they would all be dead. Either they would have had to turn back to Insomnia once the Regalia was fixed, or they would have died out in the scrub desert one way or another. Cid admitted to them months later that the Regalia had actually been sabotaged. Someone had tampered with the alternator so that the battery wouldn't charge correctly. The Regalia depended on electricity too much to run with no juice whatsoever. At least, that's as far as Prompto understood it. He was good with guns and small engines, not cars. So, basically the car worked almost exactly long enough to get to Hammerhead and no farther. Prompto doesn't believe in coincidence, could never buy into the idea that things happened or people were the way they were just because.

Prompto likes to take care of things, of animals, and of people. His camera is held together mostly with love and a little glue. He loves all of the crazy machinery and can take apart and put back together every machine and every gun. Except for the bioblaster. Not worth the risk. He's had to work hard for everything he's ever had, so he takes care of things. Animals go without saying. I mean... chocobos. Puppies. Cats are more Noct's thing, but still cute. As far as people go, he's not sure exactly why he needs to take care of them. Its probably some combination of absent parental figures and zero friends as a kid. He's not a good cook, he's a kinda lousy driver, he's not all that strong or brave or confident but... He would do anything to keep his friends happy. He needs them happy so he can be happy. That wasn't all that hard in Insomnia. Bring Ignis an Ebony or get Noctis to clean anything at all and you've made his week. Gladio's default is happy more or less. Noct was harder, but distraction is a coping mechanism he's familiar with and perfectly okay with enabling.

Gladio had to protect Noctis. He chooses to protect everyone. He usually chooses to protect them from themselves. This doesn't always work, not because he's wrong necessarily, but because he projects all of his feelings onto everyone around him. Or objects. Whatever. If he's not happy, and he's not projecting, he's angry. It makes him comfortingly predictable, but kinda emotionally stupid. He doesn't see how people actually feel because he thinks they should feel the same way he does. He struggles with it. He's never said, it's just not a secret or anything. The crap he pulled at the campsite would have pissed Prompto off if he wasn't already full of crap to feel about it. One of these days, the shield would figure out that only Noctis reacts to his bullheadedness the way he wants people to.

Noctis is simply a product of his upbringing. A shy, awkward kid that grew up to be a more shy, slightly less awkward adult. Downright childish about a lot of things. Spoiled. Kinda clueless. Also, kind, generous, mostly responsible, and literally magic. Prompto still wonders exactly how much of Noctis is really just a reflection of Ignis. He's not clear on how they operate, what exactly their relationship is, hell what Noctis really thinks about Ignis to this day. High school wasn't exactly Noct's most admirable time. The gunner tries not to think about his whole role in it most of the time. He had always known that Noctis had used him against Ignis, but was too much of a coward to ask why. All he knew was that, for a couple of years at least, if Noct wasn't hanging with him he was
treated Ignis like crap. Sometimes simultaneously. It was one of those things, like so many others, they had never once talked about. Now, Prompto really wishes he had. Those two were always so close, but there was tension in it. A lot of tension.

Ignis, though. He had been so sure that the adviser was exactly what he showed to the world for years. That fell apart pretty quickly after they left Insomnia. Ignis seemed to think that they all believed, just like Noct did, in whatever farce he had going on. Thing is, Prompto knows exactly what it looks like to show one thing and be another. In his case, eventually he grew into the mask. Gladio may as well have been a brick wall for as much as he seemed to notice. There's just too much evidence that Ignis isn't... Ignis. He's a very convincing actor. Not that he's literally a different person, that's silly. He's still Noct's adviser, chamberlain, cook, chauffeur, and everything else except Shield and Best Friend respectively. He's also polite, well-read and spoken, responsible, kind, generous, and a lot of other awesome things. Just... Prompto knows how to use Moogle. He recognizes signs in Ignis that he used to display himself. Except with Ignis those signs may as well be giant, sparkling, LCD billboards. The other man had barely been holding himself together with little more than scotch tape and a prayer the entire year and a half they had been roaming Lucis. Ignis had just as much idea of what they were doing as any of them. None. It was none. No clue.

Prompto has no idea how the hell Noctis and Gladio just accepted that Ignis, twenty-three now, never left Insomnia, spent his entire life in service to the Crown and most of it picking up after Noct, somehow had all the answers. He made it all up as he went. They bought it hook, line, and sinker. They never noticed that when things didn't go to plan Ignis brushed it off as unavoidable. They didn't notice that Ignis never admitted fault or apologized if his plans fell through. He apologized, sure, just not because the plan was stupid. It was always just circumstance. Prompto knows that none of them could have come up with anything better, but having too much faith in Ignis' infallibility meant that they were less likely to take initiative. That much responsibility must be terrifying.

That doesn't even take into consideration that Ignis was in charge of keeping them all fed too. When they were broke. Not just kinda broke, like actual choose between gas and food broke. They didn't notice that half of Ignis so-called recipes were literally just some kind of meat on a skewer or soup. He did the vast majority of the driving, sometimes in the middle of the night because Noctis could be an ass when he got single-minded. Noctis and sometimes Gladio would just sleep through it. Prompto did his best to stay awake, but even he was guilty of leaving Ignis solely responsible for not killing them by falling asleep at the wheel. There had been some close calls and a lot of canned coffee. It just went on, and on, and on, and on. How much responsibility they all dumped on Ignis was staggering. Prompto would say that Ignis' emotional breakdown was just because all that was over. He would say that it's because either Noct is or isn't here depending on how you look at it. He would be lying through his teeth.

Prompto knows for a fact that Ignis doesn't even like Ebony anymore he'd drunk so much of it. Toward the end he had started taking caffeine pills instead. He still likes normal coffee, but the canned stuff had become a crutch. Funny what you notice sitting shotgun.

Prompto watched Ignis. Watched him stay up for hours after the others had gone to sleep
sketching routes over and over the map in order to use the least gasoline possible. Half the major roads on their map of Lucis had been redrawn in pen a few times they'd been erased over so much. Watched him sit there with all their gil trying to stretch it, and stretch, and stretch and there was never enough. Watched him literally ration food so they didn't starve, Noctis and Gladio's portions larger so they didn't notice. Watched him wake up long before Noctis just so the Prince didn't have to see him be human. Watched him cringe behind his glasses when Noctis blew money on junk food. Watched his gloved hands tighten on the Regalia's steering wheel so hard they squeaked every time Noct made him take a detour. He didn't watch when every so often, while Noctis fished, Ignis would go sit in the Regalia with the top up so no one could see him.

There were countless opportunities to do something, say anything, but what could he do? What could he say? None of them knew how to do half the things Ignis did. Ignis had to learn. Prompto has no qualms about admitting he's a coward. That's hardly news. He knew. He saw. He did nothing.

*He really, really should have.*

So, now it comes to this. Now, Ignis can't keep himself together anymore. Prompto doesn't think its any one thing that finally did him in. His anxiety was always there. He just got more and more anxious with no relief from it, and then all of this had to go and happen. Probably some combination of nearly dying, getting magical visions, Noctis being gone, everything somehow being over and only just starting, and being solely responsible, yet again, for everything that matters. Ignis desperately needs a vacation.

There is no time for that. Of all the times for Ignis' composure to finally slip, this is right up there with the worst possible. They have to figure out how to save Noct. He might not be an actual genius after all, but Ignis is definitely the smartest, or at least the accent goes a long way toward making that convincing. Without his head on his shoulders where it belongs, they're fucked.

“Prompto, if you have finished would you mind terribly getting out of the bathroom?”

“Yeah, I mind! No, actually. All yours.”

“My gratitude,” Ignis mumbles as he moves past Prompto's shoulder and closes the door behind him. There's a blanket trailing into the hallway that Ignis had to have abandoned. Prompto only trips up on it a little. He'd brush his teeth after donuts then. Oooh. Creme filling.

“Gladioo... Dis is awesom.” So sticky.
“Told ya' so.” Gladio's packing up what little they spread around the room into the nearest available bag. He freezes. “Hey, c'mere a minute.”

“Uhhh, kay?” Prompto fights the urge to wipe glaze on his pants. It makes suspicious stains is all.

“Here,” the shield says and pulls out his worn, black leather wallet. Pulls out a chunk of bills. Rolls them up in one big hand. Gestures at him with the money. Prompto doesn't take it.

“What's that for?” He's whispering now. They don't talk about money. They just don't. He knew Gladio had a bunch saved up after they could finally afford to spare it, but that was a lot.

“Just take it, Prompto.” Gladio does his stupid half-whisper and prods him in the chest with it.

“No. Tell me what it's for. That's yours, dude.” Gladio huffs, stuffs his wallet back in his pocket, and grabs Prompto's glaze stained hand and shoves the money in it. Closes his fist around it. Today just started and its already confusing.

“Your birthday, Blondie. Don't spend it if you don't wanna, just I'm not takin' it back.”

Prompto has to pull his phone out of his pocket and click the calendar app to see the actual date around the cracks in the screen. Huh. October 24th. His birthday is tomorrow.

“I can't... I can't take your money, dude.”

“I'm not really givin' you a choice.”

“No, I mean. Remember last winter?”

“I try not to if I can help it.”

“Remember Iggy's birthday?” Gladio actually shudders.
Ignis' birthday is nearly smack dab in the middle of winter. His last birthday had been in the middle of a blizzard. Snow did not fall in Insomnia while the wall still held, which was their entire lives. They nearly died of exposure in the middle of bumfuck nowhere because they couldn't afford proper winter clothing and their phones had all died so that they didn't know the forecast. The only thing that saved their asses was the chocobos and Gladio insisting that it would be colder inside the Regalia since they had no gas to keep the heater running. They'd had to force the birds inside a cave and use magic to burn soaked, sputtering wood. They spent three days inside that cave, shuddering and terrified, the chocobos cooing their misery and distress. At least they had chocobo food. They'd had to drink melted snow. When it finally ended, they had to tempt frostbite walking back to the chocobo post because the Regalia had been buried in a snowbank and the chocobos had nearly kicked a hole in Noct's head trying to get away from the cave. Luck finally won out when Wiz let them stay in the caravan free because he thought they had saved the birds instead of keeping them penned. That blizzard was a top contender for shittiest thing that happened during the whole time on the road. At least the chocobos eventually forgave them.

“Are you sayin' you want Iggy to have it?”

“If we give it to him, he'll hoard it.”

“Nah he won't. Money won't mean much for long once it really gets dark.”

“I'm not sure if it would cheer him up or stress him out worse. Maybe I should just hang onto it?”

“If that's what you wanna do. Its yours now.”

“Yeah. I just wish there was something... Anything.” There is something, Prompto's sure of it, he just can't place it.

“Same here.”

“Oh! Dude! Where's Iggy's necklace?”

“Oh, shit. Yeah. I still got it.”
“Give it back to him, dumbass!”

Gladio waddles around Prompto and the bed and toward the bathroom just as the shower shuts off. The gunner takes the opportunity to pull his wallet out and shove the cash in it.

“Iggy. Got somethin' for ya.”

“I'm sure it can wait until I'm not completely nude.” Ignis' voice is muffled through the door.

“I dunno. I'm pretty sure you want this.” At that, Ignis does open the door, steam billowing out around the opening and a towel held with a hand around his waist. His expression screams put upon.

Then Gladio reaches into the pocket on the inside of his jacket and pulls out the chain. His ham fist covers it completely, and he waits for Ignis to extend his own hand. When Gladio lets it fall into Ignis' palm and backs away, the other man is still as stone. He stands for a full minute, staring at it, before he turns back into the bathroom and shuts the door again. Gladio just goes back to shoving things in bags or the Armiger. Prompto grabs another donut from the box. Ew. Jelly. Hmmm... He grabs a plain glaze.

So, what was that? With the necklace?” The gunner licks more glaze off his fingers. He's whispering again.

“That necklace is the only gift Noct has ever given him.”

“I'm sorry, what?” Gladio shrugs at the question. “How? The only thing?” Prompto can remember tons of little things Noctis had given him or gifted him. Knew little anecdotes that Gladio himself had told about this birthday or that whatever. Gladio stops tossing around stuff and sits on his bed still holding a pillow from off the floor. He leans on his elbows.

“By the time Noct got old enough to figure out that he should do stuff like that, he figured like an idiot that Ignis didn't do holidays or birthdays. He doesn't do holidays, that's true, but nobody ever remembered his birthday 'cuz he never brought it up. I'm just as guilty as Princess is there.”

“But you've given him stuff?”
“Yeah, after the whole fiasco the year Ignis turned 18, I made sure I wouldn't forget. I never knew what to get him or anything, so I mostly got him books. I mean, he got me books.”

“What happened? That time?” Prompto really wants that sprinkle donut, but two is already too many. It teases him mercilessly from the box. Gladio scratches at the back of his mullet.

“I'm gonna need you to forget this right after I tell you, deal Blondie?”

“Roger.”

“Somehow, Noct figured out that he'd overlooked Ignis' birthday pretty much their whole lives together. Noct custom-ordered that necklace for him, but when he tried to give it to him, Iggy wouldn't take it.”

“What, why?”

“That was right in the middle of Noct's asshole phase. You remember.”

“He wouldn't take it because Noct was being a bitch?”

“Nah, not that. He wouldn't take it because Noct had been such an ass that Ignis was freakin' out thinkin' he was gonna be shetcanned. King Regis had caught on that Iggy'd been lying to him on Noct's behalf. Princess didn't know that though. He threw a fit.” Gladio stops for a minute. Fiddles with the pillow. “He taunted Ignis into actually believing he wanted him fired. I tried to tell him Noct was just being his usual asshole self, but Iggy... He doesn't get things sometimes. Noct seriously thought he was making a clever joke. It went south really fast.”

“How south?” Prompto really doesn't want to know. He needs to understand.

“He actually ordered Ignis to bring the forms to fire him. Ignis did it, put em with all the paperwork that Noct had to sign, that he never reads, and next thing anybody knows, Cor found Iggy sitting in his office at 0200 hours shakin' like a leaf and freakin' out so bad they had to put him in a hospital for a while.”
“A hospital?”

“A mental hospital. They said he was a risk to himself.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. It wasn't all that long. Only a couple weeks. The longest vacation Iggy ever got. If you think Noct was bad before though, after was worse kinda. Just different. The entire Crownguard had orders not to tell Noct anything at all. His Majesty wanted to know how long it would take before Noctis figured out that he'd fired his oldest friend.”

“Do I really wanna know?”

“I doubt it, but still. Took Charmless three days to figure it out. He spent the first two days with you at the arcade. He didn't even realize Iggy was missing until the next Monday when he didn't come get him for school. Instead, they sent Cor. That pretty much gave it away. I heard most of this second-hand from my Dad, but the next part I was around for. Noct comes in the Citadel screamin’. Somethin' about Ignis belonging to him. About King Regis takin' him away. Like he was property.”

“That's insane.”

“Cor turned around and backhanded him so hard he went right back out the door on his ass. I've never seen the Marshal that pissed. I thought for sure I was gonna die since I'm supposed to protect Noct, but my Dad told me to stand down. Then Cor was yellin' at Noct a bunch of shit I didn't really get, and then King Regis was there and Cor goes quiet and the King starts in. If I ever thought the Marshal was scary, Blondie... That was fuckin' scary. He wasn't yelling, but...He basically told Noct that he was so disappointed in him that he was lucky he had no siblings. You know, no other heirs.”

Prompto has exactly nothing to say to that. He sits across from Gladio on the opposite bed, but the shield isn't done yet. There's somehow more.

“They still let him go to the hospital to see Iggy, and I had to go with him. I'm not real clear why they wanted me specifically there. Sure, I'm Noct's shield, but I think it was more for Iggy or something? Or maybe me to see what he'd done too? He wouldn't even look at us for the first two days. A couple more days and he keeps asking Noct for his job back. That's all he'd say really. Just begging for his job. After a couple days of that, Noct can't take it anymore and starts yellin' at him about why he would even want to come back. Even admitted to Iggy that he'd been purposely
horrible to him for no damn reason. He was just cryin' and yellin' at him. Worst part is that Iggy answered the question.”

Gladio stops when there's a banging sound from the bathroom. The door doesn't open, but he talks faster.

“He said... He said that he didn't have anything else, or anyone else. That his job is his life, and Noct is his job, so basically Noct is his entire life. Noct tried to get huffy about it, but Iggy meant it. Every word. Then Charmless actually asked him why they weren't friends anymore, if he was just a job. Iggy said because Noct hadn't treated him like a person since he was twelve. Not just like a servant, like a machine. Once they let him out of there, they were gonna give Iggy a break, but he didn't want it. He needed his job, so they let him go back to work. Noct gave him the necklace again when he came back, and said later that Ignis barely spoke to him for months. Barely said anything at all. Just went around like the machine he said Noct made him feel like he wanted him to be, but he never took off the damn necklace. Me taking it off him was prob'ly the only time. After a while it went back to somethin' that looked the same on the outside, but it really never was again. Too much hurt between them to fix it.”

The bathroom door opens, the light spilling out into the hallway. Gladio stands up and tosses the pillow back onto the bed, to keep up appearances. Prompto leans back and lets himself fall into his and Ignis' bed. He has even more questions now, but so many answers. The big man isn't always perceptive, but he's observant. He wouldn't have told Prompto any of this unless he felt it necessary. He definitely wouldn't have told Prompto if he thought for a second he couldn't keep it quiet.

Prompto's biggest take-away from this? If he'd had the slightest idea what was going on all that time he'd have walked away from Noctis without hesitation. Without a second thought. He knows that Noctis was having a rough time, but this was exceptionally cruel. Its difficult to reconcile the Noct he knows with the Noct that would do something so horrible. If Gladio’s paraphrasing was even remotely accurate, Noct never even really understood.

“Prompto, the bathroom is free.”

“Yeeup.” The gunner totally does not trip over the damn blanket that's still in the hallway. Ignis just goes around him, the warm, dark citrus scent of the soaps and hair products he used trailing behind him. They really need to get Ignis some more clothes though. His shirt is wrinkled pretty bad. He's guessing its bugging the crap out of him. Prompto brushes his teeth. The tiny, annoying hairs that grow way too sparse on his chin, jaw, and neck aren't even really visible, but they bother him. He sticks his head out the door and leans around the corner.

“Ignis. You got a razor I can borrow? Use? Whatever?” Ignis looks back at him like he's grown at least three extra heads. He's picking the sprinkles off a donut with pink icing. Barbarian.
“Prompto. I assume you're asking for a safety razor.” So much side-eye.

“Uh... Yeah?”

“Prompto. Did you, in all seriousness, just ask a man who kicks knives if he owns a safety razor?”

“That's a no?”

“Just get some when we go out or whatever, Blondie.”

“Ugh. I'm stupid.”

“Safety razor.”

Chapter End Notes

- Description of AU road trip portraying Major Characters as destitute vagabonds
- Second-hand description of an event portraying a Major Character in a very unflattering, biased manner
- Mention of a Major Character's past admission to a mental health facility
Chapter 7 - Gaggle Rock

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

Also, oh look. The plot. Where's that been hiding?

By the way, I only very hand-wavey reference Comrades. Basically, gimmie your glaives and gtfo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Its Time - Imagine Dragons

“Oh shit! Extra-long bootlaces!” Gladio swipes all available tiny packages off the endcap and dumps them into the cart. Ignis tries very, very hard not to tally each one in his head. He wishes very, very much that Prompto hadn't banned coffee.

“I can't believe this entire town doesn't have fiber cream! How do people live here?” Prompto is wearing Noctis' ridiculous puffy vest. Gladio had yanked it out of the Armiger (after he accidentally grabbed a butane lighter, a tent stake, a fishing glove, and an empty bottle of aspirin) and manhandled Prompto into it despite his protesting. The shield is right. Noctis doesn't need it, and clothes are clothes. It hardly matters. They're going to have to purchase winter gear regardless.

“Oh, it's you boys! What are you up to in Lestallum? Shopping for winter? You won't get caught out like last year then! Good on you. Wait, where's your other one? The shy, royal type that did all the talking?” Does she have to be right behind him? No sense of personal space whatsoever. Still...

“Ah. Ms. Yeager. Pleasure.”

“No time for pleasantries! This weather on top of the sun disappearing is fascinating. I'm off to do some research! Just as soon as I find a ride out of Lestallum.” Still too close. Why? Her arms are doing a very distracting pinwheeling gesture as she speaks, words spilling out of her as quickly as she can think them he presumes.

“What research you plan on doin'? It's cold. Now get that published.”
“Ooh, cheek. Amusing. You're lucky you're cute, but you're not my type.” Gladio's head pokes up over the racks of coats. He frowns and blinks several times. Fun.

“Ms. Yeager, please...”

“Sonia,” she hums at him. Ignis sighs.

“Sonia, of course. What are your thoughts on the unseasonable weather?”

“Unseasonable? That's cute. You're cute. Closer to my type, but too young... and nervous.”

Less fun. Ignis takes a step back. That's better.

“What do you mean, precisely?”

“Oh, this isn't unseasonable. It's not a season.” If Ignis' brain had a soundtrack, the CD would have just skipped.

“Pardon? Not a season?”

“Oh, no! Certainly not. Better get used to it, boys. Less light equals less heat. Bundle up!”

“Wait, please. Sonia.”

“I did say I'm in a hurry. I know I did.”

“How cold do ya think its gonna get?”

“Hmm... That's hard to say without taking the proper measurements around Lucis, but it will most
likely drop to somewhere between oh, 35 and 40 degrees or so, then warm up a bit when the weather stops, then get chilly again. Hard to say after that! Research! Better safe than sorry really.”

“So, not actually horrible winter storm cold? Like just cold, but not snowing?”

“Afraid of the snow now, Freckles? I'm not a meteorologist or a climatologist or any of that, so again just little guess, but the sun is what drives the water cycle. No water cycle, no weather. So, after a while, no snow, rain, any of that. Probably not even any wind! We would only be so lucky.”

“Why? Why is that lucky?”

“Sure doesn't sound lucky.” Grunt.

“All the flora is already starting to die back. Once its gone, there’s nothing to hold down the topsoil.. Or the dirt if you’re in Liede! Those sandstorms are going to be bigger than ever. Well, if there's still wind anyway.”

“Sonia, please. One more question then we shall leave you to your work. How long do you believe we have until the sun fails to rise?”

“That's not quite the question you should have asked. Try again.” She raises her eyebrows behind her overlarge glasses.

“Um... How long until its dark?”

“Accepted! Ding, ding! The sun isn’t really going anywhere. The days are actually shorter, that's magic. I don't pretend to understand that part. I'm a scientist! The sun won't completely disappear. In fact, its already settled down. Now its just going to keep getting dimmer. Maybe we'll even still be able to see it after!”

“Right, but how long, please.”

“I'd say a month. Month and a half. Again, guessing!.”
“Do these people even get that its gonna get dark? They don't seem to really,” Prompto asks and dumps an economy pack of plain, white socks into the basket.

“They'd have to be total dipshits not to.” Gladio grabs the socks from the basket, tosses them back into their bin, and replaces them with something higher quality and more resilient. Worth the gil.

“Oh, don't you boys worry about that! Exineris runs this town. They know once its dark, they're the only thing holding the daemons back! That's a bonus since you boys have been such good students. Don't forget to take samples!” Sonia Yeager is... something. Also, quite possibly the most intelligent person left in Lucis. Ignis is sure that her eccentricity is a large part of her success, but it does make her difficult to deal with at times. The woman is far too excited about the end of the world.

“Samples of what?”

“Who knows? Probably frog slime or somethin'.

“I'm gonna look at the boots.”

“You've got boots.”

“Other boots? These hurt my feet.”

“Sounds good?”

“Gentlemen, frugality.”

“At the end of the world? Why? I dunno if you heard, but I have it on good authority that rainy days are gonna be pretty unlikely soon. Besides, tomorrow's my birthday.”

“Oh. Is it? I'm afraid I hadn't a clue what day it is. Well, far be it for me to stop you on your birthday.”
“This is like the pre-birthday present. For me.”

“Hey, these socks have silver in em. Says they're anti-microbial.”

Ignis sighs. Who puts precious metals in socks? He picks up a package. Huh. Apparently, the Kingsglaive does, at least according to the package. Sure.

“I'm gonna miss all that gil Viv used to give us.”

“You mean you. Give you.”

“I shared!”

“Nobody said you didn't, Blondie! You hidin' something?”

“I don't have to. Iggy let me buy all the stuff I wanted.”

Everything they had gotten from the Meldacio Hunter Supply was stashed safely in the Armiger for now. It was far simpler to carry it that way. Prompto had put on his new coat, black, like most hunter gear, made warm with layers of cloth somehow instead of puffiness. It fits him snugly, but was made to be easy to move in. All three men had bought mostly the same items, there being little variation in hunter attire. It seems easier somehow. Nothing to iron, no patterns or stripes to match or colors to coordinate. Ignis is surprisingly content with the lack of choice. His only regret would be not knowing about it earlier. They'd had to show hunter identification just to get inside. It would be troublesome telling the clothing apart in the Armiger, however. He'd have to come up with a way of differentiating them without having to check the sizes.

Prompto had also, against both Gladio's and his own advice, put on his new boots. They're tall and thick-soled, with buckles and laces up the front and a hidden zipper in the back. He has no doubt they're modeled after Kingsglaive uniform boots. Its curious, but not that curious.
“My feet hurt.”

“We told you not to wear ’em yet.”

“I know what you told me. I also know my feet hurt.”

Now, they're headed to the market, and after that, well. There's not going to be enough daylight left to go much of anywhere even if they knew where to go. Or what to do. Stupid chest. Tight again.

A month, maybe more to figure out a plan. Ignis can't help but think if they had known before, when they were traipsing all over Lucis, they could have been searching for a way to save Noctis all along.

Now, instead of a year and a half, they had maybe a month and a half. When they turn the corner to enter the market, Gladio and Prompto stop short in front of him. He can't see past the shield, but he can over the gunner.

Vyv Dorden and Dino Ghiranze are facing away from them, Vyv snapping a photo of well... Nothing, really.

The market is gutted.

“Hey. It's you guys.”

“You know them too?” Ignis thinks this may be the first time he's ever seen Vyv not sweating.

“Yeah, of course. How'd you think I was getting a hold of precious gemstones? Those things don't grow on trees, if you know what I mean.”

“You've been holding out on me again, Dino.”
“Not exactly. I promised the Prince I wouldn’t publish dirt on him in exchange for the goods.”

“That’s blackmail.”

“Yeah, it is. Where’s the Prince, anyway?” There is a toothpick hanging out of Dino’s mouth. It wiggles up and down with his every utterance. Ignis wants oh, so very badly to smack him. To remove the toothpick, naturally. Nasty habit.

It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he’s certain he hates this man more than any other on Eos. More than Ardyn Lucis Caelum. Subject to change, of course.

“Uh... Yeah, about that.” Prompto’s rubbing at his wristband. Best to just get this over with.

“He’s gone. Prophesy crap.” Saved by the Gladio. Sort of.

“Gone? How’s the Prince just gone? The prophesy says the Chosen King is supposed to save us from the dark. It looks pretty dark to me.”

“It’s complicated. He will return, just not anytime soon.” Ignis wants to say he should know how long, but he doesn’t. It niggles at him. Its just another detail from Zegnatus that he can’t remember or explain properly. It makes him feel slow and stupid. It isn’t that the details of the visions he had been granted were gone from his mind. Its more that his recollection makes no sense. He wasn’t shown them so much as they were shoved between his ears with all the grace Gladio used to shove items into the Armiger. A divinely inhuman voice boomed warnings and prophesy that he couldn’t hear, but he could comprehend. Too many images, too many possibilities, too many timelines somehow and all of them in shades of Crystal blue. Ignis can only guess at what he was supposed to take away from all of that. What he did take away is enough. He hopes. His chest hurts, but that's not new.

“So, what happened here? Where did the market go?” Gladio grunts at Prompto’s question. The market square has been emptied of vendor booths completely. Other than the occasional refuse (this is Lestallum after all), there is little more than stacks of wooden pallets and burlap and canvas bags stacked taller than Gladio with what Ignis thinks might be fertilizer or potting soil. Its nothing new for Lestallum to be covered in the odd pile or pallet of such things, sometimes even sacks of grain or potatoes, but this is different.

“The ladies in charge started confiscatin’ goods. They’re gonna ration everything. Food, medical
supplies, you name it.”

“People aren't happy about it, but what can you do? I was going to write an article on it, but now it would probably be better to just make it more of a public service announcement.”

“So you're sayin' Exineris is enacting martial law? Who do they have to reinforce that? Hunters?”

“Sure, some hunters. For a while they had some of your Kingsglaives here too, but they got called out by that Cor the Immortal fella.”

“Gladio, kindly allow me to borrow your phone.” There is even less time than Ignis thought. He breathes carefully and deeply through his for once completely justified anxiety while the shield fishes his smartphone out of a pocket and unlocks it. Ignis has to fight the urge to swipe it out of his hand. The conversation continues, but Ignis isn't listening. He scrolls through the contacts, but can't find Cor's name. Gladio had given every contact number a nickname. Asshat... Blondie... Dumbass... KingKing... Princess... Manwhore... Wait, there's Monica. No nickname. He taps the screen and ducks around the corner of the alleyway.

“Crownsguard Elshett.”

“Monica.”

“Ignis, how can I help you?”

“Has the Marshal spoken to you since he and Dustin left Caem?”

“I'm afraid not,” she pauses, “Dustin has called, however.”

“What is this about a muster for the Kingsglaive? How are there even enough left for that? Have they been called to Insomnia? Why weren't we told? What...”

“Ignis! Stop.” He does. He squeezes his eyes and his mouth shut and concentrates on breathing.
“We've been locating them for some time now. At first we believed them simply more traitors to Lucis, however they weren't conspirators or AWOL. They all have amnesia.”

“That sounds incredibly unlikely. Like a bad soap opera or somesuch.”

“Yes, but the Marshal seems to trust them. They had started to band together in Lestallum just in the last few weeks as the hunters have no time to deal with them.”

“Yes, certainly, but why did Cor muster them to Insomnia?”

“Perhaps you should ask him that.”

“Is it truly that bad? Is it the Imperial forces or daemons?” Monica doesn't respond for thirty-two seconds. He knows this because he checked on the call twice to make sure she hadn't disconnected.

“Insomnia is burning. The Imperials are gone, but there are still tens of thousands of people left. There are also daemons.”

“The daemons are harming the civilians?”

“Not exactly. They're starving, and afraid. That's not really the problem.” Monica doesn't sound... normal. Ignis hasn't a clue what could possibly shake the woman.

“Well?”

“The Marshal made the decision to blockade the bridge to Leide and quarantine Insomnia.”

“Starscourge?”

“Yes. The sickness is turning them into daemons.”
“How? The Scourge doesn't spread quickly. To require the entirety of Insomnia quarantined there would have to be thousands of people...”

“They've already taken over the agricultural northern regions of Cavaugh. Everything is long dead. No crops for harvest. Its been over a year since the city fell, Ignis.”

“What are you saying?... Monica? What does that mean?” She's whispering now.

“The Scourge has spread to virtually every living creature remaining in Cavaugh. There is no one left to save. Cor had to blockade the bridge to stop them from reaching Leide.”

“But... Why? How could it infect everyone?” The dread didn't stop him from needing to know.

“Ignis... They've been eating each other.”

Chapter End Notes

- Very brief Non-Graphic mention of off-screen cannibalism
Chapter 8 - Viator

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

WARNING: This is where this fic starts to earn it's rating. If you are easily squicked out, ask and I'll start summarizing these type of chapters in the comments when I post them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: 40 Miles From the Sun - Bush

viator

[vahy-ey-tawr, -ter]

noun, plural vi · a · to · res [vahy-uh-taur-eez, -tohr-]

1. a wayfarer; traveler.

2. (medical): a person with a catastrophic or terminal illness who sells their life insurance policy at a steep penalty in order to pay for health care or improve quality of life.

Cor the Immortal is having a bad night.

He's on top of the command center the glaives had hastily erected made out of a couple of concrete pylons, some plastic highway barriers filled with water from the bay, and creative use of plywood and watches as another orange-red flare lights up the void-black sky above what used to be the Citadel District. He knows, not because he can see it but because he's been told, that the flare is actually a giant flaming rock. The sound it makes as it falls can be heard even from where he stands, a deafening, low groan that sinks in pitch as it falls, and then the unmistakable roar of explosive demolition.

These comets are magic, but damn if he knows what hell they had come from. Magic has a caster,
but this is so far beyond any lore of any Lucian king. There are only two possibilities, equally unlikely. Either this magic belongs to the Usurper, or to a dead Astral. Neither of these are good. If it is Ardyn casting the spells, then Insomnia is even more lost than he calculated. If its Ifrit, well. Its already the end of the world. Might as well end it in fire.


They had been forced to post snipers. Those snipers have standing orders to fire upon any civilian that attempts to breach the blockade crossing the highway lanes of the bridge. Real bullets gleaned from MT's ensure that they die quickly. Some people have chosen to jump into the water. He hopes they drowned quickly. There is no mercy here.

“Marshal! Sir!” He'd taken to calling the glaives by nicknames. They couldn't remember their given ones. Suspicious as it gets, but who is he to refuse their service? There is no choosing here. Plenty of begging, though. This glaive he calls Donut. He's a bit round all over. Good kid. He doesn't belong here. No one belongs here. Insomnia is a mausoleum.

“Report, glaive.”

“Sir, there's another civilian wanting to trade.”

“What do they have and what do they want?”

“Medical supplies. A couple boxes of syringes and needles, and a bunch of little vials. He says they're sedatives and painkillers.”

“What does he want?”

“Um... He wants us to take his kid.”

“Can't do that. Food, bottled water, a bullet. Those are the options.” the glaive's powder blue eyes are watery. He's pale. They're all already exhausted, and this is only the second day. He salutes stiffly.

Cor listens to the violence, to the desperation, to the long, slow, agonizing death of a city that
once held nine million people. Now it holds daemons and ghosts. Some of the ghosts still draw
breath.

“Sir, he says the bullet, but if he's only allowed one then its for the kid.”

“Approved.”

The corpses are starting to stink. The rioting people on the other side of the barricades are
throwing the rotting people off the bridge. The corpses don't sink, and they bloat with water.

“Sir? How long are we going to do this? How long until we... cease operations?”

“Until they have nothing left to offer us.”

“Then after?”

“That depends on how many of them are still human.”

The comets have stopped. It only took four days. Cor has never wanted a shower more in his
ten entire life. To wash off the dust, the grime, the guilt.

The infected(when did they stop being civilians) are no longer bothering to try and remove the
bodies. They don't smell so much anymore, but that's just the effects of the cold. Cor had given the
order to relocate operations back down the bridge twenty yards yesterday so that the corpses didn't
pile so high the infected could use them to scale the barricades. He might have to give the order again
by tomorrow. They can't break the barricades. The glaives are clever with magic. How they have
access to it is a mystery Cor can't help but not give a damn about the answer to.
“Sir? We're out of food to ration out.” He calls this one Chocobo. Her hair is taller than Ignis' and wilder than Prompto's.

“Nothing to be done.”

“No orders, Marshal?” Her face is so hard in the wan sunlight she could be Titan's daughter. She leaves after a moment.

Someone on the other side came up with the brilliant plan of setting the bodies on fire where they lie. This did not turn out the way they intended. The stampede to get away from the fire was worse than the actual fire. Some were trampled or suffocated. Some burned alive. Some drowned to escape being burned. Others didn't die. Not yet. They would. Until they did, they would scream and beg for it.

“Sir? Orders?” This end of the bridge is much lower, and the water more shallow. There are so many corpses in the bay below the bridge that they breach the surface of the water and are piling up around the support beams. Some of the burning infected trying to escape that death had landed on top of the bodies already below. Now they all burn. They had already backed up well past the point where Insomnia Public Works maintained the bridge. It is only a matter of time before the flames and thirty years of decay finish their duty for them. At least its warm.

“Marshal?” He doesn't have a name for this one.

“Leave several glaives and the snipers at the barricades. All non-essential personnel join the glaives moving the supplies to Hammerhead.

“Yes, sir.”

It takes two more days before the smoldering has eaten through the bridge supports enough that Cor feels willing to risk blowing the bridge. The only explosives they have were traded to them by
the infected. They use them all. He holds his breath when the glaives light the makeshift fuse. If it fails... If it fails then all of Lucis is lost. It works. It should be enough.

Flying specimens of daemonic kind are very few and far between. Hovering, yes. Flying not so much. Daemons don't like water either. The bridge has collapsed beyond the explosion some distance, perhaps eighty, maybe a hundred yards. Even if an infected person could swim that distance, they would have to cross nearly a mile of smoldering warzone. It will have to be enough.

“Marshal? Orders?”

“Regroup in Hammerhead. Give instructions to Dustin that the supplies should be routed to Lestallum.”

He goes. No one can see the city through the smoke anyway. Insomnia died months ago. Even with two dead kings and a possible third, he had never imagined having to watch his home die.

Cor the Immortal had buried her. It took one week.

“Monica.”

“Marshal? Are you alright, sir?”

“I need you to relocate to Lestallum.”

“With the children. How?”

“I'll come get you. Be ready tomorrow, but I might take one more day to get there.”

“Not to question orders, Marshal, but is there a reason for this so suddenly?”
“Have you spoken with the boys?”

“Five days ago.”

“Did you say anything to them? … Monica?”

“Only, Ignis. Sorry, sir.”

“Damn, alright. Be ready.”

“Gladiolus.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you?”

“Uh... Iggy, where are we? Seculum Pass.”

“What the hell are you doing there?”

“Goin' back to a couple Royal Tombs. Tryin' to figure things out.”

“Can you get back to Lestallum by the day after tomorrow? Maybe another day after that?”

“That's complicated. We might have... Yeah, let's call em hitchhikers.”
“Leave them with the hunters somewhere safe. I need you boys in Lestallum.”

“Alright, Marshal. If you say so, but I kinda don't wanna piss off these guys.”

“Who did you pick up?”

“Journalists, technically.”

“Just get to Lestallum!”

“Shit! Yes, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

- Non-Graphic depiction of rioting
- Dehumanization
- Non-Graphic depictions of deaths involving drowning, immolation, execution by military sniper, and in a stampede
- Graphic descriptions of sound and smell of the above, but not sight
Chapter 9 - Greenlight

Chapter Notes

No Chapter Specific Warnings.

Mmm... Plot.

Optional Listening: Kids - MGMT

Five days. Five days on the road with Gladio having to drive, Vyv riding shotgun, and Prompto, Ignis, and Dino in the back. Five days of Prompto being stuck between the other two men so they didn't kill each other. Well, so Iggy didn't kill Dino. Five days, and then Vyv finally decides to chime in with this gem.

“You know there are other tombs, right? Not just the ones you've been to already.”

“You mean the lost ones?”

“Prompto, please.”

“They aren't lost. They're out there, just well off the beaten path. Not sedan accessible.”

“Dude, you are always so warm.”

“How do you know about this and we don't? Why even bring it up now? We're goin' back.”

“Gettin' cozy over there.”

“Shut up, Dino.”
“I'm just saying.”

“Don't.”

“Why would I know how you Crownguard don't know? I write articles and run a radio station. One that I should get back to. They're all over Lucis. Well, most of them.”

“Prompto. I am not a hand warmer. Please remove your hands from my person.”

“You've gotta be the stiffest guy on Eos.”

“But dude! Gimmie your gloves then.”

“Are you sayin' there are some outside Lucis?”

“Wear your own.”

“No. Yours are pre-heated.”

“Not many. But there are tons you haven't found if you only have ten.”

“Eleven actually, but Noct's Royal Arm doesn't count.”

“I am not an oven either, Prompto.”

“Well, Lunafreya had one, but we don't know what happened to it. Then Ravus had King Regis', but we never got it from him. Said it was in Tenebrae.”

“There's supposed to be a tomb in Cartanica. Nif territory. Old abandoned mine. That's the only one I know from memory. I try to stick to Lucis.”
“Why did you not inform us of this before we left Lestallum?”

“Again, I don't see how you kids didn't know.”

“Why is he calling us kids?”

“Perhaps because you have your hands in my shirt.”

“I wouldn't call that kid stuff. I'd call it real cozy.”

“I agree with Prompto. Do shuttup, Dino.”

By the time they make it back to Lestallum, there is a wall across the entire front of the town. A wall that looks a lot like garbage, but Gladio isn't exactly an engineer. It sort of matches the rest of the garbage lying around anyway. There are red arrows pointing north, and yellow ones pointing south. They couldn't have written words? Gladio likes red better. He turns right and follows the red arrows.

“Prompto, I swear if you don't keep your poor circulation to yourself I will remove the next part of your body that touches me.” Iggy is way past had it.

“Aww.” Prompto pouts like a puppy under his black beanie.

“C'mon Iggy, you're just mad at Dino.”

“And Vyv.” Prompto sticks his hands in his coat pockets. Probably so they don't get cut off versus actually keeping them warm.
“Yes, well. The entire excursion was a colossal waste of time. And fuel.”

“Don't disagree there.” Gladio just grunts. Prompto isn't wrong. It's pretty damn cold. He's not wrong that Iggy is a space heater either. Ignis doesn't like him well enough to hesitate in the amputation, so he keeps his own cold mitts to himself.

Prompto and Ignis had already been sharing a bed for a while now. Ever since that first night in Caem now that he thinks about it, but Ignis didn't wanna be touched unless he was tired or upset. Gladio knew he couldn't actually be mad at Prompto. Not because of the stupid cold hands crap, but he just didn't ever get mad at him. The shield honestly couldn't remember a single time Ignis had been legitimately angry with Prompto. His brow furrows.

Wait, a minute. If Prompto is the clumsiest person on Eos, and a giant chickenshit, then if Ignis didn't want him touching on him then it wouldn't happen. Ignis is the opposite on the grace front. If he didn't want it, then he'd be flowing around Prompto like air. Huh.

They don't seem to notice. Gladio knows that if he's caught on, its pretty obvious. Something is going on, he's sure of it. He's willing to admit he's not clear on what.

The stupid trash wall is open in an alleyway with a hunter posting guard. He doesn't so much as blink at them when they pass. Guess there's at least one good thing about not following a prince around all the time.

“I am so hungry. Feed meeceee.”

“More like dramatic.”

Inside the trash wall isn't really any different except for the hunters milling around and... Glaives? So, Monica was right. There are glaives around still. Gladio isn't sure how he feels about that. He knows that some of them were traitors. Some of them. For all he knows, those glaives are long dead. Nobody questions them as they move further up the main drag, or what used to be the main drag. Now its some kind of headquarters, or at least it's meant to be. Other than Dustin, the tables and stations are unmanned. Unwomanned? Unpersoned? Empty. They're empty.

“Hey, its Dustin. Yoooooo.” Prompto waves enthusiastically even though the man is ten feet away.
“Yes, hello boys. The Marshal is in the tent.” Dustin gestures vaguely at the command tent shoved awkwardly in one side of the square.

“Good to see you, Dustin.” Ignis may dress like a hunter now, but he still couldn't resist putting a colorful spin on the standard hunter gear. All of his shirts are a soft, dark gray. If he looks at it right, it kinda looks blue. Gladio had been a bit put out that Ignis had not only found dyed shirts instead of the plain white or black, but that he didn't say anything about it. Gladio is fine with black, just the option would have been nice. Ignis insisted that the color was just to make them easier to tell apart, but that smelled like bullshit to him. At least Prompto had finally stopped taking advantage of the fact that Ignis' shirts were too short to tuck in now. If he'd zip his damn jacket like a reasonable human it wouldn't be a thing to begin with. Huh. He was gonna have to start a list of evidence soon.

“Of course. Likewise.” They're both so damn proper. Its exhausting. Entire conversations of nothing but pleasantries. Gladio is eternally grateful that Clarus had never forced him or Iris to take the standard elocution lessons all the other nobility types and their servants took. Why did they even still talk like that? What's the point in being so proper now?

“Hey, where's Iris?”

“Oh, Lady Iris is at the Leville on the other side of town.”

“What does that mean? Other side? Are they actually split up?”

“Yes. The other side is civilian only.”

“Civilian, huh?” Gladio shrugs. Dustin pushes up his glasses.

“Why don't you call him Lord Gladiolus or whatever? If you call her Lady Iris?”

“I imagine it has something to do with the weather being the only reason Gladio is wearing a shirt.”

Huh. Okay.
“You good, Big Guy?” Gladio lets out an affirmative grunt.

That's an interesting concept. The shield is so used to it, he doesn't really think about the fact that he normally walks around half naked all the time. It's just what he does. He knows what he looks like. Here's the thing. If Prompto just wanted attention in general, Gladio isn't a cuddler or whatever but he's fine with hugs and crap. The gunner doesn't come to him. He goes to Ignis, who lets him do it, even though before Zegnatus the man would dodge a pat on the back. He still draws away from Gladio, though. The thing is, Ignis is kinda... Clueless. Prompto isn't gay. So what's going on?

He stands outside the tent while the other two men talk to Cor. It's not made for that many people to be in there at once and he's worth at least two Promptos.

Gladio knows Ignis is... Kinda gay? He's definitely not straight. Just a feeling. None of them ever really talked about that sort of thing. It was the only subject they never touched. Ignis doesn't even get dirty jokes unless they're puns. See, Gladio has spent a decent amount of time with attractive women. He knows how other men look at attractive women. The look isn't any different if someone's gay. He's seen Ignis look more interested in tarragon than he is in people. It could be that he's just not into anyone. Or, it could be that he's only into one person. At least he makes an exception for one person. Something like that.

As far as Prompto goes, he's always been a little touchy-feely. He and Noct didn't seem to care about personal space when it came to each other. That didn't extend to Gladio or Ignis until recently, and it still didn't really extend to him. He gets that part of it has to just be Prompto likes hugs and Ignis really needs hugs, but... This is flirting. Prompto is flirting with Ignis. Ignis doesn't know it. Which means, that if Prompto really isn't gay, he's only gay for one person. Huh.

Super sleuth Gladio strikes again. Its kinda cute how they're never gonna figure it out. He shrugs.

He's nearly bowled over by Prompto stumbling out of the tent, Ignis and the Marshal after him.

“Alright. I don't like this plan of yours. At all. I'll look into Cartanica once I find a way how.”

“Thank you, Marshal.”

“Don't thank me yet. Do you three even know where you're going?”
“Nah, not really. Vyv gave me this old book, but I haven't gotten a chance to look at it yet. I was drivin'.

“Let me see it.” Gladio yanks it out of the Armiger (first try!) and passes it over. Cor hums at it. That's a good sign. The book is old. Very old. Lucis still a proper empire old. The pages are thick, yellowed parchment instead of more modern paper, and its hand-bound. Actually sewn up. The cover is some kind of thick, dark leather and has signs that there used to be something on it, but now its either illegible or indistinguishable. Can't even tell if it was script or art.

“Come back later. Give me about four hours.”

“Uh, why?”

“This might work, but only if I map this out for you. You boys are resourceful, I'll give you that, but there aren't any roads where you're going.”

“We can handle it. I mean, we take care of each other, right?” Cor's head tilts up from the book very slowly.

“You don't have time for that. That's what I need time to map out. I'm splitting you boys up.”

“Aww... chocobo butts.” Prompto looks like someone just kicked his imaginary puppy. He kicks at a loose cobblestone. Ignis does the thing where he stares at his boots with his chin all the way in his chest. Gladio tilts his head back and stares at the dim sky. Clouds? No, wait.

“How long has the sky been green?”

They give Cor three and a half hours until they're bored and out of things to do. The who-knows-what meat skewers the hunters fed them sit heavy in his stomach even though Gladio is pretty sure he's still hungry. Cor and Monica are at a table under an electric lantern back in the command square pouring over the ancient tome and three maps, smaller than the map they keep in the Armiger, but somehow infinitely more detailed. Their map had doodled landmarks all over it, a shit ton of erased roads that Iggy had drawn back on a bunch of times, a lot of coffee stains, and notes too. Tiny little
leaves where edible plants grew. Havens that were so far off the beaten path they weren't on the map. Little fish in blue pen at good fishing spots. Sure, it didn't start out all that useful, but by the time they had gone to Altissia that map was perfect. Now all its good for is stories. The plants are starting to rot, the fishing holes will dry up soon enough and like Cor said. They'd be leaving the roads. Making new maps, but no longer as a unit. No longer together. Allergies, damn.

These new maps are actual topography maps. There are tiny towns, waterways, and elevations marked with impressive sounding numbers. They don't cover as much area as the old map, like they're insets. One is Liede, but the southern mountains and surrounding beaches. Two is in two sections, the southernmost parts of Duscae and Cleigne, just as mountainous, but a lot more water there is civilization down there, but it's mostly just Caem and roads that cut through mountains. Plenty they never saw. The third map is the northern middle section above Duscae on their old one. Their map is still completely blank there except for the Lucinian Sea even farther north. This map is nearly as blank. That section of Lucis is wild, just as empty as the lands north of Ravatogh in it's own way. Hell, it doesn't even have a name. The only thing Gladio knows about it is that its supposed to be full of ruins.

All three little maps are covered in little red dots with numbers next to them. Monica is marking the dots, but Cor is painstakingly writing tiny coordinates in minuscule print in the corners. Gladio can't decide if this feeling is apprehension or excitement. They're literally going into the wilderness. Too bad the end of the world is going to make it singularly unpleasant.

“Please don't give me the desert. Please. I hate sand. So much.” Prompto holds up both of his hands and struggles to cross his fingers in them. Gladio's surprised he hasn't cut the fingers off of them yet. He got ones with mitts for the fingers just for that purpose so he could use his guns with them still on. Probably in case he needed an excuse to annoy Ignis more.

“Got some bad news for you then,” Cor says and he caps his pen and stands up. Leans on the table.

“Why?”

“You're long range and there's little in the way of bullets, magic or otherwise. There are some mountainous parts of this area of Leide, but they're old, old sand smoothed things. The other reason is because you're the smallest.”

“Yeah, that is a thing. And?”

“You'll need the least water. It won't be that much of a difference, but you're also going to have a
chocobo to take care of.”

“Really? I'm totally into that. Super into that. You have no idea.”

“Good. I hope you know how to use a compass. There's going to be nowhere to charge a phone, so you may as well not take them. You'll communicate through the Armiger. It will have to be cleaned out first, however.”

“A refresher course would be good. Like... super fresh.” Cor sighs.

“Gladiolus, you'll be spread out across here.” Cor turns the second map with the split sections around to face him. Gladio can't help but be a little disappointed he didn't get the wilds map.

“Why that one? Why not the other one?”

“You use a greatsword exclusively. Most of that area is dense forest, and not the kind you boys are accustomed to. Think the pine woods east of the Alstor Slough, but much more than that. There's even a large section of temperate rainforest. You wouldn't be able to fight effectively there at all. Ignis can. Not to mention that either you, Gladiolus, or Prompto would be more likely to break your necks trying to navigate there.”

“Yeah, but what about Cicero?” Cor's icy eyes actually go blank at the question. “His chocobo?”

“I'm sure... Cicero... will be just fine.”

“You really gonna take Cicero?” Ignis has been quiet. He's staring at that third map, face blank as printer paper.

Cicero was a fluke. Ignis' original chocobo, a timid creature ironically named Rascal, had run off one night when an Iron Giant swung at him. They couldn't find the bird afterwards, and it had never returned to Wiz's Chocobo Post. Ignis took it as stoically as he took anything those days, but they could all tell he was hurt. The bird was a terrible mount, but it liked him. Most animals ignored Ignis. Rascal loved him. Cicero is a black chocobo. Under normal circumstances, no one would dream of using a black bird as a mount, at least not nowadays when they're mostly only for racing. Too aggressive.
There had, however, been an incident involving fireflies, Sonia Yeager, a black chocobo, Ignis' glasses, and a treant in the Myrlwood. Ignis wouldn't put the chocobo's egg down. By the time they got to Wiz's Chocobo Post from that far, the chickobo had long since hatched and imprinted onto Ignis.

So, Cicero was kinda like his kid and his mount. He had only gotten big enough to ride in the last couple months, but Wiz had made it a point to train him well. Ignis loves the bird. No two ways about it.

“I have to. He's mine. How long will Wiz be able to care for the birds anyhow?”

“Good point. Not sure how we can do better, but good point still.”

“Time's wasting, boys. You'll take a truck to the post and leave the Regalia here in Lestallum. The tombs you're looking for are numbered in the order you should search for them.”

“Wait, how do we know like... how high up they are?”

“That's why these are topography maps. There are vertical coordinates for each tomb.”

“Oh, cool.”

“Monica, make sure Prompto can use a compass correctly. You two are going to fix that dumpster fire you call an Armiger.”

“Hey! That's our dumpster fire!”

“I agree with Blondie. It's fine.”

“I also concur, however, there must be some limit to it surely. We shouldn't waste the opportunity.”
“There most likely isn't. It just drives me crazy. You'll fix it for my sanity.”

“Why? You gonna put that in the Armiger?”

“Burned by the dumpster fire!”
“Boys, this is completely out of control.”

“You said the Armiger didn't have a limit. You said that. Why does it matter?”

“Can you honestly look at this and ask?”

“Boys, I'm sorry. This isn't normal.” Monica has a hand over her mouth, but her voice is clear.

The entire contents of the Armiger are spread out on the ground in front of them. And behind them. They cover nearly the entire surface of the open courtyard, barely any asphalt to be seen. Prompto feels sick.

“I knew it was bad. I just couldn’t tell how bad.” Gladio looks like he's been eating rocks, cringing and frowning so hard the scars that cross his face wrinkle and crease.

“Gladiolus, this isn't bad, this is beyond the pale.”

“His Highness liked to pick up things. Everything, really.” Ignis' chin is in his chest and Prompto is pretty sure he's looking at his boots, not the mess.
“All of you, quiet.” the Marshal has a hand bracketing his forehead, the other crossing his chest.

Maybe it wouldn't look so bad if some of this crap wasn't literal garbage. Prompto couldn't say. Noct always had a use for everything. Some of those things were scraps of loose metal and rusted drill bits.

“You know, some of these items are actually fairly valuable.” Alright, Dustin.

“That's completely beyond the point, Dustin.” Monica's hand is still over her mouth.

“I am not condoning this. Quite the opposite. Perhaps if the boys had thought to sell some of these instead of keeping them, these last months might have been quite a bit easier on them.” Traitor.

“What? This crap is worth money? Are you serious?” Gladio's gone a little pale. Ignis is trying to hide in his own coat. Prompto thinks he might just be numb.

“Not anymore it isn't. A few months, a year ago, certainly.” Monica nudges a discarded claw as long as her shinbone with the toe of her boot.

“How... How much money?” Is Gladio angry or what?

“Just that claw alone is worth thousands. Was, rather.”

“All this stuff... Noct used it to make spells. We were literally burning money.”

“This is my fault.” Ignis is breathing funny, but not crying. Not yet.

“How the fuck is it your fault?” Gladio is getting louder. Still pale. Shaking a little.

“It is my job to know things. If I had known...” He puts a fist up and pinches the bridge of his nose between his eyebrows, but really he's hiding.
“How the fuck is this your fault! How the fuck is this any of our fault! Why didn't anyone tell us?”

“All that was for nothing. All of it, wasn't it?”

“None of us thought you needed to be told not to hoard the damn Armiger!”

“Fuck you, Cor. Just... Fuck you.”

“Gladiolus, that's out of line.”

“No. No it really isn't. You spent months sitting on your ass in Caem. You don't get to stand there and treat us like stupid little kids. You don't get to stand there and act superior. Fuck. You.”

“Gladio, please. It doesn't matter anymore.” Yeah, Iggy's crying. Crap.

“It doesn't matter? How can you... All of that crap we went through while they played house? It doesn't matter? And now they wanna talk shit when we're about to do it all over again! They fucking knew! They knew we were struggling! They knew we were starving half the time! They knew! They didn't do shit, Iggy. They did nothing.” Gladio's hands are flying all over the place. Prompto imagines if he couldn't hear and didn't feel more than a little nauseous this would look funny.

The thing is, Gladio is right. For once, he's completely right. The fact that the older Crownsguard have gone quiet is telling.

“And now we get to go out again. We get to go out and kill ourselves for scraps. We have to... And all of this? All this fuckin' garbage?” His leg jerks and he kicks the dragon claw so hard it smacks into the trash barricade and leaves a dent. It isn't funny. Prompto's eyes burn. “That was two weeks worth of groceries, Iggy. Groceries we wouldn't have had to kill something to get. There are two more of those right here. See this? How much is this bullshit worth?” He's holding up a bar of some kind of metal. There are eight of them under the shield's boots, and several square ingots of what Prompto thinks is the same metal along the edge of the trash wall where the dragon claw fell.

“I... I don't know.” Monica sounds afraid. Prompto hates himself a bit for being okay with that.
“That's still valuable, technically.”

“How much, Dustin?”

“That are mythril. I don't know about those bars, but the ingots along the wall are perhaps twenty-thousand each.”

Gladio spends the next twenty minutes throwing and kicking things. Monica and Dustin beat a hasty retreat when the screaming starts. Ignis just sits in the middle of the chaos, legs folded underneath him. Prompto sits with him. Back to back, they hold each other up and let Gladio work out the anger and hurt for them. Cor stands in a corner and watches. Watches Gladio scream and curse and Ignis and Prompto sit with tears in their eyes.

It's some time later when he's worn himself out, hoarse and shuddering as his sweat dries in the cold, dry air. Ignis pulls on his pant leg and he falls to the asphalt with them. They scoot around until Gladio can lean back with them. They sit for a while, at least until the shield's breathing is normal again. No one speaks. Prompto's hands are cold, but he keeps them to himself.

Later, Monica brings them coffee. She doesn't try to apologize. She does coax them out of the hoard so they can help sort through the weapons and curatives. Prompto watches a line of several hunters move things out of the courtyard and take them... somewhere. He's too numb to care about it now.

“Why? Why can't we keep these?”

“Gladiolus, please. We will all be alone. These curatives would be far beyond what lone travelers would need.”

“That's not the point. We literally bled for this shit.”

“Yes. We have, yet holding onto them won't help anyone at all. I dislike it just as much as you.”
“Can we just like... Get rid of all of it? We really don't need most of this stuff.”

Gladio grunts. Ignis is still sorting, but moving slowly like he isn't really making progress. Prompto just wants to forget it all.

“I'm gonna go do the weapons. Lemmie know which ones you wanna keep and I'll set those aside.”

“The Spelldaggers, and one spear. Whichever among them is in the best condition.”

“Um... I dunno dude. They're not getting the machines though.”

“Cor wouldn't give away your machines, Prompto.” The bottles of magic clink together with a sound like Noct's crystal magic. It hurts.

“I dunno. They're giving away everything else.”

“Are we really hoarders? I'm not sure anymore.”

“Perhaps it just got away from us and we didn't realize.”

“Nah. We're fuckin' hoarders. Shit, I'm not sure if I'm more pissed about the money thing or that Cor is giving the crap to Meldacio. It's garbage to us now, but...”

“Maybe because its Noct's garbage.” None of them say anything. They all know it's a lie.

In the end, they give up almost everything. Prompto even gives up some of his machines. He won't be able to use them anyway. Too loud. Too flashy. When he gives up the auto-crossbow, Cor gives him a sniper rifle. He's too tired and sad to think about why he knows how to use it. He's too numb to care how Cor knows that he can.
The Armiger is gutted. Prompto can feel it in the back of his skull like a hole in his head. He wonders what space all of that stuff was supposed to fill.

It isn't empty, just different. Less. Gladio only kept two swords, the one he found in Balouve Mines and one katana Prompto can't remember ever seeing. Cor seemed to recognize it somehow. He only kept the Aegis Shield. How many can a guy possibly need? Ignis kept whatever Spelldaggers are. He wasn't going to keep any others, but Cor insisted he keep another pair. Prompto didn't know which. They all looked the same to him anyway. He knew the spear Ignis kept was from Steyliff Grove. Prompto kept two handguns just in case something went wrong with one. He called them Executioner and Death Penalty. Giving them names felt stupid and childish now. Even with everything they had been through, somehow it didn't seem real until it was spread all over the ground at Prompto's feet. He still felt more numb than anything. They had kept only one of Noct's broadswords. He had the royal arms and the Engine Blade anyway. He still had always liked Balmung though.

Other than the weapons, some potions and a few elixirs, and a fishing pole with several different lures and extra line, most of the rest was clothing, personal hygiene items, and chocobo fodder. Cor had put things like preserved food, bottled water, rope, batteries, and real first aid stuff in as well. All the kind of things a lone traveler on chocoboback might need. The last things they put in were his and Gladio's phones. Prompto turned his off. His was only in the Armiger for safe keeping. Gladio's was kept on. He deactivated all the locks and passcodes. It was for absolute emergencies. Well, if any of them were lucky enough to find a signal. Cor would keep it charged.

“Sir, perhaps this as well?” Monica holds out a notebook and a package of fresh pens. “So they can communicate through the Armiger.” Cor just takes it from her and pushes it in with all the other survival gear.

“You'll have to check with the proprietor of the chocobo post for spare tack or mount specific items. Actually tell him what you're doing. He'll get you whatever he thinks is best for the birds.”

“Right. Can we go now?” Gladio won't look at anyone, his gaze off to the side and near-shuttered with fatigue. Ignis has hardly lifted his chin from his chest for hours. Prompto still feels numb, but he's starting to feel numb about that too.

“Yes. Go. Sleep, eat, whatever you need to do. You'll be leaving tomorrow. The trucks are being outfitted with the same headlights installed on the Regalia, so you can drive straight through.”

“Tomorrow. How do you call it tomorrow when there's no damn sun?”
They don’t talk. Their assigned room is hardly more than a closet with a tiny bathroom really, but they’re used to less. There’s not even room for proper furniture or beds in it. Instead, there are two cheap but clean mattresses leaning against one boring white wall. Gladio drops them on the floor, and Ignis shoves them together to make one larger bed. Gladio grunts. They fall asleep in a dog pile, tangled together. Just this once. If they’re lucky then maybe all three of them will see this tiny room again. Prompto doesn’t believe in luck.

The next ‘morning’ when they drag themselves out of the room, Gladio looks exhausted and Ignis’ hair is flat and soft. It’s a bit too long and gets in his eyes, but he’s staring at his feet anyway. No point trying to keep up appearances now. The sky is still dark even though it’s nearly 1030. Its more green somehow all the time, a color that reminds him a bit too much like the water in Cresholm Channels.

Monica and Dustin aren’t around. Gladio has already said goodbye to Iris. Cor doesn’t look like he’s slept, but Prompto can’t really care about him right now. They choke down today’s mystery meat skewers (where the hell are the vegetables anyway) while Cor lectures.

“Keep the maps in the Armiger when you aren’t using them. Remember, if you get lost, we can’t help you. You’ll have to help yourselves. It’s dangerous, but there’s not enough daylight left anymore to bother with trying to travel in it. You three know how dangerous this is.”

“That it?”

“No. A couple more things. I wasn’t quite honest yesterday. About where you’re going and why.”

“Uh... Why not?”

“I meant to tell you separately, but that wasn’t fair. Gladiolus, the reason I’m sending you southwest is because you’re going to have to cover a lot of ground, some of it underground. I know you. You could run all day and ask for more. You’re most likely going to have to do some
spelunking, maybe even diving. Prompto is claustrophobic. Prompto, I lied. The area you're going to isn't actually desert, but there will be sand. There will be a lot of coastline to search. Ignis, I'm sending you north for several reasons. One, you never get cold. Everyone knows that. Two, if you get lost up there, I trust you're clever enough to get unlost. Three I already said. That area is very vertical. Its full of ravines, gullies, and trees as big around as houses. I'm trusting you not to break your own neck.”

“Is that it?”

“Not quite, bear with me. Gladio, your last couple locations will take you near Ravatogh. Do not go near the volcano. We have reports that seismic activity around that region has been higher than normal. You can still use it to navigate, just don't approach.”

“Got it.”

“Prompto, if you have to go north for any reason, which you should not, under no circumstances should you cross east of Hammerhead and into the Ostium Gorge. Absolutely, no circumstances. Understood?”

“Yup.”

“Ignis, you're probably not going to see many daemons, but you'll see more beasts and monsters than you're used to. Try to avoid unnecessary fights. That goes for all of you.”

“Of course.”

“One last thing. Whatever you do, do not eat or drink anything that didn't come out of the Armiger. That goes for your chocobos as well. That's it. Good luck, boys.”

“Seriously? I'm a mercenary. I get paid to do whatever you people need. Pay me in food or whatever. Who cares?”

“I'm startin' to believe they don't want us here, Lady A.”
“Lady, I don't care. You're not a hunter and you're not a glaive. You aren't getting in Lestallum.”

“I have an airship you dope. I'm trying to... You know what, forget it.”

“What the hell is she doin' here?”

“Oh hey. Fancy meeting you boys at the end of the world.” Aranea Highwind wearing actual clothes. Prompto can't even muster disappointment at the moment. He isn't sure if that's just a right now thing or a never again thing. Sigh.

“Aranea, you need access to the city?”

“City. Right. We've run out of crap and people to move around everywhere else. We figure we can do more good here than sitting on our asses playing cards.”

“You're just mad 'cuz you always lose.”

“Stuff it, Wedge.”

“She's not our enemy? Iggy?”

“No. Aranea is not our enemy.”

“If you say so.”

“We can arrange for your entourage to be granted access, however we would require a favor in exchange.”

“That's a trade, not a favor.” Aranea peers at Ignis. “What the hell happened to your face?”
“Hmm... I'm not exactly sure. Have we reached an accord?”

“Dinnit that bloke wear spectacles?”

“Maybe its the spectacles that done him in.”

“Whatever, sure. Deal. Move aside, doofus. What did you want then?”

“We need to get to Wiz's Chocobo Post. We had intended to drive, however we will be leaving on mounts. Would you be willing to take us in your ship instead?”

“That's all? Sure thing. What's your name again? I can't call you four-eyes if you don't wear glasses.”

“Ignis Scientia. We have met.”

“Yeah, alright Fireman. Lead the way.”

“Does she remember anyone's name? Like at all?”

“Not exactly. Lady A just makes up nicknames.”

“Are your names really Biggs and Wedge?”

“Course not. What kind of parents would do that?”

“Not the kind that would name their child after a flower, right Gladiolus?” Grunt.
Chapter End Notes

- Graphic depiction of hoarding and hoarding behaviors
- Very unflattering depiction of multiple characters, both Major and Minor
Chapter 11 - Bird Brains

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Daniel In the Den - Bastille

Turns out that they had nearly missed their chance. Biggs didn't even have to land the airship. Naturally, Gladio and Prompto had waited until they were much closer to the ground before jumping out of the open hatch. Now, Ignis stands at Cicero's shoulder and strokes his dark feathers. He watches the frantic activity still going on inside the post proper from where the three men stand in the middle of the gravel path that connects the dude ranch to the main road. Spotlights and flashlights flicker back and forth. Human shouts, chocobo calls, and the varied rumbles of different truck engines and clanking of livestock trailers ring out of the barely controlled chaos. Wiz is evacuating. He's not stubborn enough to try to defend the indefensible post. Behemoths are one thing. The end of the world is another.

Ignis had feared that they would be inconveniencing Wiz, but the man had been grateful. He had shoved fodder and supplies at them, more frantic than he had ever seen. It felt strange to put things into the Armiger now. The older man had given each of them the entirety of the tack for each chocobo, including extra saddlebags they didn't really need, saddle blankets, and a large, new can that had saddle soap printed on this side. Ignis wasn't clear on what that was, but he could guess. Wiz even had one of his ranch hands show them how to put strange pieces of armor onto the birds. He could only guess at why a dude ranch had chocobo armor. They are made of a mixture of thick leather and thin steel, all overlapping in rows of chainmail-like scales bound together with thick steel riveting and fitted around the birds' necks and lower legs. There are also three matching pieces of head armor. Ignis doesn't know whether he thinks they're more helmet or mask, but they more or less match the other pieces. He thinks perhaps he heard Wiz call one of the pieces a crinet, but he has no idea which one. He does know that chocobo armor is called barding collectively. None of that matters, the information useless so long as the armor does any good at all.

Gladio and Prompto stand near, the shield's arms over his chest and his chocobo silent and stoic next to him. His bird is huge and bright orange. He calls her Strelitzia, Strel for short. Ignis doesn't know what that means. She is just as large and imposing as Gladio himself, yet has the opposite temperament. Where he is all fierce determination and prone to anger, she is preternaturally calm and collected at all times. Both of them are loyal to the bone. Also, stubborn.

Prompto's bird is a deep gray, small and fast. His name is Bullet. Prompto and Bullet are exactly
as alike as Gladio and Strel are different. The creature is excitable and very affectionate. The thought
gives Ignis a feeling he can only describe as fondness. He isn't sure what to do with it, so he lets it
lie.

Cicero is Ignis' bird. He wishes he could say for certain exactly what the black chocobo's
temperament is, but unfortunately had much less time with him than the others. He's still very young,
but strong and healthy, already a touch bigger than Bullet. Wiz assured Ignis that he had been well
trained. He can't help but be happy the bird hasn't rejected him. He knows that Cicero imprinted onto
him in the absence of his mother. He knows that the bird's death was his fault. So, too was the death
of his last chocobo, Rascal. Animals Ignis interacted with had a tendency to come to unfortunate
ends. He can't help but think that so will Cicero. The bird turns his neck, lowers his head, and butts it
into Ignis' chest. Rubs his beak against him gently. Ignis isn't sure what that means, but he's grateful
all the same. He scratches at the tiny, silken feathers above his beak in thanks.

“So, we're wastin' time. Should start moving.” Gladio turns his back on the activity at the post
toward the other two men. Strel doesn't twitch a feather.

“I'll miss you guys.” Prompto isn't crying, but his violet eyes are wet and glossy. Bullet is nibbling
gently at the blonde hair sticking out the side of the gunner's beanie.

Either of you.” The expression falls off and his face is blank. The look in his eyes, dark in the night,
is unreadable now.

“We can still communicate with the notebook. It's not as if there's no way for us to reach each
other.”

“I dunno, buddy. I kinda think it would be easier if we didn't.” Ignis feels his brows lower and his
lips curve down and he's surprised that Prompto's words hurt. He isn't wrong, but that doesn't make it
better.

“Its alright, Blondie. We'll all be back in Lestallum soon enough.”

“Sorry, Ignis. I just... This sucks. It's kinda easier to like... ignore things.”

“I understand.” And he does, all too well.
He's two miles down the road, Cicero following the highway north at a steady clip, before the shaking stops and the tears start. The bird doesn't stop, but his pace slows just enough for him to chirp softly and steadily at Ignis as he cries into the chocobo's dark feathers.

Ignis isn't even sure why he's upset. Maybe its that he might never see his friends again. Maybe he might die, or they might. He knows he has good reason to be upset. Perhaps its the dread heavy in his guts or the terror in his throat. Maybe the vice around his ribs. At least letting himself feel something outwardly about it keeps his mind from crafting up ever more horrifying scenarios of things that could go wrong.

Everything is already wrong. Ignis isn't sure how much more wrong things can get.

Usually, these thoughts are unreasonable, and he knows that. He can mentally work himself down from whatever anxious heights he's climbed through logic and reason. Now, logic and reason dictate that the spiral of doom is a perfectly acceptable concern. In a few hours, the road will run out, and Ignis will have to pull his map out of the Armiger and start the second certain suicide mission he's ever been on. Until he reaches the Coernix station along the highway north of Alstor Slough, he's free to let Cicero lead. He will have to stop at Digythe Haven. It's a bit off the road, but the ethereal blue glow of a haven is easier to find at night, and he can't possibly miss the highway on the way further north.

The thud of Cicero's huge clawed feet on the pavement and deep breaths are the only sound to be heard. The air is dead still. No other creatures around. Ignis doesn't believe they're all dead, not yet. Perhaps instinctively hiding in hopes the light and heat return. No chance of that, at least not anytime soon. Its too quiet. Ignis hums to himself softly. Cicero chirps in melody. Ignis smiles at the crest of feathers bouncing at the top of the chocobo's head. Who knew a bird could have an appreciation for music? He chuckles, and starts his artless humming again when Cicero lets out a questioning wark.

Digythe Haven is surrounded by rotting vegetation. The ground around the platform is slick with it and Cicero warks unhappily when it squelches between his claws. When he hops onto the rock of the haven, he lifts each leg in turn and flicks the filth out into the darkness. Then he lets Ignis dismount. He tries not to breathe too deeply as he loosens the leather straps of Cicero's saddle. The slough is miles away, but even from here reeks. It didn't smell like perfume and roses before. They can hardly expect it to smell better now. Ignis wonders if the catoblepas that waded through the area are still alive. He has doubts. He can still hear insects, and can only hope they aren't the kind that
might like to eat him. Cicero ruffles his feathers and sits, legs under him and nips at Ignis' coat sleeve until he settles himself against the bird. Then the creature wraps his neck around and lays his head in Ignis' lap. Alright, then. At least the bird knows what he wants. Ignis idly scratches above Cicero's beak until he falls into a fitful sleep.

Alstor Station is abandoned and quiet. Ignis is fairly certain it's supposed to be daylight right now, but the sun through the green haze looks more like the moon now. It's only just bright enough to turn his flashlight and Cicero's lantern off. When Ignis pulls a fire extinguisher off the mount on the side of the Kenny Crow's diner and throws it through the window, Cicero warks at him deep and disapproving. Ignis chooses to ignore the bird's judgement. His attempt at looting and pillaging isn't successful at the diner. The Coernix shop is more lucrative. He stashes the several cans of Ebony in Cicero's saddlebags, bird grumbling the whole time at his petty larceny, instead of the Armiger. Prompto can't confiscate what he can't find. At least, that's what Ignis decides to tell himself. The coffee will have to be for special occasions. He won't be finding more. Ignis swipes a couple bags of potato chips and a couple gysahl chip bags. He leans against the wall of the diner with Cicero and feeds him a gysahl chip for every one of his potato chips. They're delicious after nothing but meat skewers for days. Cicero warbles at him when he cracks a can of coffee. So much for special occasions.

There is a pair of eyes reflecting the light from Cicero's lantern roughly 30 feet away in a stand of trees. The eyes haven't moved for several minutes. Ignis isn't concerned. Whatever beast it is isn't confident enough or hungry enough to attack a chocobo. Said chocobo is staring daggers into the dark shadows of the bare trees. Somehow there's still enough light for shadows, but the wind is as dead as its been for days now, and the shadows are still as stone across the dry, crumbling grass. It would be creepy, but Ignis is already getting used to that. He examines his map. There's supposed to be a way up the escarpment, but it's difficult to find in the darkness. They've been back and forth across quite a ways trying to find it.

There's a telltale howl and yelp, and Ignis wants to roll his eyes. Of course it's a damn voretooth. Should be called vermintooth. He hops off Cicero, summons a dagger and tosses it in the air, turns and kicks. The dagger just misses the voretooth's right eye, and bounces off its tusk before despawning. Damn. More cackling howls.

Cicero warks and hisses when one of the hounds makes the unfortunate choice to go for the chocobo instead of the human. One raking kick and the beast's skull caves with a loud crack. Ignis smirks as he summons his weapon. Flayer is its name, and flay it shall.
There are three hounds attempting to surround them now, but they aren’t terribly bright animals. The first one to attack tries to bite at Cicero’s leg. Instead, it winds up with a huge clawed foot crushing its ribcage. Two down. Time to duck. That one leaps clean over Ignis’ head and into its hunting partner and they crash together in a tangle of limbs, tusks, and rage. The one that made the leap really is particularly stupid and crunches the other’s foreleg between its jaws. Ignis chuckles, but then his blood runs cold and he feels it drain from his face.

The sound behind him is remarkably like an electrical transformer. There’s an angry wark and Cicero ducks his head and slams into Ignis hard enough to flip him over the chocobo’s back. There are giant, dark feathers in his face, and he can’t see anything except the blinding flash of electrical discharge that had to have gone off right where he had been standing. He barely has the presence of mind to dismiss his poleaxe. There is the stink of charred flesh and a strangled animal scream as the voretooth hounds meet their deaths. Cicero is ramping up into a gallop, and its all Ignis can do at the moment to hang on.

This is very far north for a coeurl to hunt.

There is a feline snarl and Ignis is certain the cat isn’t interested in the hounds. He’s hunting bigger game. Game such as one human and one chocobo. Cicero has reached a full gallop now, and Ignis takes the opportunity to flip around and get his ass in the saddle where it belongs. He dares to take a glance behind. He regrets it. The coeurl is right at Cicero’s tailfeathers. When the giant cat leaps, Ignis feels more than sees the chocobo lift one wing into the air and extend the other straight down.

The cat goes right past them as Cicero’s body somehow turns an almost instant eighty degree turn. The coeurl screams it’s displeasure, but momentum takes it quite a distance before it can turn and resume the chase. Cicero somehow hasn’t slowed a tick and in seconds is not only well past where the cat can likely catch up again, but up the escarpment before Ignis realizes that the bird has found a navigable way up. He comes to a stop at the top of the overlook, and Ignis can see the coeurl growl and hiss it’s distress and failure. The cats are incredible apex predators, but more evolved for speed and their electrical capabilities than vertical leaping or climbing. There comes a mournful yowling as the beast realizes it will go hungry. There were more hounds left behind during the chase, and the cat knows as well as Ignis does that they have no qualms about feasting on each other and just one hound can strip a corpse that size in minutes.

Ignis can’t help but laugh at it all. He’s reasonably certain that Cicero is smarter than he is. The bird warks softly at him as he catches his breath and Ignis laughs harder. Now he’s absolutely certain the bird thinks he’s stupid. The chocobo is nibbling at him over his shoulder looking for injuries, and warks again when there are none to be found. Both of them are hale and whole as they can possibly be, no thanks to Ignis. He laughs for a good while when he realizes he is perfectly okay with that.
The first tomb on Ignis' map should be here. Right here. They aren't ten miles off the escarpment, and not even reached the deep forest yet, and Ignis is already confused. He stares at the map, then stares around into the dark and sees... Nothing of note. Cicero is trying to preen himself around his saddle. Perhaps they should take a break once he finds the damn tomb. Ignis checks and double checks and feels slower and more lost every time. He's absolutely sure the tomb should be right here. It's a good twenty minutes before Cicero gives up on him and shoves him off the grassy mound they're standing on. He nearly lands on his ass (graceful, really) but catches himself at the last instant. The tomb is right here. It's the mound. The mound is the tomb. Ugh.

Ignis can't help but feel excitement and apprehension when he pulls the tombkeep's key from the Armiger in a tiny flourish of light. He has to step back at the dank, ancient air that emerges when he pushes the door open. He hesitates. Cicero has to bump him between the shoulders with his beak before he can bring himself to go in. He's afraid, but what of Ignis can't say.

The tomb looks the same as any other, the same statuary and the same pale stone. The same face on the bronze king holding a weapon. The item definitely is a royal arm with similar embellishments as all the others and made of adamantine just the same. Ignis can't help but be underwhelmed. It's just a longstaff. The weapon is so simple compared to his expectation despite being so obviously a royal arm that Ignis feels something like defeat as he stares down the front of his coat at it. He wasn't expecting any particular weapon, however...

These arms are the only thing they have to go on. The only idea they could come up with that might have any hope at all of saving Noct. Ignis doesn't know what they're going to do with them, or even how more damn weapons can possibly help especially since they hurt Noctis to use them. Well, not always. The weapons don't hurt him when he summons the entire set in a burst of magic and furious activity. That fact is the only thing they have to go on. With every royal arm Noctis added to his arsenal, that mass-summoning became stronger. He could keep the spell going longer, and moved faster, the four men had even worked out a way to incorporate all of them into the attack. Normally, the royal arms were little more than metal bludgeons in the hands of someone not of royal Lucian blood. During the summoning, however, the arms were just as powerful, just as magical, and just as incredible as they were in Noctis' grip. Now that he thought on it, the feeling was remarkably like...

Ignis shakes his head. Smothers the notion in an avalanche of swift and savage self-admonishment. Those are dangerous waters Ignis has no desire to tread. Best keep his head above water by not jumping in to begin with.

He has to wrench the damned thing off the bronze effigy. Cicero has followed him inside and waits patiently for Ignis to attend his tack. He sighs and throws the hand holding the longstaff out to
push it into the Armiger. Ignis can't breathe for the horror that overtakes him.

The royal arm will not go into the Armiger.

Chapter End Notes

- Non-graphic description of racing thoughts associated with anxiety
“Cor, we got a problem.”

“Are you injured? What's the emergency?”

“What, no. Nothin' like that. The weapons wont go into the Armiger.”

“You mean the royal arms? Are you certain?”

“Yeah. I thought maybe it was a fluke, so I just went to the next one. Neither one of ’em will go in there.” Strel shifts and makes a quick sideways motion with her head. Gladio hears her neck crack.

“So then none of the arms will go. Nothing to be done, sorry Gladiolus. Where are you?”

“Near Taelpar Rest Area. I can leave these two here and keep going. Leave the next couple in Caem too.”

“That's not a good idea. Didn't one of the arms his Highness already has get stolen? I remember the hunters reporting the tomb around Costlemark having the weapon missing.”
“Yeah. Greatsword. Damn daemons took it into Costlemark. Fuckin’ hate that place.”

“Then at the very least don't leave them until you pass Caem, and only if you're absolutely sure no one will find them. If the power is still on when you get there, don't use the elevator in the lighthouse. We're getting reports of transformers and power stations getting attacked.”

“Power stations? What for? Who would attack them?”

“Not who, Gladiolus. What. Daemons. They're attracted to the electricity as far as Exineris knows.”

“Alright, fine. What about Prompto and Iggy though? What are they gonna do?”

“That's up to them. I might hear from Prompto at some point, but word from Ignis won't be by cell phone. Likely Ignis already knows the arms can't go in the Armiger. Prompto shouldn't have even reached the first tomb yet. It's only been four days.”

“Right. I got nothin' else. Later, Cor.”

“Stay safe, Gladiolus.”

Gladio sighs. There are two royal arms lying on the rock in front of him. A very small mace looking thing that he's not sure is actually a mace, and a rapier. They're not overly large or heavy, just cumbersome. Royal arms don't come with sheaths. He's sure either he or Strel is going to wind up bloody from the stupid things, and wouldn't that just bring the daemons out of the woodwork?

He's been lucky so far. There's hardly anything alive up in the mountains above the Daurell area. He hasn't seen anything bigger than a rabbit since he left Oathe Haven. He didn't stay long. Even a few miles away, Costlemark Tower is creepy. Everything is creepy now.

“Strel, what are you doin'? Don't drink that, girl.” She picks up her head from the pond and just looks at him. Like its his fault. Probably is.
Under the overhang of a giant rock is a terrible shelter under normal circumstances, but these aren't normal circumstances and Gladio is itching for a fight. Also, his ass hurts. He's gone a long way in only four days. Gladio's not about to risk saddle sores running Strel ragged. He puts out fodder and bottled water in the feed trays that Wiz gave them and leaves the big orange bird to her own devices. She doesn't move around really, just sways back and forth while she eats and then goes right to sleep as soon as she's done. Nothing to worry about. Sometimes he wishes she were more energetic like Bullet, but he wouldn't trade her for anything. She's kinda boring though.

That's really the worst part of this whole adventure so far. It's damn boring. Hours and hours of mind numbing, ass numbing, miles and miles. Plus its pretty much totally dark now. Gladio can sometimes see either the sun or the moon through the sick green haze, but there's nothing right now but darkness. He's kind of starting to get used to it a bit. During the brighter hours, he's started turning off his and Strel's lights.

Gladio sits up fast enough to catch vertigo and huffs out frightened breaths. He didn't mean to fall asleep. Strel is still snoozing away, completely unaffected. He rubs a hand over his face, decides he can do better and wets a cloth, and gives himself an extremely cursory spit bath complete with cursing at the cold, the towel, the water, and his beard. It's getting annoying already. He hadn't thought to trim it before they left Lestallum. Stupid.

He's not sure if he or the chocobo stinks worse.

Two more days and both Gladio and Strel have about had it. He's starting to think maybe he's not doing something right. He's exhausted, but falling asleep is so risky. Strel is irritated and testy. It isn't like her. She actually grumbled at him when he got in the saddle last. If they can just make Caem, then a couple days to recover is fine. They should get there soon enough.

He's found two more tombs, but only one weapon. The royal arm for the first he found had been missing, the entire tomb caved in. Gladio didn't really want to know what could do that. There was no evidence of an explosion, no rockslide, just a tomb with the whole roof busted in. The mace looking thing, rapier, and now some actual nunchucks are all bundled together inside a towel tied to one side of his bird's saddle.
Strel's big feet plod along in a trot down the highway. They've been following it for a while with no sign of any cars, but this route was always sparsely traveled. Gladio has to fight to keep his eyes open. Between the cold and the quiet, everything seems almost smothered. Too still and silent. Dead maybe, he didn't know. The trees along the sides of the highway are completely bare of leaves, what used to be a landscape covered in green is now a panorama of skeletons. Creepy shit.

Strel stops so fast Gladio falls forward onto her neck. She rocks back to compensate and warbles.

“What? We gotta go through the tunnel girl. That's the only way through.” She's cooing now. That's bad. Something really not good is in the tunnel. That tunnel is long. Really long. Gladio is asleep in the saddle and everything hurts, and Strel is probably worse but has more willpower than the shield does. If she were well rested then he might risk running straight through. She's not, and that's his own fault. He knows from the map that they've been keeping too quick a pace. Either that, or Gladio hasn't let them rest anywhere near enough. It's been six days since the chocobo post. According to the map he shouldn't be beyond Taelpar yet. Shit.

Either they turn around, risk running through the tunnel, or Gladio has to fight. There's nowhere else to go from here. Forwards or backwards.

“Strel, big girl. I'm so fuckin' sorry.” Warble. “I'm gonna have to turn this thing around. We gotta go back.” He pulls her reins to one side and she plants her feet and pulls back. What now? She doesn't want to turn around, but she doesn't want to go in? Which is it? He slides off her saddle and grunts at the pain in his knees and back. He really has fucked up.

Pulling on the reins does nothing, but Strel starts plodding slowly toward the tunnel. In his confusion, Gladio lets go and limps after her. The tunnel is still lit inside. Why the hesitation then? She just keeps plodding, so Gladio keeps walking. After a bit, the chocobo picks up the pace a bit, just enough for Gladio to jog. He feels like an idiot. She's making him run to stay awake. It hurts, but serves him right anyway. She should make him carry his own ass. Gladio can't help but feel like there's something in here, but this tunnel is just miles and miles of lights and concrete. There's nothing.

After a while, Gladio is falling asleep on his own feet instead of Strel's saddle. Now they can't go back or forward. He just stops and stands in the middle of the lanes. The chocobo only goes maybe three more paces and then she stops as well. There's some kind of maintenance access door built into the wall of the tunnel. He's not sure Strel will fit in there, but it's better than trying to sleep in the middle of the road. There are no emergency lanes.

It takes Gladio several minutes, a lot of cursing, prying, grunting, and trying to figure out how to turn on Prompto's Drillbreaker before he realizes the door isn't locked, he's just turning the handle the wrong damn way. He needs sleep. When he opens the door, Strel squeezes past him and into the low
maintenance hallway. Both of them have to duck to fit in here, but it's not the middle of the road and there's a door. It's the safest Gladio's felt all week. He wants to collapse, but not taking proper care of Strel at this point would be an even bigger screw up than before. When her tack is all in a pile near the door and she's been fed and watered, she sits and preens her feathers. He chokes down some kind of protein bar that insists it tastes like chocolate. It does not. A lot her feathers are broken where the saddle was. By the time she's done, there are little pieces of broken feathers all over and wedged between the cables built into the floor. Gladio feels like an even bigger bag o' dicks.

When Gladio wakes up, he has no doubt in his mind that he's made the stupidest mistake of his life. The lights are still on, he and Strel are rested, but he's in so much pain he can barely pick himself up off the concrete. His knees ache and throb and his back feels like there's an icepick in his spine. She doesn't seem like she feels great either, but more tired and listless than in pain. He doesn't want to do it, but unless he wants to hide in this tunnel until Noct falls out of the Crystal, he's going to have to use a potion or two. No more than two though. One for Strel, and one for him. There are only ten in the Armiger now. He'll have to beg Cor to replace them once he can use his phone again.

When he pulls them out of the Armiger, he's stunned at how easy it was. No fishing for the right thing, grabbing something the same color, category, or general shape but not the right thing. He barely had to think about it at all. He cracks one over Strel, and then one for himself. It will have to do. He's moving, but feels like he aged forty years overnight. They squeeze back out the door, and leave behind nothing but broken orange feathers and the wrapper from a protein bar. Gladio doesn't ride, he limps along on his own two feet and Strel plods along beside him.

Gladio is starting to wonder if this damn tunnel ever ends. They'd driven through it at least a couple dozen times, and maybe he had a habit of zoning out or reading in the car, but he doesn't remember it being this long. He knows the car is a lot faster than a chocobo, and definitely faster than his own big feet, and he's dreading having to get back in that saddle. The worst part is that he knows another potion would just be a colossal waste. They can only do so much, and work best when used quickly after an injury. Its why he and Ignis both have scars all over their faces. Its why the potion won't work right now either. If he had used it before he slept it might have been fine. Bearable.

This is going to be torture.

He reaches for Strel's reins and just holds them. Stands and breathes for a minute. Looks into her feathered face, and she stares back.
“I'm so fuckin' stupid. I can't do anything right without those other idiots around, can I girl?” She just stares serenely at him. He can't blame anything on allergies in the middle of a mountain and with all the damn plants dead. His stupid ham fist is shaking around the strips of leather. “Why do I have to always make shit worse? The harder I try...” Strel stretches her neck out and nibbles at his greasy hair. Presses her beak to his forehead. He swallows hard, and his eyes burn.

The lights above their heads flicker. They're out of time.

Gladio barely manages to flick on her lantern and his flashlight before the lights are flickering again. He swallows down the fear, but the tunnel goes dark for a five-count and then the lights come back up dimmer and dull. Brownout.

He pulls down on Strel's reins until she crouches and he still can barely lift his leg high enough to get it over her back. When his sits down in the saddle he doesn't scream, not exactly. When she starts moving he does. He cries and begs for her to stop even when the lights sputter out their final death. He screams through teeth gritted so hard they squeak. He can't breathe it hurts so bad and he can't get enough air around the sobbing and the tears.

Strel doesn't stop. She races through the depths of the mountain, sure and steady even as Gladio curses and begs, even when his hands grip so hard into her feathers he's sure they'll come out. She gallops unerringly even when the horrible low drone and crash of metal on metal heralds the red giant climbing out of the road in front of them. Strel runs and Gladio cries.

She doesn't stop until she's carried him all the way to Caem. Then the chocobo collapses. Forward, so she doesn't crush Gladio. She heaves and pants and froths at the corners of her beak. She shudders and her breath is wrong, wrong. All wrong. Gladio is too hoarse to scream anymore and he falls out of the saddle at her side. He can't pull the potions out of the Armiger fast enough. He cracks one, two over Strel but it doesn't change anything, it doesn't. Gladio's brain is slow and dull. He's broken another one before he realizes the potions are trying to heal him, not the bird.

“Why? Why doesn't it...” It hurts to talk, but he can't stop the words. “Please.. Please, no. I'm so fuckin' stupid, please!” There's blood at her nostrils and in the spittle from her beak. “No...”

There's nothing for it now. He can't fix this. He pulls his phone from the Armiger.
“Cor... pick up. Please. Please.” Nothing. He calls again. “C'mon, dammit.” Again.

“This is Cor.”

“Cor. I fucked up. I fucked...”

“Gladiolus. Where are you?”

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“Where are you? Gladio.”

“I've killed her. I've killed her, Cor... Help me. Please.”

“Your chocobo? She's dead?” Gladio chokes at that, cries harder. “Is she dead?”

“Not. Not yet. I killed her. I'm so stupid.”

“What's wrong with her?”

“She's not... She can't breathe? There's blood. What do I do?”

“Gladio, is she actually not breathing?”

“There's blood. It sounds so bad. Cor, please.”

“I'm putting two elixirs in the Armiger. Use one on the bird and one on yourself. Don't hang up.”
The instant the curatives are there, Gladio rips them back out of the Armiger. He cracks one over Strel and waits, and waits. It does... something. She still sounds horrible, breaths wheezing and chest heaving, but still better. Only then does he crack the second elixir for himself. Immediately he feels something in his lower spine pop hard and the relief from both elixirs makes him crumple.

“Gladio.” The tinny speaker of the smartphone is barely audible from the ground where he dropped it. The screen didn't crack.

“Yeah. I'm here.” He's not done crying yet. Probably won't be for a while. Its fine.

“Where are you?”

“Caem.”

“Is there still power there?”

“Uh.. Yeah. There is.”

“I'm on my way. Stay put.”

“What? Why?”

“I'm sorry, Gladio. I can't tell you how... Nevermind. Get inside and stay put.”

“What about Strel?”

“If she can stand, she can walk. Get her in the house too. Stay there.”
Gladio has to drag her into the house. He hates himself with every inch. He turns on every light in the house, and collapses against Strel and listens to her breathe.

Chapter End Notes

- Animal character neglect by a Major Character
- Unspecified non-mortal injury of Major Character
- Major Character mentally/verbally berating himself repeatedly
- Graphic description of severe pain by Major Character
- Graphic depiction of major, non-mortal injury of an animal character
Chapter 13 - Redneck Engineering

Chapter Notes

No Chapter Specific Warnings.

A bit shorter than the chapters have been, but that's the format causing that. Hopefully I can keep them fairly consistent.

Optional Listening: 19-2000 - Gorillaz

“You have got to be kidding me.”

There's the tomb, there's the effigy, the statues, everything. Everything but the royal arm. Prompto turns in circles around the room, shines his flashlight around and around, even drops to his knees and checks to make sure there are no gaps in the construction. There are not. There's no weapon here.

Prompto sits and leans against the giant marble coffer and tries not to be pissed. A whole week of this for nothing. Seven whole days, nights, whatever with a sore butt and nothing at all to show for it. At least the tomb is a good place to camp. He scratches at his hair through his beanie and sighs as he stands again. He's exhausted already. He hadn't really gotten into any fights. Not exactly. His sniper rifle had a night-vision scope on it. Why not take potshots at reapertails and sabertusks from a few hundred yards? Technical superiority is Prompto's thing.

When he tries to lead Bullet into the tomb, the chocobo plants his claws into the ground and might as well be a tree for as much as Prompto can move him. The bird whistles and warbles playfully at him, raising and lowering the feathers of his gray crest behind his leather faceguard.

“This isn't a game. Stupid bird. C'mon.” Prompto barely manages to stop himself from getting a mouthful of dirt when Bullet pulls back on the reins. He gives up after ten more minutes of tug of war and lures the chocobo inside the tomb with a handful of sweet feed Wiz gave them back at the post. Hopefully the bird has enough sense to not try to leave. The door to the tomb had been smashed in at some point, one door hanging listless from a hinge, the other flat on the marble floor. Prompto has no guesses as to why.

He takes the opportunity to rest properly. He and Bullet hadn't found anywhere safe since Verinaugh Haven. Since then, it had been nothing but open highland with the occasional recreational
sniping as he followed the impossibly high cliff edge north toward the tomb where he now sat. The bird didn't stay inside the tomb, instead choosing to wallow in the loose, sandy dirt outside. Bird bath.

Another day and another empty tomb later, Prompto is starting to think the Six are out to get him. This tomb was nearly hidden under the outcropping it had been built into, but the door isn't smashed in. The gunner ignores Bullet pecking at a shiny boulder and approaches the door. Pulls the tombkeep's key out of the Armiger. Unlocks the door and pushes it open while the key winks out of existence in a flash of blue sparks. Holds his breath.

“Oh, c'mon! What the hell is that thing!”

There is a weapon there. Sort of. The thing between the bronze hands of the prone statue could hurt something, in theory anyway. Prompto shakes his head while he examines the tiny, thin dagger no longer than his own forearm pommel to pointy end. It's a stiletto. Prompto grumbles to himself as he yanks the thing off the coffer. Stupidest royal arm ever. Letter openers aren't intimidating. They're not even particularly sharp.

It doesn't go into the Armiger, but Prompto half-expected that. All the other royal arms had turned to magic when Noct touched them, then were in there in a way the others couldn't reach. They were only physical in Noctis' hands or during what he called the Armiger Chain. The only arm they can pull out without Noctis is the Engine Blade, but why is a bit of a mystery. Its the prince's royal arm, but doesn't have the power inherent in the other weapons. Prompto doesn't want to think about what that means for Noctis.

There's nothing else to do but think. Once he'd finally gotten the hang of this compass thing, navigation is hardly difficult when there's nothing in the way to hang you up. He couldn't get lost if he tried. Prompto's thoughts run away with him while he takes care of Bullet, the bird nibbling at his straw-colored hair. Noctis had always had trouble with crystal magic. He could warp and phase just fine, but it took a lot out of him for a really long time. He'd gotten better, more resilient, as their journey progressed, but none of them could pinpoint why. The only thing they were sure about is that King Regis' death alone made no difference. They had needed a newspaper to find out Insomnia had been invaded at all. But... Noct had trained for years to use crystal magic. He had gotten particularly creative with magic flasks, but his dad hadn't needed anything like that. The king could summon magic with nothing but thoughts and put up a shield fast enough to stop bullets. The prince couldn't shield at all, and his attempts at elemental spells weren't even passable for a Kingsglaive.

They all knew it had something to do with the daemon attack when he was still a kid. Well,
speculated. Nobody had any other explanation. Still, his warping and phasing took less out of him the more royal arms he collected. It was the only thing they had to go on.

Prompto could only hope the next weapon was something epic. Big and flashy means more power in video games, so why not with the royal arms? Not like the stupid sewing needle that fit inside Bullet's saddlebags.

“This is bullshit.” Bullet warbles and chews on his reins.

He had spoken too soon. Careful what you wish for and all. Prompto doesn't have any kind of name to give the thing. He can't even be sure what it is, seeing as how it's in pieces. Just to make sure it really is a royal arm, he picks up a random piece and tries to shove it into the Armiger. No dice.

So, it is a royal arm, and what it is probably doesn't matter so much as the fact that it's huge. Like hilariously huge. Cartoonishly huge. Video game huge. If he didn't know better, and he doesn't really, Prompto would say the pieces looked like some kind of disassembled siege engine. What kind of Lucian king would have a siege engine as a royal arm?

He can't just leave it here. If the bigger weapons really are stronger, then this is probably the strongest one out of all of them. He can't just use this tomb as a base of operations either. Not because it's not possible, but more like he only knows how to follow Monica and Cor's instructions not how to chart his own course. He would have to retrace his path over a couple hundred miles at least once. Plus, the last two tombs on his route took them below the cliffs and onto the beaches. There was only one place it was safe according to the map, and even then it was a route that only went one way. There didn't seem to be any way to get it out of here. Crap. May as well sleep on it.

Prompto wakes to Bullet's whistling snores in his ear. His hair and skin are damp where the chocobo breathed on him. Gross. He lets Bullet sleep in while he sits on a near crumbling wooden beam and does the best he can to wash himself in the dark and cold and with bottled water. He's not sure he smells better, but he does feel better. The ancient wooden boards and beams give a hollow rattle against each other and the stone beneath them when he stands. Wait.
All the other royal arms are entirely metal even when that makes no sense. Why would only one have wood? Before, he had tried to put a long, curving piece of metal into the Armiger. This time he fishes around in the stack for a short, thin, flat piece of wood. The flash of blue light when it goes in the Armiger lights up the wide smile on Prompto's face. He pulls it back out and decides to try something ambitious. He puts a hand on the thick beam he had been sitting on and squeezes his eyes shut.

The sensation of weight in the back of his skull makes him shout in victory. Bullet startles awake and immediately runs into the nearest wall.

It takes him a while and liberal use of machine weapons and rope, but he's proud of his work. Bullet now has a perfectly workable sled harness with as close an approximation of a sled as he can possibly make with the parts of the siege engine. Getting rid of the wood he didn't need for the sled itself made the task perfectly manageable. He had double-checked every piece, of course. Prompto has exactly no desire to ever come back here. The two wide, curving pieces of metal that make up the sled runners are nearly the perfect shape. The gunner might actually have lucked out. Instead of being hobbled by the weapons, he can use one to carry the others. He wants to whistle a bit, but there's some suspicious light off in the distance.

The gunner summons his rifle, turns on the scope, and brings it to his shoulder. Daemons. Bombs specifically. He nearly forgets to turn off the night-vision scope before dismissing the weapon. This is bad. Daemons usually didn't just loiter. They popped out of nowhere or climbed up out of the ground. The four friends had found out through trial and error that daemons that spawned didn't even hang out when there was nothing to do normally. If they left the area where the daemons were, after a while the daemons would disappear. These just milled about the highland setting fires in the tall, dry, dead kindling that only used to be grass. Aw hells.

Prompto jumps onto Bullet's saddle and stays far, far away from anything that looks like flames in the night.

Everything is going relatively well. Prompto is well aware Cor gave him the easy route, and he is really not complaining. Gladio can have the caves. Ignis can have the trees. There's only one thing that Prompto envies them for.

Bullet is fucking stupid.
When the other chocobos were around, it wasn't so bad. Bullet was perfectly happy to follow the more intelligent birds and since he didn't like being alone wouldn't wander off. He wasn't smart enough to be scared of anything, so he'd never panicked either. Before, he hadn't really had any complaints. He did love chocobos after all. He really does love this bird.

Right now, though, Prompto wants to strangle him.

“Dude. C'mon. There's nothing there. I don't want to die. Let's go.” Bullet makes no indication that he's heard at all. He continues cooing and chirping into the dry, dead bushes with their brown leaves barely hanging on. Prompto knows there's no pulling the chocobo away from something until he's worked through whatever caught his interest. May as well wait it out. Prompto huffs into his bangs and sits with his knees folded under him and leans his head on his hands. Watches the brushfires in the distance for a while. After a minute, he feels a giant beak yank the hood of his coat and he falls over backwards into the dirt.

“What gives?”

Upside down, Prompto can't really tell what he's looking at. Whatever it is, it must be special because it's the only green thing other than the sky that he's seen since they started this trip. He rolls over and the picture becomes much more clear.

It's a cactuar, except its the tiniest, saddest, most miserable creature Prompto's ever seen. It waddles out from the shadow of the bushes and Prompto hasn't had more trouble holding himself back from hugging since before Ignis decided cuddling is a good thing. The poor cactuar is no taller than the gunner's shin, and it's tiny arms hang at it's sides and it's bitty feet are both on the ground. Prompto didn't even know they could do that. It looks a little... dry.

“Hey, little dude. I got something for you.” he pulls a bottle of water out of the Armiger and unscrews it while Bullet scratches in the dust behind. How do cactuar drink anyway? He pulls off a glove and pours a splash of water on a hand and flicks it at the plant. The thing waddles toward him and wiggles it's arms up toward the bottle. So cute. Prompto decides to just try pouring it on him. When he pours a stream of water over the creature's head, the liquid is somehow redirected through the ridges on it's body and into it's teeny mouth. He doesn't stop pouring water until the plant can't absorb anymore and its being wasted in the dust. The cactuar hops in place and spins around on one absolutely adorable leg.

Too bad. Prompto has to keep moving.
They've gone a quarter of a mile before he realizes the plant is following them. Maybe Bullet isn't as stupid as he thought.
Chapter 14 - Pride

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Immortals - Fall Out Boy

Ignis had seen a lot of Lucis, but never anything like this.

He can see the tomb. Unfortunately, it's at the bottom of a deep ravine surrounded by the largest trees he has ever seen. The land here rolls and rolls, the loam spotted with dark boulders covered in rotting moss, and the rust-barked trees tall and wide as skyscrapers. There is no other flora under the forest canopy but lichens and a surprising amount of fungi. The carpet of pine needles and dropped cones is freckled with mushrooms for miles. The roots of the goliath trees are so thick Ignis and Cicero can't go over them, only around. He's sure it might have been beautiful once. Now it's just problematic.

For the last two days, he and the bird had fought for every inch forward. At least, Ignis is fairly certain they're still going the right way. After all, they had found the next tomb. Cicero had been invaluable. The chocobo knows where to step to avoid poor footing, and has no issues allowing Ignis to stand in the saddle to see around the giant roots and pick a way through them. They are too high in most places to simply jump Cicero over, and Ignis had realized very quickly that there isn't enough lift in the cold, still air for attempting to glide the bird. Besides, the first time Cicero nearly flipped over and dumped his rider attempting it. Neither are willing to attempt a second time.

When Ignis leans over to see down the sheer, dark wall, Cicero grasps onto the back of his jacket with his beak and pulls him back. The bird still thinks he's stupid. Nevermind. There is no way down into the ravine from where they stand now. A cursory scan of the Armiger reveals a great deal of the rope missing. There is nowhere near enough remaining to attempt rappelling down even if Ignis had any practical experience with such a thing. The next tomb is beyond the ravine anyway. They'll not only have to get to the bottom, but cross and return to the surface.

Cicero picks a direction and starts moving. It takes Ignis two hours to realize that the ground is very slowly sloping downhill. Maybe the bird really is smarter than the man?
They're fortunate. Several miles from the tomb itself is a series of outcroppings and a fallen tree that forms a convenient ramp to the bottom. The ravine is shallower here, and Ignis can make out the last dregs of a dying river in a shallow bed. The route isn't exactly safe, but it's clearly the best they can hope for. He allows Cicero to lead, as trusting the bird's judgment has served him rather well thus far.

Everything is fine right up until the chocobo stops dead in his tracks and gives out a warble. Ignis can't see what the issue is through so many dark tailfeathers, so he ducks under the bird's body and the longstaff tied to his saddlebags and works his way past. Daemons. He's not sure what kind, however. Not from this distance and not with so little light. The silhouettes of black on black don't move like anything Ignis can recall seeing before. They skitter and shuffle in intermittent bursts of activity. He only knows they're daemonic from the red glow of their eyes of which the number is very much in question. Lovely.

They're only halfway down the fallen tree when Cicero's warning warble stops him short. The daemons are already onto them. Ignis has only seconds to make a decision. Fight on the narrow, slippery tree trunk, or get down to the bottom and fight there. It's hardly a choice.

He stoops down low into a shambling, sideways run. Cicero warks behind him and follows, feet sliding and claws ripping into the moss and bark. He makes it close enough for comfort, summons the Flayer and leaps off the tree. He can hear the chocobo screech as he flips through the air and falls, boots and weapon pinpointed at the arachnid abdomen of a daemon.

When he strikes true, the thing explodes, guts, bile, and miasma flying. Ignis flips back over the shaft of the poleaxe and barely avoids both the results of his own attack and another daemon as well. Now that he's close, he can see what they had been at some point and really wishes he didn't know. They're giant daemonic ticks, all bloated body and very little anything else. Ignis knows with dire certainty that if either of them are bitten by these creatures it will be a swift and excruciating death by exsanguination. He also knows that these daemons have recently fed, and that just might be enough to not die here.

Cicero slides down the bottom of the trunk and screams his ire. Ignis takes the opportunity of the distraction to flip his weapon over his own head and the axe blade slices clean through the abdomen of another daemon, blood and hemolymph spilling together to join with the dying river. He whips his weapon around his torso and the blade slices into the bodies of two more daemons, but it isn't enough to take them down. Time to regroup.

Ignis backflips twice, once on his own hand and again with the Flayer. When his perspective is horizontal again, he sees Cicero kick one daemon into the wall of the cliff with enough force to flatten it. A second kick disengages a daemon's disparate sections from one another, the abdomen
rolling one way and the thorax flying another. Ignis has the notion that the bird knows not to bite the daemons. Perhaps the instinct rather. Hard to say.

Ignis dismisses his poleaxe and summons the Speldaggers. They flare with heat and light as he lets the magic flow through him and into the weapons. He throws one from under his arm and then the other and they both meet their mark in the two daemons he failed to kill before. The flames wash over the arachnids like they're covered in gasoline, and their swollen bodies shrivel and curl as the daggers despawn.

The stench of burning monster or daemon is an occupational hazard Ignis has had plenty of time to grow accustomed to, but Cicero grumbles and warks and backs up away from the burning arachnids shaking his feathered head. Then he turns toward Ignis and starts in on his usual warbling and examining through pecks and nibbles. After a moment, the bird warks his approval but still stands and stares imperiously.

“Come now. You're angry with me?” The bird's head tilts, feathered crest flopping over. Ignis' brows furrow. What could possibly be the issue now? “I am not about to allow you to do all the fighting. That's hardly fair. I'll pull my weight even if you are carrying it, thank you very much, sir.”

Cicero walks into him hard enough he has to step back and buries his wide beak into Ignis' chest and rubs and warbles happily. Ignis feels like now is a good time to scratch feathers and stroke the bird's neck around his leather armor. It takes him a moment, but he does eventually realize he's never actually spoken to the bird before. That explains quite a lot.

Cicero carries them both along the bottom of the ravine at a trot, maneuvering around fallen boulders and muddy waters alike. They reach the tomb in good time, and with no further incident. Inside is a tomb a bit different from the ones Ignis had visited in the past. The stone is dark, perhaps the same as the boulders that litter the region, and the statues are white marble instead of the usual tarnished bronze. The effigy atop the coffer is the same as always, however. The royal arm it holds makes Ignis smirk. A gladius.

He lashes the sword to the longstaff with the leather straps from Cicero's saddlebags and fastens the bundle to the chocobo again. The longstaff has no edges, and lashing the weapons together should take care of any risk of the gladius harming either of them neatly. The tomb would be an excellent place to rest, but neither he nor the bird are particularly tired having rested upon reaching the ravine. They move on, further up the ravine, and Ignis can only hope there's a way out of it. The next tomb is on the opposite side and end from the ramp they used to come down.
There is a way up nearly a mile further along. It isn't safe. Cicero warbles next to him as they both search the cliff wall. It could possibly be done, but not by a chocobo. Unacceptable.

Another mile and another possibility. This one is better. There are roots emerging from the rock wall, and small outcroppings similar to the ramp down. Cicero seems convinced this will do. Ignis is less convinced, but the chocobo is already moving up the wall. He wishes for a moment they had chosen to rest in the tomb after all. The wall on this side is steep and slopes the wrong direction. Still, the bird had been correct every time before. Ignis has little reason to doubt him now.

A third of the way up, and an hour later, Ignis has lost all confidence this is a good idea. Unfortunately, the orientation of the rock leaves no option than to continue upwards. Cicero is calm where he rests on the outcropping and only takes a few minutes to rest. They start again, bird hopping from root to rock and further, and man taking careful jumps and occasional swings to follow.

Three more rests and three quarters of the way up and Cicero is panting, but trying to stop the bird here isn't possible.

“Cicero. There is no hurry, silly bird. Take a moment.” The chocobo warks, but continues. Stubborn bird.
Right at the top of the cliff is where things finally fall apart. The loam is slick and loose and Cicero's claws find no purchase, his wings find no lift. He falls.

Ignis has enough warning to look up and see several hundred pounds of dark feathers before the weight crushes him to the rock outcropping.

He wakes slowly, head throbbing. There's pain, a lot of it, but he isn't coherent enough to pinpoint it yet. A concussion is a given. It would hardly be the first time. He can hear Cicero warbling and cooing his distress, and the pecking him over jostles his body and brings fresh pain.

“Silly bird. I'm alright.” The pecking stops, but the warbling increases in volume. Ignis isn't sure if the bird is concerned or just knows when he's being lied to.

Something isn't right, but Ignis can't assemble his thoughts right now. Its some time before he figures out what it is.

His right arm feels wet, or something like it. It hurts as well. Cicero must have landed on it. Now that he's thinking about it, that arm is where the bird is concentrating his nibbling. Perhaps a closer look is in order. It takes Ignis several increasingly more painful minutes to remove his coat, and he's more confused all the time. The arm isn't very cooperative and hurts more and more by the second. Then the inside of the sleeve snags.

Ignis nearly bites through his tongue trying to stop the strangled yelp that comes out. He stops and tries to breathe through the pain, measured and careful through his nose. He knows there can only be one reason for his arm to snag on his clothing. Hyperventilating will hardly help him now. By the time he gets the sleeve off, Ignis is trying very hard not to panic.

His bones are no longer where they belong. He can't quite tell what exactly is going on around all the blood, but compound fracture is a very good guess. The problem isn't really the fracture. He can sense there are elixirs in the Armiger. When they got there is beyond him. The problem is that he's not sure he can realign his bones without passing out. The other problem is that he doesn't know how long the wound has been open. There could be anything in it by now. Still, he has to take care of this
before the adrenaline wears off completely.

He's shuddering hard when he starts pulling things out of the Armiger. The first aid kit has antiseptic in it, but it's not meant for what he's going to do with it. It will have to do. Two elixirs just in case. A fresh bottle of water that takes him entirely too long to open with one hand and his teeth.

He wishes he could take one elixir for the concussion, but that will make the fracture so much worse. He'll have to hope his pain threshold is stronger than his panic and need to pass out again.

Ignis opens the antiseptic, then places one of the elixirs in the pit of his right arm. Breathes deeply and grabs the water first. Whines through his teeth as the cold water runs over and into his arm. He's panting when he switches to the antiseptic. He can see the break now, the cracked ends of his own radius exiting his flesh at angles. It would be fascinating if he weren't living it.

When he pours the antiseptic it burns so badly he sobs. The adrenaline is wearing off quickly. There's no time. He has to fight his own instinct to flee the agony when he starts pulling on the bones. Ignis can't really hear the sounds he's making he grits his teeth so hard. Something like moaning and gasping and screaming all at once. He's shaking too hard and so afraid he's going to screw this up and the panic boils inside his chest. He has to hold his bones together and try to move his right hand to be sure its in place. He can't really feel the arm working but he can barely make it out through the tears.

He cracks the elixir under his arm and promptly passes out.

When he wakes this time, his mind is no longer muddled. His entire right side feels cold. He tests the fingers on his right hand. They move, but they're numb. Hopefully the cold.

Ignis sits up and knocks over the water bottle. It rolls off the outcropping and down. He doesn't hear it hit the bottom. Cicero wakes and uncurls to watch him. He ignores the bird for now in favor of examining his arm. It seems none the worse for wear. He did, however, get blood, water, and antiseptic all through his coat. Bollocks.

For some reason, there's wood in the Armiger. Wood that looks like it was harvested sometime in the second century, but it burns. He feeds poor Cicero in the light of the campfire. When he tries to unbuckle the bird's saddle, the chocobo pecks at him until he gives up. Ignis doesn't have the fight in him right now to argue with the bird. His arm works fine. No pain, no difficulty moving his hand and
wrist. His last two fingers are still just slightly numb, but if that's all the permanent damage that comes from this he can hardly complain.

When his clothing is dry again, if not clean, he breaks camp and they exit the ravine with no more trouble and head towards the next destination.

They reach the next tomb before Ignis notices his arm starting to ache and swell inside his coat.

Chapter End Notes

- Graphic combat involving arachnids
- Very Graphic Major Character’s depiction of a compound fracture and setting the bone himself
Chapter 15 - Whiplash

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Fake It - Bastille

Seven days earlier -

“What do you mean there aren't enough? That's all there is.”

“I heard ya, but that don't change nothin'. There just ain't enough parts. Can't do it, Cor.”

“Alright. I appreciate the heads up.” the Marshal locks his smartphone to end the call and sighs. Its been one problem after another since he got to Lestallum. This time Hammerhead has run out of replacement headlights for the hunter's vehicles. Nothing to be done.

He doesn't want to be in charge, but between a combination of being the only person remotely qualified and a lot of buck passing he has little choice.

Three days earlier -

Damn. Gladiolus had dropped the call. He's pushing too hard. At the rate he's going, he's more likely to kill himself or his chocobo instead of completing his mission.
“Sir? There's a report of a dog at the gates.”

“A dog? Just ignore it.”

“Something isn't right about it. A few of the hunters on guard are getting nervous.”

“So long as it isn't hurting anyone, it's fine.”

“Sir, it isn't hurting anyone, but it keeps disappearing and reappearing when people aren't looking.”

That's suspicious, but still not a fixable problem. The hunters on guard are probably just getting paranoid. So far, nothing has attacked Lestallum, but reports of daemons from the hunters bringing in meat from the other side of the Taelpar Crag has turned into reports from the guards of seeing daemons wandering the fields. Cor himself has seen lights in the distance that are definitely not man-made.

There's no time to waste on contemplation. A new convoy has just been granted entry. This time it's refugees. Where is he going to put more people?

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Two days earlier -

It's so loud. Cor has to chew on his tongue to stop himself from grinding his teeth. There are hammers on nails, boards and plywood smacking together, desperate people and miserable children, trucks and chocobos, a crane being constructed a few blocks away, hunters, glaives, and mining picks and jackhammers. There is no more space. There's not even room to make more. That's what the jackhammers are for. To make more space. Lestallum is already built between a crater and Taelpar Crag. It's much safer to dig than build higher. The existing infrastructure is crumbling at best. They can't build on top of it.

“Sir, that dog is back again.”
“Do I look like I give a damn about a dog?” Temper lost.

“Sir, this time there's a woman with it.”

“I don't care. She'll go with the rest of the refugees.”

“She said to tell you that she wants to speak with you. Said her name is Gentiana.”

Cor nearly bowls over three families, two Exineris employees, a boy, an elderly man and one cat trying to get to the gates. The messenger stands serenely in the middle of the street outside the makeshift wall that now crosses the length of Lestallum looking as if the end of the world is simply another night. A gray dog with a green bandanna and unnatural markings sits at her side.

Gentiana and who he believes is the messenger Umbra who used to masquerade as the Oracle Lunafreya's pet. A dog, of course. Cor approaches with caution, but he tries to disguise it as ease. He doesn't believe for a second she is fooled.

“Gentiana. You summoned me.” She smiles with just the corners of her lips, but her eyes remain closed. Umbra lies down at her feet with his head on his paws.

“Marshal. This one comes to speak with the Chosen's companions. They are not here, spread to the winds that are no longer.”

“Their idea, you understand. What do you need from me specifically?”

“This one merely wishes to bestow her blessing, however that can no longer be. This one instead comes bearing counsel and a gift.”

“Any counsel you can give would be invaluable, especially as it concerns Prince Noctis.”

“This is not the way events were meant to unfold. You know this.”
“Do I? Is that what Ignis was trying to say? Was it you who showed him visions?”

“Not this one. Pryna.” The other messenger masquerading as a pet of the Oracle. Hmm. So Ignis was talking some sort of sense. Very little, but still.

“Know that the Chosen must Reflect for a time. Upon his return, he is to confront the Usurper.”

“Right, how long is he going to be in the Crystal?”

“Ten cycles.” Damn. Ten years is a long, long time for there to be no sun. Too long.

“Thank you for your counsel. And of the gift? Who is it meant for?”

“The Chosen's companions gather the arms of the Lost Kings of Lucis in preparation for their King's return. I give the Trident of the Oracle to that end.” The messenger pulls a royal arm from nowhere in her robes and lays it across her spread hands. Cor reaches slowly for it. This feels too easy, like there should be a catch, a price, some service to perform in exchange. There is nothing. Gentiana allows Cor to wrap a hand around the shaft of the trident and step away.

“Thank you, Gentiana.”

“Do not thank this one. The trident belonged to the girl. She requested this one give her blessing, yet that time has passed and has not come. The trident merely exchanges possession at another juncture.”

He blinks and she's gone. The dog is gone as well. The trident hangs loose in his fist.

One day earlier -

Two potions have just gone missing from the Armiger. Cor doesn't have the time to think about that. He's only upright through sheer willpower and caffeine. The streets and alleyways of Lestallum
are so clogged with people and blankets and tents and belongings that he had to implement patrols just to keep order with the refugees. There hardly seems a spare inch of space around them. That doesn't even bring into account how he's going to feed them in a few more days. Rations are already tight and people already desperate. It gets more dangerous all the time for the hunters to keep bringing in meat. It gets more dangerous all the time for the volunteers distributing it. At least the construction of the greenhouse in the back of town is going well.

The noise though. And the smell. Even if Lestallum's plumbing were built to handle so many people, there aren't enough bathrooms or showers for anywhere near this many bodies. He feels like the proprietor of a human chattel ranch. Its only a matter of time before the sickness starts. It might have already. He had to order one of the glaive barracks emptied and converted into an emergency clinic. They don't have the capability for an epidemic. They hardly have the capability to handle papercuts right now. If he can get some of the medical supplies from Insomnia into the town proper that might change, but for now Lestallum may as well be swimming in potential disaster.

He almost doesn't hear Monica over the racket of jackhammers and through his fatigue.

“Sir, we have a problem.” What. Now.

“Everything is a problem. All we have are problems.”

“Sir, shuttup and listen to me.” What? He doesn't follow her order, he's too shocked to respond. “I need you to slowly and calmly look up at the cable cars.”

Exineris has been working with the hunters to move goods from around Cleigne with the cars. It is efficient and they don't require protection from daemons or looters. Cor blinks at the heavily loaded car above their heads. He can't see anything of note.

“Monica, what am I looking for?”

“Pointing is not only rude, but going to alert the civilians. Look at where the pulleys meet the cable on the second car.”

He can see it now. The cable is bulging oddly and kinked a bit. Cor can just make out rusted metal wire poking through the rubber coating. Damn.

“Monica, we have to move them. All of them.”
“Where?”

“That thing is about to kill everyone here and take out half the buildings. I think panic is probably appropriate. Get Dustin and some glaives and get them up.” He takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. It smells like shit. Shit creek.

“Everyone listen up. This area needs to be evacuated immediately. All civilians, Exineris employees, hunters, everyone must move farther into the city.” He's not even sure they can hear him. Some few start standing up and moving, but too few and too slowly. “Again, this area must be evacuated right now. This isn't a request. Glaives and Crownsguard will direct you to somewhere more appropriate.”

They still aren't getting it. Civilians may not grow up learning the importance of haste, but they'll learn the hard way today if they don't just get up and move.

Cor hears a metallic snap and doesn't manage to hide his eyes flicking up toward the cable cars. When his gaze falls back down, a woman notices. Looks up. Another snap, then two more. She screams.

It's maybe ten seconds before the stampede starts.

There's screaming and crying, but its smothered by the thunder of hundreds of feet trying to move in a single direction. There are so many humans stuffed into this courtyard that the ground shakes beneath them. So too, do the buildings. And the cable cars. Cor barely has time to throw his arm around Monica and dive into the nearest doorway, flashes of blue dancing around them from warping glaives. He doesn't see the cable snap, but he does hear it. It sounds like the world's loudest gunshot.

Through the open door, Cor can see the rest. One side simply drops the overloaded cable cars like twenty ton anvils into the courtyard and a chorus of screams snuffs out like so much smoke in the deafening crash, chunks of cobblestone and concrete flying from the shattered courtyard. At the same time, the loose cable whips through the air like an electrical livewire. The sonic boom overloads Cor's hearing and his ears ring as he watches the wild cable crack off buildings and rip through bodies like a Gigli saw on steroids.

When the cable comes to a rest, he thinks he's shaking, but that's not him that's Monica still wrapped in his arm. He takes his arm away, and she's saying something, but Cor can't read lips very well. He shakes his head and blinks away the dust.
He tries to help move the rubble and retrieve corpses from the blood and dust, but Monica leads him away after an hour. Cor's rations taste like concrete dust, and the lukewarm water in the shower washes off greyish-red. He passes out and tries to forget.

Something is happening, but Cor can't place it. His vision is bleary, and hearing muffled. It takes him a minute to realize his phone is ringing. He nearly panics, but realizes he can hear it fine. He's just too out of it to recognize the sound. The ringer stops. He picks up the phone to check who it was, but it goes off in his hands again. Gladiolus.

His sluggish brain kicks fully into gear when he hears the voice on the other end of the call. Gladiolus is frantic. Hysterical. Something about his chocobo dying? Why doesn't he just use an elixir?

That's when Cor realizes that there are no elixirs in the Armiger. In fact there are only five potions there and no other curatives at all. He tries to throw clothes on at the same time he grabs the two elixirs in his own bags and throws them into the Armiger. He senses them disappear again instantly. He disconnects when Gladiolus seems calmer. In less pain. Cor races through the smothering streets and alleys, hurdling over heads and under construction scaffolding and toward the Regalia parked at the far end of town. On the way out, he confiscates all the potions and elixirs from the command center and throws those into the Armiger as well. No one tries to stop him when he drives right through the chain-link fence to get to the highway.

Cor doesn't even stop for the Ronin in the middle of the road. He's not in the mood to duel right now. The Regalia is a big girl. She can take a few dents.

Even going as fast as he's capable of controlling the Regalia in the oppressive darkness, it still takes several hours. He doesn't even make it halfway before two more elixirs are gone from the Armiger along with the first-aid kit. He beats on the steering wheel and pushes the Regalia faster.
The lights are all on. Every one.

Gladiolus is obviously more afraid of daemons than looters. The door isn't locked.

“What the hell are you doin' here?” Gladio sits stretched out on the floor leaning on his massive orange chocobo and stroking her crest where the bird's feathered head sits in his lap.

“I said I was coming.”

“What for? Nothing to do here.” Gladio looks... pinched. Like his face wants to make some other expression around his red-rimmed eyes but his willpower is barely holding it back.

“Yes, there is. I came here firstly to apologize.”

“Why?” He shakes his head and furrows his brows. The scar that Gilgamesh left on his face crinkles with it. Cor moves around the younger man and the chocobo slowly and sits on the couch.

“Do you really not know?”

“Nah. I don't. I screwed up. I said I was sorry. And I am. Fell off Strel tryin' to glide her and didn't think I was that hurt. Really fuckin' sorry piece of shit.” Cor isn't sure how he can feel much worse lately, but that doesn't help. This is his fault, not the boys'.

“Did all three of you really believe I meant to send you all over Lucis with nothing but a few potions?” Gladio's expression melts into several things he hasn't seen in at least a decade. Its confusion and shame and anger and bitterness, but more than anything its just hurt. His eyes fill with tears, but none fall. Cor isn't prepared for his answer.

“Did you really believe you'd given us any reason to think you didn't?”

“I made a mistake, Gladiolus. I'm sorry.”
“Sure, you made a mistake. I don't think it was the stupid potions though. The mistake was making us feel so shitty we didn't question it.” Cor can't find anything to say. Lately, nothing he does seems right. “Someone took some back out again earlier, but I think they put one back. I didn't count 'em. You know either Ignis or Prompto might be dead right now if you hadn't put those in there. I'm only alive because Strel is smarter than me.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Look, I know none of us are perfect exactly, but that's not good enough, Cor. Don't think that what you did a week ago was it either. That was just the newest shitty thing.”

“It was for your own good.”

“Was it? Or did you not wanna have to think about why it happened anymore? Was it easier on you, Cor? Did throwing away the evidence absolve your role in it? I've had a lot of time to think in the last day or so. I'm pretty sure I hate you.”

“Gladiolus, I know I've made mistakes, but...”

“No. You're still making mistakes. The difference is that now you get to pay for them like everyone else. That's what this is. If Ignis or Prompto dies, know right here, right now, I'm never, ever going to forgive you. I still might not even if we all live.” The chocobo warbles softly and his fingers resume scratching under her crest.

Cor has seen a lot of things. He's been through even more things. Most of those things don't affect him very strongly, at least not for long. That's just what happens when a person has seen so much. This is different. This is his own godson that he watched grow from a tiny, red-faced infant telling him that he hates Cor.

Gladiolus hates him. Likely, Ignis and Prompto do as well. Perhaps even his absent king. He can't even attempt to justify himself. There's no justification for this and he knows it. Gladio is right.

“I'll finish the route. Let me have your map and I'll do it.”

“Are you stupid all the sudden?”
“I hope not.”

“You can’t take my place. I have to do it. I’m not about to give my burden to someone else. This is my duty even if I’m shitty at it. You’re not taking that too, Cor.”

“That’s not what I meant, Gladiolus.”

“I know what you meant, and it doesn’t matter. You don’t have a chocobo, and if you touch Strel I swear to you I will rip your arm right out of it’s socket. We clear?”


“I’ll leave in another day or two. Gonna be a lot slower. Don’t think Strel can really run anymore.”

He doesn’t have the guts to tell him that there was no reason to send them separately. After all, they have ten years.

Gladiolus should hate him.

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Chapter End Notes

- Semi-Graphic depiction of multiple minor character deaths. No Major Characters are injured in the incident.
Ignis sits in Cicero's saddle and stares at the northern sky through the spears of thousands of sickly, spindly evergreens. Normally, they wouldn't be able to see so far. He clicks off his own flashlight and leans down to Cicero's lantern in turn. Waits for his eyes to adjust. After a few minutes, he makes a decision and coaxes the black chocobo forward. They don't need the artificial lights.

The northern sky is glowing.

Its a nauseating, horrible color, something like green and gray and brown blending together in a mockery of gradient. Ignis allows Cicero to pick his way north through the thin trunks and thinner branches of the sapling forest. The needles are brown and crumble when the bird's flanks or Ignis' shins brush them. Occasionally, he has to maneuver around the awkwardly long bundle of royal arms secured to Cicero's saddle. He has seven now; the stave, the gladius, a longbow, a morningstar, a chain-sickle, a naginata, and a pair of intricate and ornate glove-like fist weapons. He did not try them on. He's had quite enough of wearing anything that belongs to ancient Lucian kings.

There are only two tombs remaining on his map, but Ignis has little hope there will be anything in them to find. Out of eleven tombs, Ignis had only found the seven weapons. The others were destroyed or looted any number of years before. The final two tombs on his route were back toward civilization and less likely to still contain royal arms. Even if it could be known where the rest of the lost tombs were, most would be found similarly ransacked.

Ignis checks his right arm when they cross a barren clearing. Its hot to the touch, and burns sharp and deep under his inflamed and irritated skin. He carefully maneuvers the limb out of its coat sleeve. It won't do to have to cut the clothing to get it out if it continues to swell. The cold normally doesn't bother Ignis, but now he doesn't feel it very well. The fever isn't high enough yet for him to feel ill, but he knows its there.
A smart man would just continue along the charted route. A man with a healthy sense of self-preservation would make a beeline for civilization posthaste. Still, Ignis has to know. There are no good reasons he can imagine for the mysterious light. None of the reasons he can imagine are good things.

Cicero comes to a stop and warbles. Something stalks them. Ignis has no desire to fight. He's exhausted and in pain and so anxious his stomach roils, although that could be the infection. He hasn't eaten since the last time he threw up. That was quite some time ago, but time means little now. He can only hold onto the horn of Cicero's saddle when the bird starts to run, not fast enough to jostle him loose but plenty fast enough to make him grit his teeth.

Whatever the chocobo had sensed gives up the chase quickly. The few beasts they've encountered look worse all the time. The only one that had tried to attack them was some kind of hoofed creature not terribly unlike an anak, but smaller and with more proportionate limbs. It stamped and chafed at them as they passed, protecting what used to be an infant but now is little more than a bit of fur and bone. She won't be standing guard much longer.

The sea of dead saplings is giving ground to what might have been grass once. Cicero's claws click on the packed dirt and stones with every step. The bird has been quiet since the ravine. To be fair, so has Ignis. They're both miserable. It seems fitting.

The sky grows lighter and lighter the closer to the coast they get, but Ignis still hasn't seen any sign of why. There's no civilization for at least a hundred miles in any direction. Farther in most. The rock is completely barren now, the forest far behind them.

Ignis smells it before he hears it. There's a chemical smell mixed with ozone. It stinks like oil from a car that hasn't been properly maintained. It overwhelms the usual scent of salt that all seawater has.

Ignis hears it before he sees it. He can hear moving water, yes, but he can also hear something that, to his knowledge, shouldn't be possible in the ocean.

When Cicero stops, claws at the edge of the cliff overlooking the Lucinian Sea, Ignis knows for certain the hells are a place on Eos.
The ocean is burning.

He knows, due to his sitting in for Noctis for years worth of council meetings, that Coernix is the only corporation still operating in Lucis that deals in petroleum production. Or, at least was the last corporation operating. The only explanation for what Ignis sees is that the company's offshore oil drilling rigs were abandoned at some point and malfunctioned. Perhaps were even just abandoned outright. The low, sluggish waves that crash on the beach are slimy and slick, and the sand is a black mirror that reflects the shine from miles and miles of intermittent fires. Its bright enough for Ignis to see thick, choking black smoke billowing into the sky. Woe to any creature that lives when the results of that falls from the sky. Ignis feels like acid rain isn't a strong enough term. He doesn't plan to stick around and find out.

Even so, the burning ocean is hardly the worst part. After all, some spark had to have started the flames to begin with.

The ocean is crawling with daemons.

To Ignis' previous knowledge, aquatic daemons were not a thing. His previous knowledge is being updated with every passing second. There are bombs wandering the beaches for miles. Those surely started the fires, but bombs are about the only daemons Ignis recognizes. There are serpents and fish, seadevils and shieldshears. There are some shapes that Ignis cannot account for. Those look remarkably humanoid even though they swim. All of them are daemonic. All of them are fighting. All of them are eating each other. Well, not quite all of them. Just below them is a pack of what looks like seadevils if the reptiles had longer legs and moved much faster. Their fins are glowing daemonic purple and their eyes look like embers in their long faces. When they open their jaws to hiss at Ignis and Cicero, the sound that comes out is distorted and deep like it's been run through a synthesizer, and miasma spills from between jagged teeth that he's sure there are far too many of.

Ignis doesn't have to tell Cicero to run.

The bird's claws skitter and scrape on the bare rock before they find purchase, and he flaps his tiny wings as he tries to build up speed. He warks when the wing on the side with the royal arms smacks into the weapons. More glowing embers turn in their direction even as daemons scramble up the incline.

The barren cliffs are unforgiving. They contain no places to hide, no places to get to higher
ground, and no relief from the constant jolting of the chocobo's rider. The daemons are much faster than Ignis remembers seadevils being. They're losing ground. They're likely going to lose their lives. Cicero turns inland toward a landscape of sharp stones and boulders of various shapes and sizes. The bird vaults them in an attempt to throw off the daemons, but without any lift from his wings all it does is make the bird tired. Cicero makes mistakes when he's tired.

They only manage to stay ahead of the daemons for about a minute. The chocobo tries to duck through a gap between two enormous boulders, but he doesn't make it all the way through. It isn't that the gap is too small, or that he has a rider. The royal arms at his side catch against the stone and trap the bird in the gap. Cicero hisses and screams his rage, but by the time Ignis can free the chocobo with only one good arm it's too late. The daemons have circled around the gap and they're trapped in the alcove. Ignis had been so certain he would die from complications of severe infection. He's less sure now.

Cicero hisses and warks above Ignis' head where he's crouched under the bird's body. He knows there's little point trying to fight. Even if he were in perfect shape, there are at least a dozen daemons circling the rocks and bickering amongst themselves over their prize. He's exhausted, hungry, nauseated, feverish, and in pain. He only has proper use of one arm. This many seadevils of even the non-daemonic variety would rip him apart in seconds. Even a farce of a strategist knows this is a fight that cannot be won. When he folds his legs under him and cradles his right arm in his lap, Cicero goes quiet. He's a good bird. He deserves a better chance. Ignis reaches up above his head and unbuckles the bird's saddle. The weight of the royal arms make it slide off the side of the chocobo's back and onto the bare, cold rock. Cicero warbles and chirps. He pulls his leg away when Ignis tries to start unbuckling the bird's armor.

“C'mon silly bird. You want to live, don't you?” Ignis voice only wavers a little bit. He blinks several times up at the chocobo. The view is a bit blurry.

Cicero fights him when he tries to remove his bridle.

“Really, now? This is hardly the time to be stubborn. We don't both have to die here.” Ignis hadn't wanted to believe his fears, but now they seem comforting. He knows he was likely doomed days ago. Going through the motions was just a way to comfort himself before the infection takes him. At least this will be fast.

The daemons have established pecking order. The largest one, its head alone nearly as long as Ignis himself, approaches. From this distance, he can see that it's leathery skin is corpse white and it's fins glow purple along the spines. It's eyes are glowing red, but not like embers, like overheated cast-iron burners on a cheap electric stove.

“Stupid animal. Go! Run away!” No amount of shoving makes a difference. Cicero won't move
an inch. He can't save anyone.

Ignis closes his eyes and waits for death. Again. He's cheated death once before, but there's no prince here and no crystal. He hopes it hurts less this time.

Death is taking its sweet time, really. Ignis opens one eye, then the dimmer one. The daemon just stands there staring at him with it's hot metal gaze. The scaled tip of it's muzzle is roughly four feet away. Ignis could reach out and touch it. Miasma puffs out of it's nostrils with each slow, calm exhale.

Why doesn't it attack? Ignis is starting to get impatient. Making them wait like this is just rude.

“Weel? Have we changed our mind? I would appreciate some expedience if at all possible.” Cicero warbles from somewhere above his head. Ignis turns under the chocobo to look through to the other side of the gap. There are two more daemons on the other side, just as unmoving as the one in front of him. The daemons that haven't come near still bicker and pace beyond the alcove.

After several more minutes of this, Ignis thinks maybe taunting is in order.

“Come now. Eat me. I'm sure you gentlemen and ladies have better things to do than this, surely.” Cicero warbles and chirps.

After roughly half an hour, Ignis is bored. He lifts a hand and extends it toward the daemon in front of him. The infected one, naturally. Why risk the good arm? He sees a flash of light out of the corner of his left eye and jerks his hand back. The reptile had rocked back and then forward again with the proximity of Ignis' hand. Cautiously, for what reason he can't fathom, Ignis extends his hand again. The reptile moves. The light in his peripheral left flashes again. He pushes forward farther, rocking up onto his knees on the hard, dark stone. Cicero backs up a half-step with him. The daemons won't come within four feet of him. They're pacified. Ignis reaches one more time and holds his arm in the air between himself and the daemon. The light stays.

It's the fractals and ornate designs of crystal magic. When Ignis tries to focus on the light, the shapes move and shift so he can't get a clear picture. He swallows hard around the grin fighting it's way onto his face.
It takes Ignis a while to put Cicero's tack back on him. There's no hurry. Then he simply mounts up and walks the chocobo out of the bickering daemons. The seadevils that get too close instantly calm and stare, passive as puppets. They follow, but eventually peel off one by one to return to the burning ocean.

When he can't see them anymore, he dismounts Cicero and wraps his good arm around the bird's neck and buries his face in black feathers. The chocobo warbles and nibbles at his hair.

“Are we both forgiven then? A bit less pride and foolishness and we might actually live through this. Wouldn't that be nice?” Wark.

He takes the time to search his map and compare the landscape. So much for less foolishness. This detour was a mistake on so many levels. Ignis can't find any landmarks to show him where he is. The bare, flat rock stretches as far as he can see in all directions. The green sky gives him no clues. The only useful information he has is which direction north is from his compass, but with no reference on the map, he's lost. He can't return to the daemon infested coast. Its the wrong direction besides. With no way to be sure of his coordinates, the best he can do is abandon the final two tombs and travel vaguely west-southwest to the Taelpar side of the escarpment then to the highway.

If he's even close in his guess of where he is, that's the longest way through the wilderness, but the most direct way back to civilization as it is. Even with no detours, that's around a hundred miles of hard travel not counting the highway back to Lestallum. At least daemons are no longer an obstacle. If he and Cicero are going to survive, if these royal arms are going to help save Noctis, Ignis needs to save himself. He heaves himself back up into the chocobo's saddle and turns Cicero southwest.

Ignis might have cheated death again, but he doubts he'll be able to do it a third time.
Chapter End Notes

- Semi-Graphic description of early complications of serious infection by Major Character
- Semi-Graphic depiction of animal starvation
- Graphic description of consequences of industrial disaster
- Major Character depicting impending death as inevitable and making no effort to save himself (No actual death occurs)
Chapter 17 - Headway

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Go the Distance - Disney's Hercules Soundtrack

This is it. This is the last one. Prompto wanted to say fuck it and go home days ago. Really, the only home he has is either out in the wilderness just like he is, or in some kind of magical purgatory. He lost track of how long he's been out here a while back. Not that he couldn't find out by simply pulling Gladio's smartphone out of the Armiger, but because he really doesn't want to think about it.

The stupid stiletto. The siege engine. Knuckles with claws in them. A huge sword taller than Prompto with a blade the width of his hand that undulates like flames. Another sword, not quite as large, that he's seen only in RPGs called a claymore. This last one is a tiny, round shield he knows is called a buckler. Six royal arms out of twelve tombs. A fifty percent success rate isn't great. Results like that aren't even passing. He can't even be happy he's done.

The toe of Prompto's boot catches on the threshold of the tomb and his arms pinwheel as he falls. He barely manages to avoid the mouthful of sand. The buckler flies through the air like an adamantite frisbee. Prompto hears a dull clang, then a playful warble up the beach from where he lies in the pale, dry sand. Oh hell no.

“Bullet, no. Drop the incredibly important magical weapon. C'mon, buddy.” He gives up chasing his chocobo after only a couple minutes. His heart just isn’t in it anymore. He just walks further south along the empty shoreline and listens to the bird’s big feet, the cactuar's tiny feet, and the shallow, sluggish waves.
Something is wrong. His eyebrows lower from under the rim of his beanie and he frowns. The map has to be wrong. There's no way even Prompto could have screwed this up. Follow the beach until you reach the Galdin area. Super easy. Even Bullet couldn't get lost. Just one problem.

There is no more beach. The sand abruptly ends into a cliff that Prompto can't see any end to. At first the thinks he must have gone the wrong way somehow, but triple-checking his compass shows him the same thing. His road west is non-existent.

The gunner stands on the edge of the world and his eyes burn. He wants to go home.

Prompto decides risking a campfire is worth it. There's nothing to catch on the empty, dry sand and he hasn't seen anything alive for days. Even the daemons don't come here. He even checks the notebook. Pristine. He feels like the last human on Eos.

The last human on Eos, leaning on the last chocobo on Eos, with the last cactuar on Eos sitting on his head and kicking it's tiny legs. It's somehow still easy to smile no matter how badly Prompto wants to cry.

He used to be lonely. He was an awkward, shy, overweight child with no self-esteem to speak of and no idea where he had come from. His adoptive parents were really only parents on paper. He spent nearly all of his childhood alone. He raised himself.

Prompto spent every day of his childhood wondering why he wasn't worthy of love.

Sometimes, even now, he wonders what would have happened to him if he had never gotten that letter from Lunafreya. That was a long time ago now. He's not that scared, lonely, sad kid anymore. He used to give all the credit to Noctis for his own personal growth, but he knows most of the credit belongs to himself. Even at that age, he understood that if he wanted love, he had to go find it. If he wasn't someone worthy of it, he would become that person.

Every second was worth it.
He would do it a million times over. Again, and again forever. Prompto isn't in the habit of lying to himself. It was so hard. The only regret he has is not starting earlier, but he needed that push. That tiny reassurance that someone, somewhere gave a damn. And he needed a target. Not a goal, a person to do it for. Obviously, doing it for himself had never crossed his young mind.

Noctis filled that role neatly. Prompto didn't know for sure at the time, but he had always suspected he had no competition. By that logic, why did he really need to change who he was in order to get a friend? Easy. He couldn't expect the crown prince of Lucis to like him if he hated himself. It still makes a sort of sense.

Then, there was the shock when he realized that the solemn, harried, exhausted creature that followed Noctis like a very well-trained beaten dog was not only not even two years older than he and the prince, but supposed to be Noct's oldest friend. He hadn't had competition. Noctis treated Ignis like furniture. Like he wasn't even worth the trace elements in his bones.

Prompto had a crisis of confidence. Not in himself, he hardly needed a crisis to not have confidence back then. In Noctis. How long until his best friend grew tired of him? What would he have to do in order to keep his friendship? Ignis already did everything. Noct fought more than anything else with Gladio. What did he have to offer? In the end, he did the same thing Ignis had. Never say no. Prompto strongly suspected his reasons were much different than Ignis', but for some reason his version was successful. Ignis' never was.

It felt like he was a bystander in the world's most unbalanced game of tug-of-war. Ignis pulled, Noctis dragged him in the mud. Noctis held his ground, Ignis yanked and dragged and begged and nothing changed. Somewhere in the background of it all, Gladio and Noct yelled at each other. When had any of them ever been friends?

Prompto did nothing but watch. He watched, and he pretended the entire thing didn't make his skin crawl.

Not for Ignis' sake. Prompto doesn't have to like that he's a raging coward, but he can admit it. He did it out of selfishness. He put on blinders and kept himself removed from the entire situation. One weekend, he spent the whole thing with Noct playing games and goofing off. The next week, Noct was gone and not answering his phone. Then another week went by. Prompto didn't even consider that it had anything at all to do with Ignis. He was too busy worrying about himself. Ignis was missing for a few more days, but Noctis was... different. Even before Ignis came back, something had changed. Gladio didn't seem to have noticed from what he had said about it. Noctis was just as much Noctis as he ever was. Now he just seemed to pay more attention. That was it. The only difference.
When Prompto would slip and say something just a little too self-deprecating, Noctis would try to build him up. Key word being try, but there was effort there. The prince had trouble seeing outside his own head. The gunner can only imagine what that must be like, or how exactly Noct grew up that way.

His dad seemed like the nicest old dude in Lucis. Ignis didn't even know how to be selfish, and as far as Prompto could tell, he had done more to raise the prince than even his father. Still, if the whole thing had taught Noctis anything at all, it was that other people actually have feelings and emotions. That his own actions mean an awful lot to certain people.

Ignis came back, but Prompto had trouble recognizing him. Before, he had been over-stressed and frustrated. After, he wasn't the same. Robotic. Mechanized. Wounded. Eventually, Ignis shifted into someone else again. At the time, and for years afterward, the gunner had no clue why. He'd had a lot of time to think lately. The empty hinterlands and beaches of southern Leide left him with little else to do.

Prompto's hands itched with the need to fix Ignis. No amount of Moogling gave him any definitive answers, so he wiggled and weaseled his way into Noctis' relationship with Ignis trying to figure the whole thing out. He never really did. Noct didn't talk about what had happened during high school, and he wasn't brave enough to push. Plus, Ignis was a difficult guy to get to know. He wasn't exactly forthcoming with things before they left Insomnia, or after really. For a long time, Prompto just thought that was just how he was.

Then everything went to shit. Then they spent a year and a half following Noctis all over Lucis doing everything under the sun (while it was still in the sky anyway). Noctis led the way. Gladio kept them moving. Ignis kept them alive. Prompto still isn't sure what role he played. He likes to think it was important, whatever it was. Whatever role he has now, he's sure its crucial.

He just knows that whatever it is, he needs it to not stop.

He's slept twice, but he can't be sure how much time has passed. He's sleeping longer all the time with no daylight to tell him when to be awake. This time, when he wakes, Prompto's eyes burn fiercely as he stares west into the dark water, dark cliffs, and darker sky. He has to get home. Wherever that is.

He has no choice. He'll have to abandon the royal arms. Bullet is a particularly small chocobo. The bird can't swim carrying that much weight. He can't leave them. They're the only clue they have to save Noctis.
Prompto lets the tears fall and sniffs and swallows while he unpacks the arms from the sled. The sled can't go. The bigger sword is way too big. The claymore is too awkward. He'll have to leave those behind. Maybe go backwards the few miles to the final tomb to lock them inside. Bullet warks behind him and bumps the chilly adamantite edge of the buckler in his beak into Prompto's shoulder.

“I'm not playing with you. Go. Shoo, or something.” The cactuar is riding on the chocobo's head, holding onto his raised crest with it's tiny green arms. For some reason, it makes Prompto cry harder. He hates crying. It makes him feel weak. Bullet pokes him again.

“Go away already, you stupid shit!” He snatches the buckler and throws without looking. He hears the splash and then he can't breathe. “No. No, no... crap!”

Bullet, dumb bird that he is, doesn't hesitate to run into the lethargic surf after it. He'll never find it. Adamantite is very heavy. Prompto sinks to his knees in the sand and lets his body flop over. Maybe he belongs out here. That was the new stupidest thing he's ever done. He really didn't think he could top not realizing Ignis was dying in Zegnatus.

He lies and listens to the chocobo splash. Watches the cactuar toddle past his head. After a minute, the splashing stops, and he can hear Bullet's big, clawed feet slap wetly against the sand. The bird pokes him again. Wait.

That didn't feel like chocobo beak. Prompto flips over and his eyebrows disappear into his beanie. His jaw drops. Bullet is holding the buckler. He takes it from the bird, gently this time, and hugs the cold, wet metal to his chest. His violet eyes nearly pierce the surface of the dark water searching for an answer. He bites his lip, braces himself, and walks into the frigid surf. When the water is up to the middle of his thighs, he holds out the buckler over the water. Prompto lets go.

It floats.

Prompto has to stop pretty often so neither he nor Bullet gets hypothermic or anything. Anytime he sees a spot along the black cliffs to stop, he does. Every so often, he has enough space to light a tiny fire with the wood he left in the Armiger. Luckily, Cor hasn't touched it yet. He uses these opportunities to dry whatever cloth he's used to keep Bullet reasonably dry and his own legs from freezing off. Its definitely the least pleasant part of this trip, but Prompto can't even be upset about it.
His legs and feet are waterlogged and stinging with the cold, but he's too happy to care.

They follow the endless cliffs west, the adamantite sled runners sliding serenely along the surface of the water behind Bullet, and the cactuar riding on Prompto's head. The water is so still only yards from the rocks that the runners leave tiny, overlapping wakes behind them. The open ocean beyond looks like an old video game with ancient graphics. Flat, blank, and still. Prompto is too happy to care.

He's going home. He hopes with everything he is that home will be coming to meet him.

Chapter End Notes

- In depth stream of consciousness involving childhood neglect, self-esteem issues, self-worth issues, relationship power imbalances, and biased recollection of events
This tomb is supposed to be underwater. It shows plenty of signs of having been flooded, but now only those markers remain. The marble is stained a greenish brown, and the bronze effigy is more tarnish than metal. Gladio has no idea what to make of the royal arm. It's a chain weapon, that's clear enough, but the chain is long. Really long. Longer than he is. He wraps a hand around one of the spherical, ornately textured heads on either end of it and tests the weight. He expects it to be heavy, but each melon-sized ball has to weigh twenty pounds. Seems excessive, but he's not an ancient Lucian king. Gladio shrugs, wraps the chain around his arm, and hefts the weight onto his shoulder. Its hardly a problem for him.

Its dark outside the tomb, but it is located in a cave after all. Unlike the cave tombs in the more populated areas of Lucis, this cave is wide and open. The roof is a maze of stalactites dripping far above his head, but the bottom is reasonably smooth. Gladio figures that has something to do with the missing water. He can hardly complain. For a change, this was easy. The last four tombs were all empty, each more annoying than the last. One was at the bottom of a damn sinkhole. He almost didn't have enough rope. Someone had used half of it. Strel had to pull him out because his shoulders were too wide to climb the narrow tunnel on his own.

She had been doing better. Gladio is still hopeful. The chocobo was fine for the first couple days, but has gotten more listless and tired since. The shield wants to just forget about the last two tombs, but he's only found four lousy arms. If both Prompto and Ignis come back with more, he'll never live it down. If they can't save Noctis because they didn't find enough royal arms, he'd never forgive himself. Also, probably not live. Gladio likes to be realistic about his job. He might not be great at a lot of the crystal and magic stuff, but he knows how to take a hit.

Strel waits patiently for him at exit to the cave. He can't figure out another way, so Gladio attaches the newest weapon to her saddle by wrapping the chain around the saddlehorn and twisting the business ends around each other to secure it. It'll do.
They climb back up off the rocky coast before Gladio mounts the chocobo again. She's still moving fine even if she's tired. He's tired too, but it's looking less and less like fatigue all the time. The most Gladio asks from Strel now is an easy lope. He pulls back on her reins if she tries to run. He's had to fight twice. Once, he disturbed a very unhappy gaia toad living inside a ruined royal tomb. The second time he smacked around some variety of ronin that looked like it had been hit by a car. Neither proved a challenge.

According to his map, he has two tombs left. One is only a few miles further down the coast. The other is... northish. Hard to say exactly since it's not actually even on the map. He'll climb that hill when he comes to it.

This cave is even bigger than the last. The lights from Gladio's flashlight and Strel's lantern don't reach the ceiling. Gladio can, however, make out what looks like the mast of an ancient wooden ship stabbing out of the still, dark water. Strel follows him as he picks his way further into the cove. The more ground they cover, the more evidence Gladio finds that this place was inhabited a very long time ago. From the look of the tattered and weathered goods in rotting stacks around them, the shield doesn't need much imagination to know this was a pirate cove. Pirates hadn't been operating in Lucis at all since Niflheim began their campaign in the country, but these pirates had to have been sailing at least a couple hundred years before. They hadn't sailed for quite some time.

The tomb is open, but Gladio expected that. It had what he could only guess was furniture in it at one point, but now is just rotting splinters. They had been using it as an office or something. He's pretty sure that pile of refuse used to be a roll-top desk.

Gladio turns Strel around to pick their way back out of the cove, but something about the ship is bothering him. He stands at the edge of the water, stroking the chocobo's orange feathers and peers into the water. He can just barely make out the general silhouette of the ship under the surface, but something else is under there. He flicks off his flashlight. There is something. He flicks off Strel's lantern. Something that glows just very slightly is on that ship.

Damn. Here he was thinking he wouldn't have to go diving after all.

Gladio leaves Strel on the shore with some fodder to occupy her and pulls off his boots before leaping into the water. He's a good swimmer, but not as good as Ignis. Damn guy is good at everything. Its annoying. The shield smirks and breaststrokes his way to the sunken wreck. Sure enough, the closer he gets, the clearer the glowing is. The only thing it could be is the royal arm
missing from the tomb behind him. Whatever this thing is, it's huge. Big enough to be fixed to the prow of the ship like a figurehead. Whomever these pirates were, they sure thought highly of themselves. Gladio flicks his light on again, takes a deep breath, and dives.

The water is clear enough to see fairly well under the surface. The more Gladio sees, the less he thinks this is a pirate wreck. The whorls and angles carved into the ship look remarkably like those associated with Lucian royalty. Maybe there was a pirate king of Lucis? Nah.

He can see the royal arm. He can't see how he can possibly get it out of the water. This weapon is even more a mystery than the last. It looks like some kind of primitive firearm, but too large to be a rifle, and too small to be a cannon. He thinks maybe he sees multiple barrels, but that could just be decoration. The royal arms are bad about totally useless extra metal. Then again, his greatsword isn't exactly innocent of that fault either.

He swims back up to breach the surface for air, but doesn't get much. Something in the water grabs his ankle and yanks him under. It isn't that he's being attacked that bothers him. Its that whatever has his leg has human hands. Multiple whateveres.

They're not all that strong, but there are a lot of them. He summons Apocalypse and is very grateful that the one greatsword he kept after Cor's purge of the Armiger is pointy instead of a giant razorblade on a stick. He can see the little daemons swimming around his legs in the water in flashes of blue sparks. Its easier to just keep dismissing and resummoning the sword in the water. The light is a bonus.

They look like some kind of goblin or imp, but with mismatch fins instead of mismatch wings. Gladio has time to think once he finds a section of the prow high enough in the water for him to stand on. He's still stabbing fairly randomly, but they aren't very smart daemons. He could have sworn there were no such thing as water daemons, but here they are. Around now is when Gladio accidentally stabs the prow itself instead of a daemon or just empty water. The whole thing cracks. Before he can move off the prow, the entire thing comes apart beneath him. He dispatches the last daemon, and watches the figurehead detach from the waterlogged wood of the prow. He doesn't have much time for regret. The damn thing pops right out of the water in front of him.

Well, of course they never figured out the damn things could float. Noctis is a terrible swimmer. Besides, the royal arms the prince already had despawned after leaving his grip. Gladio shrugs a shoulder out of the water, wraps his arms around the strange weapon and kicks his legs until he reaches the shore. Strel doesn't even look up from her feed. Admittedly, that wasn't his greatest performance. The shield can't be upset that he had no audience.
After rinsing himself off with bottled water just in case and replacing his clothes with dry ones, Gladio decides now is a good enough time to camp. He builds a fire out of what burnable wood he can find from out of the tomb. It's not much, but he doesn't want to use the wood someone put in the Armiger when he has something just as good here.

Strel lies down to sleep while Gladio examines the new royal arm. He was mostly right. It's some kind of firearm with three barrels each as long as one of his arms. The barrels rotate easily, and click into place in a triangular orientation with one on bottom in firing position. It doesn't have a trigger, but there is a slide like on a shotgun and the stock is curved to wrap around a shoulder. The shield isn't into guns. Whatever it is probably isn't really a gun. Better to leave this thing to Prompto to figure out. Well, if he can lift it.

When he next wakes, Strel is waiting for him. He chokes down some garula jerky and mystery dried fruit while he gives her food and water, but she only picks at it. He's worried, but they have to get out of here anyway. The giant rifle is heavy. Really heavy. He hates to have to give Strel more to carry, but they're almost done. Just one more coordinate now. Gladio wraps the whole thing along with the rapier in her spare saddleblanket and ties it to the back of her saddle. She accepts the weight with no complaint.

They pick their way back out of the cove, Gladio leading and Strel following again. She's a little slower, but that could just be the extra weight. The reflection of their lights in her eyes shines red. He could have sworn the shine was yellow, but it doesn't matter.

Quite some time later, Gladio curses Cor under his breath. The coordinates take them clear past Ravatogh and up the escarpment north of the volcano. Strel is slower with every step, but they only have a few more miles to go. The shield pulls his smartphone out of the Armiger. He has signal here, but very little. If they can reach the tomb, then he can call for a pickup. From the look of the Rock, he might have to. Its been belching smoke even more than normal. On the way north, he had seen a thread of far off lava sliding down the eastern slope of the volcano. Hopefully it manages to keep it's temper until they can get out of here.
There are some giant rotting plants lying here that Gladio wants to say used to be malboros, but they're blue so he isn't sure. He needs to find the tomb so Strel can rest. She's wheezing. He's not sure if she's just that tired or what, but she doesn't really respond to him when he talks to her or strokes her feathers.

The only way further north he can find is a path going higher up. If this doesn't lead to the tomb, then he has no clue where it could be. He has to lead Strel up the slope with her reins. Her head is low and beak pointed down. Gladio would stop to take some of the weight off her, but there is a building right here. This tomb isn't like any of the others. It doesn't even look like Lucian architecture. He thinks it must be very, very old. Rubble of white stone unlike anything else on the volcano and bent, cracked bars litter the path upward. It looks like someone wanted in here very badly at some point. Gladio can't complain. Tomb or not, he needs to take care of his chocobo.

When they reach the top, it dead ends into a small, square area with a glowing, circular, metal plate in the back wall. There doesn't seem to be an entrance. Or at least, there isn't until Strel leans against the wall with the metal disk in it.

They're going down.

The disk does nothing when Gladio touches it. The glow is gone.

He smacks at it, over and over, but nothing changes. This is not a tomb. Gladio has no idea where they are. The way back isn't working. The way forward involves huge moving stones covered in hot metal spikes. He had thought it was dark outside. This is oppressive. This air is stale, dry, and cold enough for his every breath to fog from his nostrils. The constant scrape of stone against giant stone is deafening. He can't hear anything else, and he can't see anything outside the light from his flashlight except for red lights and glowing metal.

Strel seems to be more comfortable where she sits on the floor of the elevator, so Gladio feels that leaving her for just a few minutes is fine. If he can't go back, then forward it is.
A couple hours later, Gladio is lost. The needle of his compass spins around inside it's plastic casing, and the pitch darkness combined with the alternating noise from the moving slabs of stone and dead silence when he moves away from them is even more disorienting. He only finds his way back to the first room by jumping down into it through a gap in the wall. The pale stone bleeds with rusty water, and Gladio doesn't want to touch it. It isn't even the creepiest thing in this place.

The shield is relieved when he finds the stairs leading up toward the elevator again. They could camp right inside the entrance, and leave as soon as Strel was up to it. Hopefully, Ravatogh would stay under control until then.

“Huh?”

There is no chocobo sitting in the elevator. The bronze disc is still in the opposite wall. The elevator didn't move. The bird did.

“Strel! Where'd you go, big girl?” Gladio was nervous before. Now even he can admit he's scared. She was so out of it before, why would she try to follow him? This place is dangerous enough for him to wander around in. What if he can't find her? What if something happened to her? Again? Gladio feels goosebumps crawl across his arms under his coat. He breathes deep to stay calm. To think.

“Hey, c'mon back here! Dammit!” He runs down to the bottom of the stairs and peers into the black room. Nothing but broken statuary and the overwhelming racket of moving stone. Gladio swallows thickly. He can't let himself freak out here. He can't give any attention to the boulder in his stomach or the shuddering down his spine. The shield tilts his head as his brows furrow.

Something is breathing harsh and wet down the back of his neck. That something is exactly the same height as his chocobo. The moist breaths stink. His skin crawls.

“Strel? Big girl?” Gladio's voice is too faint for even him to hear, but he knows it doesn't matter. He can just make out a hissing growl between the gaps of overwhelming scraping from the stones. The growl is so deep it sounds hollow and synthesized.

Gladio can see in the blue sparks that follow the arc of his greatsword. He sees purple miasma and glowing, red eyes. He sees black spikes scattered among bright orange feathers. He sees a huge, curved beak stuffed full of needle-sharp, obsidian teeth spewing dark sludge and coming down toward his own head. He sees the faint glow of the royal arms strapped tightly to what used to be
Strel. He sees the blade of Apocalypse slice through flesh, bone, and leather armor like so much festering rot. The disembodied head hits the stones before the body does, black blood splattering in a wide arc across the pale rock. Gladio crumples just afterwards. He doesn't have the time to feel anything about it.

The corpse in front of him disappears in a flash of crimson light.

Chapter End Notes

- Semi-Graphic depiction of decline in health of animal Major Character due to neglect leading to permanent incapacitation
- Graphic temporary death of animal Major Character at hands of Major Character
Chapter 19 - Paradise

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

I finally got around to starting a spotify playlist:

https://open.spotify.com/user/5ojawsgf5nutw5kpxc2mw8ikw/playlist/4CdirIcywWrEdNAhRVJD0c?si=QX62jyMLSCihpy6e2UsC4A

Please feel free to comment. I'm willing to beg. What's shame?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Optional Listening: Control - Halsey

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Gladio can't move at first.

It isn't the fear. It isn't the horror. Its the confusion.

There's another crimson flash up the stairs. The distorted screech of rage is loud enough to hear over the roar of scraping stone. Its loud enough to get Gladio moving. Not fast enough.

His boots scrabble and slide against the rock and he's too slow. Gladio's view of the twisted chocobo fills his vision as the daemon leaps through the darkness and down the stairs. He flinches when she lands, ground shaking and huge taloned feet straddling him where he's frozen on the floor. He barely manages to turn and cover his face in his arm when the daemon roars above him, purple miasma and black spittle flying from her beak. She rears up to rake him and Gladio's brain might be frozen, but his instincts are still operating enough to force him to his feet. Just in time. Daemonically altered claws rip through the back of his coat like tissue paper.

There's nowhere to run. Left is a bottomless void. Right is a giant moving wall. Forward is a door that leads to a maze of rotating death. He hesitates too long, and the unnatural screech rips through the air again. Gladio won't fall for the same move twice. He sprints right towards the giant wall moving toward him. The daemon's needle-filled beak snaps shut in the space the back of his neck just vacated, but the shield's vertical leap is just high enough for most of his fingers to reach the top of the still-moving stone. He scrabbles up the rock. She slams into it and screams. He has to yank his
legs back from the edge when the daemon jumps after him, and the stone changing direction barely saves him. There is black blood smeared across the moving rock below him.

The movement of the platform is disorienting, and she's determined enough to keep throwing herself against the rock. Every leap she makes is higher. Gladio isn't safe here either. He jumps across to a static section of stone where he can see the daemon. She seems... bigger. He can see the straps of what's left of her armor strain around her legs and the saddle seems to sink into bright feathers and black spikes.

Gladio's done too good a job. All of the arms are still either secured to her saddle or tied into her saddlebags. Even the huge firearm doesn't show any signs of slipping when the daemon crashes into the walls. The one time in his life it would have been useful to screw up, and he's gone and screwed that up for himself too.

There's no time for strategy, and that was never his job anyway. Gladio pulls Apocalypse out of the Armiger and slings it over his head with all his strength and lets it fly. The metallic clang that results doesn't make any sense. Not at first. He had aimed for the side of the chocobo's unprotected breast.

"Shit."

One tiny, insufficient wing is now slightly less tiny and way more sufficient. Black spikes spread from the limb where flight feathers used to be. She's mutating more every second. She's getting angrier every second. He needs a strategy, but there's no time for that. At the daemon's next jump, her crest peeks over the edge of the stone. The next jump reveals one brightly glowing red eye. Out of time.

Gladio summons his shield and braces himself. The chocobo crashes into the metal so hard it bowls him over and he slides clear to the opposite side of the platform. He has to dismiss the shield to get enough purchase on the smooth rock to stop his momentum from throwing him off the platform. He barely rolls out of the way, and her next jump is her last. She leaps over the edge and scrambles to catch herself, but falls through the gaps in the stones on the other side, screeching her way into the void.

Gladio has maybe fifteen seconds until the daemon leaps clear up onto the moving platform. She doesn't leap at him. He hops off the back of the rock into the gap below. She doesn't follow. He sneaks around the corner, jumping from stone to stone to the hole behind the sliding rock. He'll run for it and figure out something else.
The daemon is blocking the hole when the stone moves past. Gladio has just enough time to summon his greatsword and slide it past her breastbone. He doesn't wait for the flash of crimson light. The gap is too dangerous. So is climbing. There's nothing to do but fight.

He has to get the royal arms away from her.

She's getting smarter. This time she just charges him from across the room. He throws his greatsword out in an arc underneath her as he slides through the loose rubble under their feet. The blade slices through both the straining leather armor and the thickening muscle of her legs, but it doesn't cripple her. The crimson light flashes, and the daemon is gone again. Two empty, scored pieces of leather leg armor fall to the ground where she stood. He doesn't even have time to think before the chocobo is on him again.

This time, he loses. She blocks his upward cleave with the one armored wing and ducks under it to close her jagged beak nearly all the way around his abdomen. He only has a second to scream at the burn of daemonic sludge, at the crunch of his own vertebrae, at the feel of hundreds of needle-teeth puncturing his skin and so much deeper before the red light flashes and the shock of it stopping all at once takes the breath from him entirely.

He's not even breathing again yet, and his legs start moving before his brain catches up. This time he stumbles into the dark, narrow hallway left of the staircase. He scrambles up the steep ramp in front of him, lungs heaving and boots sliding on the smooth stone. Strel throws herself up the ramp, hissing and growling, but can't get enough grip on the rock to reach him with her altered talons and mutated wings. She knows as well as Gladio does there's no way off this ramp except through her. At least not alive anyway. He has no desire whatsoever to die again.

The daemon paces at the bottom of the ramp while Gladio tries to calm his panic and racing heart. He can't die again. The shield knows what shock is. He knows he's dangerously close to it. At least he can sit and think. The chocobo seems to have finally stopped growing. There is no more armor, but the saddle is so tight around her body that he can't see the straps anymore. He wouldn't be able to cut it off of her even if that were an option. Too risky. The arms could fall into the void.

If he can't cut the saddle off her, he can't kill her, and she can't kill him, then they're at a stalemate. He can't abandon the royal arms. He can't abandon Strel to an eternity of this.

Gladio just sits in the dark for a while. Stares at his newest mistake. He knows what he has to do, just how he's going to do it is the problem. After a while, he takes a bottle of water out of the Armiger and washes the gunk off his hands. He drinks the rest and tosses the bottle over the edge of the ramp and into the endless drop beyond. Then Gladio pulls pieces of wood out of the Armiger until he finds a thick board with holes at either end. He has to borrow one of Ignis' Spelldaggers to widen the holes. He can only channel enough magic through them for embers, but he still manages to
Once the holes are big enough for it, Gladio pulls what's left of the rope out of the Armiger. There's even less there than there was before. He laces two lengths of rope through the holes in the board and makes careful knots for each loop. That's at least half a plan. He has to hope the wood can hold the daemon. He makes more careful knots in what's left of the rope and uses the dagger to melt the synthetic fibers together for strength. He hopes Ignis didn't miss it.

He takes a few more minutes to rest. If this doesn't work, then that's it. There's no other way to get the arms away from the daemon or get her out of this hellhole. Not for the first time, Gladio wishes he wasn't alone. He doesn't pray. No one in Insomnia did.

The shield puts his contraption into the Armiger. It takes him quite a few tries to get the lasso around the daemon's neck. She doesn't rip it off her neck, but the tampering pisses her off. That's fine. It doesn't matter now. He lures the chocobo to the far wall and waits until she settles. Then Gladio sprints down the ramp and back through the narrow hallway. He only gets one chance. She's too smart to fall for this more than once.

The daemon screeches and careens through after him, dust flying as she smacks against the walls. Gladio sprints down the stairs and across the room toward a crumbling column. She's right behind him, but that's exactly what he needs. As he passes the column, he summons his greatsword and stabs it into a gap in the stone floor. Gladio lets the momentum whip his body around the column and then lets the weapon despawn. Strel blazes past him and the column, and the rope trails behind her. His heart is in his throat when he almost doesn't grab the loose length. Then, he braces his feet on the column.

The daemon's trajectory goes sideways as the rope pulls her around. The skin on Gladio's palms and fingers burns at the friction when it slides through his grip, but he holds tighter. She keeps coming around the column, but its too late. Gladio hops over the rope and pulls down as she passes again. Her last pass is just too short for her to reach him. Her own strength holds her fast to the column. Still, he's gonna have to be quick.

Gladio yanks the makeshift hobble out of the Armiger and rushes around the column behind the daemon. He wraps both ham fists around one bird leg and pulls with everything he has. Strel goes down like a sack of concrete, screeching all the way. The huge claws nearly shred his arms as he wrestles the chocobo's feet through the loops. When he tightens the hobble, he can hardly believe this worked. It holds. The daemon can't fight the contraption.

Before she has any opportunity to escape, Gladio borrows a dagger again to slice through feathers and leather alike until the saddle slumps to the ground with all the royal arms. He pushes the pile well out of the way of trouble. Then he untangles the long rope around the daemon's neck and pulls.
backward. The chocobo's neck folds over her back in such a way she can't put any strength behind fighting loose. Gladio ties the loose rope into the hobble.

It takes Gladio a very long time to drag her back to the elevator. He doesn't feel anything.

Then he goes back for the royal arms. He has to put the saddlebags around his shoulders and the chain weapon tied around his waist. The bundle with the rapier and giant firearm he carries in front of him. By the time he makes it back to the elevator, the disc in the back wall glows again. He leans against it. They go up.

Gladio dumps the arms onto the stone at the surface and drags the daemon out of the ruins, inch by inch. He has to be sure. Her warped screeching is so loud out here, even with Ravatogh spewing dust and ash. He kneels in the dark dirt and turns off his flashlight. Her lantern had broken what feels like ages ago now. He has to search for a section of orange feathers not covered in black blood or daemonic spikes. When he finds it, he strokes gently.

He'd called her Strelitzia. Bird of Paradise. He hopes there's some paradise left somewhere that's worthy of her.

“I'm so sorry, big girl. I'm sorry for everything.” Her screeching stops. She's quiet now. He hopes she understands. “You deserved better than me.”

Gladio stands and summons his greatsword. The body doesn't disappear after he lets it fall. There's no place to bury her here. There's no time.

“Thanks for everything. I'll miss you.”

The royal arms are heavy, but they're nothing next to the weight in his chest. Ash covers and coats everything gentle as snow flurries. Gladio can't see much of anything, but nothing in it's right mind would be out in this. Not even daemons. The only landmark he can make out is Ravatogh itself, a glowing waterfall miles away. He retrieves his smartphone. Just enough signal. It only rings once.
“This is Cor.”

Talking is harder than he thought it would be.

“Hello? Gladiolus? Are you hurt?”

“I'm gonna need a ride.” The call is silent for several moments.

“Alright. Where are you?”

“Fuck if I know. Everything's the same color.”

“You're at Ravatogh then. Gladiolus, if you don't know where you are, then I can't send anyone to find you. Can you get to the gas station near the mountain?”

“You want me to go closer to the Rock?”

“There's no other way, Gladiolus. I'm sorry.”

“Not near as sorry as you should be.” Cor is quiet again for another couple moments.

“I'll send someone out to get you. Just get to the station.”

“Gonna take a while. This crap is heavy.” More silence.

“Oh. I see... They'll take quite a while to get there anyway. Just keep moving.”

Gladio ends the call. Tosses the phone back into the Armiger. He tightens the hood of his coat over his face and starts walking. He's not sure if the ash rain or the lava better describes the way he feels.
Chapter End Notes

- Very Graphic depiction of extensive combat scene involving multiple temporary deaths including animal and human Major Characters at the hands of each other
- Major Character experiencing Acute Stress Reaction/Psychological Shock
- Death of animal Major Character at hands of human Major Character
Chapter 20 - Burning Bridges/Baiting Flames

Chapter Notes

No Specific Chapter Warnings.

Alright, first chapter from Aranea's PoV.

If that worries you, know that only tagged characters will have chapters in their PoV, and that most of them will still be the bros.

I also thought I could take a minute to explain where my PoV decisions are coming from. Most chapters have been/will be written in the PoV of the least emotionally invested of the major characters taking a major role in that chapter. The reason for this is that I very much prefer a 'show not tell' approach. By placing the perspective in the least invested character, that forces me to be inventive with descriptions. Of course, many chapters won't have that option.

Optional Listening: Counting Stars - One Republic

https://open.spotify.com/...PO5YmcSUSMqaQ2IfYHzxQ

Lestallum was always trashy. This is more than a little excessive.

Funny how fast shit can roll once things start going downhill. This is a very steep hill, and there's really just so much more farther to fall. Aranea wants to hold her breath, but the air isn't going to get any more breathable. Instead, she rolls her eyes for the upteenth time since she dragged herself out of the closet that Crownguard woman was just oh, so nice to let her share.

If she rolls her eyes much more, maybe they'll get stuck in her head and Aranea won't have to look at the stinking, filthy, ugly, crowded heap of garbage that Lucis has fallen to. And that is just it, isn't it? This is Lucis now. All of it. Every last living civilian for all intents and purposes is jam packed into a couple square miles of festering rat tunnels. They had to make room somehow. She can't come up with anything better, but that doesn't stop her from hating it.

Aranea Highwind isn't particularly claustrophobic. Sure, she owns the skies in combat, who would argue against her there? The plywood ceiling of the tunnel above her head warps and bows with every step across it. The entire arrangement is just begging for another incident. Exineris
couldn't figure out what to do to alleviate the overcrowding, so they left it to the pitifully overburdened Crownsguard to figure out. The solution they came up with is arguably worse than the problem they needed to solve. The narrow streets and alleys of Lestallum were all built up into hallways and tunnels. The hunters, Kingsglaives, Exineris types, and anyone else with anything important to do moved around in the rickety tunnels. The civilians were moved on top. It effectively doubled the space in the streets, but Aranea thought it was backwards. Wouldn't it make more sense to keep the civilians more or less indoors? There are so many more of them, too. She'd asked, sure, but Mr. Immortal wasn't interested in her opinion. It'll show him when the damn things collapse.

At least the awful racket is different, even if it isn't less really. The bone-shaking rattle from the jackhammers and whatever else the Lucians can find to tunnel into the bare rock is duller now. Every so often there's an explosion. They don't have any explosives. They're using magic somehow. Typical Lucians. Still can't function without magic even with their babyface prince who knows where. She had asked, of course. Can't fault a girl for being curious. Not even a little bit of suggestive posing got her anywhere with the Glaives. Mr. Immortal didn't even notice. The hunters only pretended to know anything, and Aranea is still mad at herself for even trying. At the very least, they could tell her why the damn world is ending.

Not that the slop they started to hand out after the hunters ran out of healthy beasts to hunt and turn into skewers is anything remotely similar to food. Aranea isn't picky. A healthy double-dose of military rations and austere environments instilled a near total lack of particularity in her diet years ago, but there should at least be a standard. This crap is more water than gruel. She thrusts her portion in the general direction of a few glaives against the opposite building. It's dark down here, alright?

“Knock yourselves out.” She thinks she can make out one of them rolling eyes at her. Aranea wants to roll hers back, but the gesture has gotten annoying after doing it hundreds of times. She sighs instead, then harder to make sure they heard her. Somebody in this trash can should. Not that she has any particularly good ideas or talents worthwhile to contribute to the current situation, but she'd at least feel useful.

“Yo, Lady A!” There go the eyes again. If she's lucky, they really will get stuck. Then she won't have to go to whatever new hell they'd come up with this time.

“What do they want now?” Biggs' gray officer coat stands out easily in the dimly lit tunnels, but Aranea can only make out Wedge from his pale face floating disembodied behind Biggs' shoulder.

“Rescue mission this time. Gotta go fetch them boys what traveled with the prince.”

“Rescue? How exactly did those pretty boys manage to find enough trouble that they need us?”
“Oh, its not trouble. Just that bloody volcano's gone and blown it's top.”

“And let me guess. Its easier to risk my ship than it is to risk a bunch of hunters and a truck.”

“You'd have to ask that Cor bloke. He's the one gave the message.” Her feet are moving before Biggs finishes. Maybe it is time to give Mr. Immortal a piece of her mind.

They have to pass through multiple tunnels, past the mine entrance, around puddles of nothing good, and struggle through the press of bodies and close air that makes up the new headquarters. They're bringing civilians through.

“What's going on? Why would they change their game-plan all of the sudden? These people make no sense.”

“The volcano.”

“Lot 'o ash up there, Lady A. Not safe anymore.” Enough to move the civilians? She's not an expert on giant angry mountains, but still. That's even more reason not to fly anywhere.

“Where's that damn Marshal?” Wedge points a gloved finger outside the cover of the plywood tunnels. The floodlights outside highlight the dusky flurries. Mr. Immortal is just standing there in the falling ash, and it collects on his shoulders and his cropped hair. It makes him look infinitely older.

“What's the big idea sending my ship and my men out in this mess?” Aranea flings an arm out for emphasis. Its an easy way to show she means business. She rests her other hand on her hip. Another way to say the same thing, but this is an argument she needs to win. She can't risk her ship in this freak weather event. Figures that the weather would give up and stop, and then start up again with this. If this even counts as weather.

“I need you to fly to Galdin Quay and pick up Prompto Argentum and his chocobo. Preferably before the ash makes it all the way there.”

“Blondie, right? What the hell is he doing there with a chocobo? He's alone?”
“With the chocobo,” Hilarious.

“What kind of ship are you running, Mr. Immortal?” He doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. The ship crashed a long time ago. This is the wreck. His phone goes off. Aranea is too busy having a crisis of conscience to eavesdrop.

“So, here's the thing. If we don't go get the kid...” Honestly, she isn't sure the ash can travel as far as Galdin without wind to carry it. He'd probably be fine.

“Can't leave 'im out there.” Wedge is for it.

“Whatever you decide, Lady A.” Which in Biggsspeak means to stop being a bitch. She'd sigh again, but a mouthful of ash sounds like even less fun than this little expedition is going to be. Mutiny it is. Fine.

“Highwind.” Aranea turns slowly and dramatically. Well, its supposed to look dramatic, but its hard to look impressive covered in ash. “Change of plans. I need you to go to Ravatogh first.”

“You're out of your damn mind!” Throw out arm. Stomp booted heel. Blinking away the ashes probably ruins the effect, but Mr. Immortal is starting to resemble a gray snowman. Hang on. The snowman is angry? What does he have to be angry with her about?

“You think I want to have to ask you? Do you think if I had a choice I wouldn't ask literally any other person?” That's an awful lot of contempt coming from someone asking for favors.

“Thin ice, Sir-Ash-A-Lot. You can talk to your loyal Lucian dogs licking your boots however you want, but you won't talk to me or my men like that.” Aranea doesn't have to affect being pissed now. Snowman doesn't back down a hair.

“If you refuse to go, you'll be abandoning the prince's retainers. I have no one else to send on such short notice, and no one else with an airship.” Wait, what?

“Hang on, Snowman. Nobody ever told me they were splitting up when I dropped them at that chocobo post. Did you do this? Am I about to have to pick up your mess?” His jaw clenches
repeatedly like he's trying to chew his own teeth. This just gets better and better the more she finds out. No wonder no one tells them anything.

“Yes. This is my mistake. Is that what you want to hear? I can't fix it. That's why I'm asking you.”

“Hang on. Weren't there three 'o them lads? Where's the other one?” Biggs has a point.

“You gonna tell me where to go find that one, or do we have to guess?”

“I don't know where he is.”

Normally, this is where Aranea would blow off whatever poor, stupid fool had managed to screw up everything for everyone. Her standard operating procedure is to look out for her own before anything else. After that comes money. Since money isn't worth the cloth its printed on anymore, at least not for anything that matters, that leaves only the one priority. Looking after her own.

The thing is, Aranea didn't have so many to look after anymore. Just herself, Biggs, and Wedge. Those two could look after themselves for the most part, but the idiots had flat refused to get rid of their Imperial uniforms. Lucians didn't trust them. Who can blame them?

Those three kids, and they are still kids somehow even after spending a year or so living out of a car, had grown on her a bit. Like... mold or something equally annoying and hard to get rid of. If she had to guess, Aranea would say it had something to do with most of the faces she'd had to interact with for years having been mechanical. It makes the few human ones stand out a bit. They were... scrappy. The boys could somehow make terrible jokes at disgusting daemons and ridiculous monsters and brush it off like it was nothing. It wasn't. It couldn't be. She knows from personal experience that you don't learn how to live like that without a lot of sacrifice. She hadn't actually interacted with them personally all that much, but they're hard to forget. She hadn't interacted with the meathead at all really, but he didn't seem any different, just grumpier.

Back in Steyliff Grove, when that creep of a Chancellor ordered her into the ruins with the prince and retinue minus Meathead, she fully expected to have to constantly save their lives. The prince seemed competent enough, but reckless and overdependent on his magic like he was compensating for something. The blondie with the guns was clumsy and fell all over her at every opportunity, but could thread a bullet through a needle. The stuffy adviser was about as highly-strung as it got, but weaved around her like she was a pebble in a riverbed. She was their enemy. They had every reason to hate her guts. They were polite.
The three that sat in her ship a couple weeks ago were very different from what she remembered. They were still annoyingly polite. Well, Meatshield wasn't, but none of them said much at all. Aranea hadn't asked for any information at the time. That wasn't part of their deal. The difference wasn't just that their prince was missing, but that they all gave off the distinct aura that came with a suicide mission. No jokes. No banter. No hope. Nothing but perseverance and stubbornness in equal measure. At the time, even though it didn't strike true, she chalked it up to the end of the world. After all, its personal for them. And now here's the kicker. This dumbass split them up and sent them all over Lucis while the entire world dies. This is the guy they put in charge of Lestallum. The guy they put in charge of the last gasps of humanity in Lucis.

Now that she knows the truth, Aranea can't turn her back. This asshole in front of her knows that.

So, as usual, she's cleaning up someone else's mess. Except this time its people. This time its people she likes. This time it isn't a ship full of human cargo that may as well be more boxes to her.

Even better, this jackass lost one.

“You'd better find him by the time we get back. I don't think you want to explain to your prettyboy King that you sent one of his friends off to die.”

The flinch is barely noticeable. Aranea gets no satisfaction from it.

A couple hours later through way too much ash, smoke, and eye rolling, Biggs sets the airship down in what Aranea can only guess used to be the road to Ravatogh. The station is right in front of them, but wouldn't be visible if not for the reflections from their lights in the windows. The heel of her boot gets caught on the threshold and kicks up a cloud of dust. Graceful.


A small mountain of faintly glowing metal and ashes leans against the shop counter. Aranea would never admit being just a tiny bit startled. She backs up a step and watches the boulder move, clouds of dust floating off his shoulders and adding to the dusky fog.
“Where's your bird?” Wedge yells out from the cargo bay over the drone of the airship's engine. Aranea thinks he sighs heavily, but it's dark and loud and she can't make out the sound. There is a telltale puff of more damned ash, though. Wedge shrugs it off when the big guy rather gingerly moves out of the shop past Aranea. Her eyebrows lower as they all move back onto the ship.

“Where's your flashlight, Beefcake?”

“Dead.”

“Which one? The light or the bird?” Dammit, Biggs.

“Both.” Awkward.

“That sucks, kid. Is there anything..?”

“I'm real grateful and everything, but can we just go?” She'd managed not to cringe until just now.

“Sure thing. Get us the hell out of there, Biggs. Dammit.”

Aranea has been in an awful lot of awkward silences, but this tops them all.

Biggs is piloting, as usual. Wedge is taking up space snoring on the other side of the cargo bay. They've abandoned her. The meat mountain is mostly shades of gray sitting across from her. She couldn't tell before, but he's wearing his dead bird's tack.

“Okay, I gotta ask.”

“Do you really?” He sounds tired. Bone tired. He won't set down anything he's carrying. She can't see his eyes in the dim light, and it bothers her, but Aranea figures a flashlight right in the corneas might just be overkill right now. That doesn't stop her from being nosy.
“Sure I do. What is all that crap you're hauling around?” He huffs at her, but answers anyway.

“Weapons. From long dead Lucian kings. Is that enough for you?”

“Whoa, I'm just curious. If they're so heavy, just put them down. They're no use to us.”

“I don't know that. I don't know you.”

Aranea's head tilts and eyes narrow, and she knows even before any sound comes out that whatever she's about to say she will *regret*.

“Well, excuse the hell out of me, Meatslab! Sorry for giving a damn. I'll make sure to not to make that mistake again.”

“You do that. While you're at it, let me know what other info you want to pay my way.”

Well, shit. The sneer falls away, and she sits back against the steel wall of the hold and folds her arms. There's probably no way to salvage this. At least not right now. Still, Aranea has a reputation to uphold. Sigh.

“I don't need anything from you, Brisketbuns. I don't want anything from you. I'm not getting anything for this, and neither are my men. I'm trying to help you.” He just grunts in her general direction.

It's quite a while until he speaks up again.

“Do you.. Are we getting the others?” He leans forward just far enough to make out his features under the hood of his coat in the dim light. Aranea swallows down a lump of concern. If he doesn't want it, she's not going to force him. She looks away so she isn't tempted to examine the damp lines through the layer of ash on his skin.

“Headed to Galdin for Blondie. Then back to Lestallum.”
“But what about..?” When he trails off Aranea can't resist. She turns back toward the man, but he's looking through her now at something beyond all of this. Maybe beyond her understanding.

The burning curiosity isn't even an ember now.

The ash storm lets up somewhere around the southern terminus of Taelpar Crag. From outside the clouds of smoke, Aranea can see the freak weather system move north over the eerie landscape in the bizarre greenish glow of what she thinks might actually be daylight. Well, the end of the world edition. She doesn't look long before smacking a gloved hand onto the hatch controls.

Blondie has the sense to wait on a high crag overlooking the abandoned resort along with a very excitable chocobo that confuses Aranea until she realizes that his feathers are a deep gray. The bird is carrying a small shield in his beak like a dog with a frisbee. The eyeroll comes unbidden. They both hop up onto the hydraulic ramp with no hesitation or suspicion. Aranea pretends that doesn't make her feel just a little bit better about all of this. He doesn't even wait for the hatch to close before he's flapping hands covered in ridiculously impractical mittens at Mt. Meat.

“Dude, what is all this? Where's Strel?” The big one just turns away. The little one deflates like a latex balloon. The chocobo pokes Meatymitts in the arm with the shield.

“Get that thing away from me.” The meatbag growls.

“Okay... Whatever you need, Big Guy.” Freckles is trying to fidget and pull the bird away simultaneously. He sits on the opposite bench when Wedge goes up front with Biggs holding his chocobo's reins. All enthusiasm is gone.

“We're gonna need your bird to lie down. Its a long way back to Lestallum.”
“What do you mean Lestallum? Aren’t we gonna go get Iggy first?” This is what she gets for wanting to be useful.

Now they're both looking at her like she has any of the answers. Like the next one she gives will redefine their world.

Aranea pretends turning away doesn't feel like swallowing ashes.
This is a lot.

Prompto had thought that being alone at the edge of the world was awful. The sight and stink of Lestallum, a tiny, cramped beacon of piss, sweat, ashes, and terror, is an unimaginable new reality. The town is so crowded with the press and heat of bodies that he'd had to ride Bullet with Gladio on the sled just to get the thing to their assigned room. The shield hadn't come back with him to take his bird to the new stables. He'd just dragged the whole sled inside the building.

Bullet is quiet under him. He had been since they got on Aranea's ship. Prompto scratches at the feathers of his neck to keep him calm as the bird picks and pushes his way through what feels like thousands of people, but the gunner knows can't possibly be more than a few hundred total in the entire town. Between the lack of light in the tunnels and the mass of humanity, Prompto is dripping with sweat under his clothes. Couldn't they have found a solution for the crowding that wasn't absolutely horrifying for the claustrophobic?

Gladio on the other hand, hadn't been afraid of the tunnels. He'd been afraid of the chocobo. Prompto really wasn't sure what that meant. The shield had sat on the sled, long legs folded underneath him and arms full like a very uncomfortable and irritable weapon rack. He'd been all too happy to stay behind. The gunner knows that Strel has to be dead. He's more confused than sad about it, but there are so many other things to worry about right now he can't spare much for her. That thought does make him sad, but he's already barely holding it together anyway.

The stables are fenced off from the rest of the town and not covered by the plywood tunnel system. Really they're just an uncovered street in a back corner not far from the Exineris plant and the new greenhouse. The ash is thick and pristine as freshly fallen snow. Only a little is falling right now, but that doesn't mean it can't start again. The stalls are mostly empty, a lone chocobo the only
occupant under the awning. She whistles and chirps at Bullet while Prompto closes the gate behind them. Prompto doesn't have to lead his bird to the stall nearest the sapphire chocobo in the furthest one. They whistle and coo at each other, the sapphire bird picking at the facemask of the gray while the gunner takes care of Bullet's tack. They missed each other.

The impressive and very blue animal belongs to Noctis. Her original name had been Jewel, but Noct had changed it when they all realized she wouldn't answer to it. They had gone through dozens of names, each more ridiculous than the last trying to find anything the bird would answer to. In the end, they had found her name by complete accident during a conversation about potential fishing in Altissia. He'd named her Marina. Prompto still thinks it fits her perfectly. She was always a little too enthusiastic about having to swim.

Prompto is careful to brush down and fluff Bullet's feathers to make sure they aren't still full of ash. He doesn't want the chocobo to get sick trying to clean himself just because the gunner can't see the ash in his feathers. Once both birds are busy eating and the tack is all put away for a later cleaning, Prompto carefully pulls the tiny cactuar from where it had hitched a ride inside his coat.

Somehow, it hasn't poked him once. Prompto smiles sadly at the creature as it wiggles it's tiny arms and legs up at him like a bizarre, green infant. Maybe it is still a baby? That would explain the behavior. He's not supposed to be its mom, is he? The gunner tucks the plant back into his coat and picks his way through the crowds again. This time he has to go around Distributions and Requisitions, and by the time he reaches the other side of the crush his right ear is ringing and he's afraid the creature in his coat is crushed. There are glaives guarding the door. Prompto tries not to cringe. He's not going to be able to sneak past them.

“No one's allowed here. That includes hunters.” The cocoa-skinned woman closest to him says. Her hair is full of ash. Her partner, a husky, pale man with blue eyes so pale they look gray as the powder on his shoulders, summons a pair of daggers in a flash of blue sparks. That strikes Prompto as both confusing and very interesting.

“I'm um... I'm not exactly a hunter really. Well, sorta. But...”

“No entry. Only the Kingsglaives and Crownsguard have access to Food Production.” Why does everything need an official sounding title again?

“Okay, that works. I'll be going in now.”

“I don't know what your deal is kid, but you ain't coming in here.”
“But you said Crownsguard could go in? I'm Crownsguard.” Yeah, he didn't think they'd believe him, but that woman's stare is scary.

“Sure you are. And I'm the King of Lucis. Get out of here already.” He waggles the knife in one hand around like someone who most likely knows exactly how to use it and doesn't much care what a Nif-looking kid thinks about it.

When Prompto summons his own weapon and casually spins the handgun around his fingers, the man backs off a step and his weapons disintegrate into blue sparks when he drops them. He holds up his open hands palm out. The woman just rolls her eyes.

“Yeah, okay. You're one of the prince's boys, aren't you? The ones that were supposed to take him to get married?” Prompto wants to snap at her, but instead he just shoves his pistol into the Armiger.

“Yup. And before you start in with the jokes, I'm gonna have to tell you. I've heard them all. I'm not really in the mood. Can I go in now?”

“Whatever kid. We gotta log you in and out though. Procedure, “ The male glaive shoves a clipboard at his chest and Prompto just barely manages to grab it before it injures his jacket buddy. Prompto makes a point of not fidgeting or chewing at his lip as he fills in blanks. He's too tired for this, but he's also too tired to argue. He shoves the clipboard back into the glaive's chest and yanks the door open to go inside. The door is not soundproof.

“That kid was one of the prince's bodyguards? No wonder they got lost.” When the woman laughs, Prompto's eyebrows lower and his lips turn down and he has to stand and fight the flare of white-hot anger that burns through him for a full minute with his fists clenched tight at his sides. He doesn't have time for this now. The gunner takes a deep breath and exhales heavily to clear his mind, then takes in his surroundings.

Prompto's first impression of the greenhouse is a library, but for plants instead of books. There are rows and rows of various types of metal shelving as far back as he can see stacked nearly to the ceiling with various plant life. Most of the plants are barely shoots, and when he pokes his head around a corridor of rows he can see that the farther back the shelves go, the younger the flora. The planters at his elbow are full of young, tender cilantro. The gunner has to stop and breathe for another second at the memories of how he knows. There's no time for that right now either. Later.
Further along, the shelves give way to larger and larger planters. It just seems to go on and on, and Prompto wonders exactly how Exineris built around the power plant to have this much space. He had seen the aluminum sheeting that made up the roofing of the greenhouse from the air on the way in. The building nearly circled the entire power plant without actually touching it anywhere as far as he could tell from that distance.

The gunner stops when he hears voices around the bend of the inner wall. He has to do this now. When he shoves his hand inside his coat, the cactuar slides further down inside and wiggles its arms and legs. Prompto can't grab the creature with his stupid mittens. Whomever is coming will be here quickly. His mitts stumble over the zipper of his coat and the cactuar flops out onto the plywood floor onto it's back, limbs still wiggling and rolling gently from side to side. Prompto has just enough time to cringe as shoes come into his view. The shoes are rather small.

“You got me a real live cactuar! That's a real cactuar! Oh, my gods you guys are so awesome!” Talcott's exuberant hopping and dancing is in very real danger of smashing his new cactuar. Prompto finally manages to open a mitten to grasp the wiggling plant around the middle.

“That is a monster. You do realize, don't you?” The worn dress shoes beyond Talcott's sneakers belong to Dustin, and Prompto couldn't possibly have gotten luckier. The retainer would go with basically anything for the kid's sake.

“But its a cactuar!” Talcott stage whispers and stares up in wonder at the green toddler from where the gunner holds it.

“Its harmless. Not afraid at all. See, watch,” Dustin has the good sense to not interfere when Prompto wrestles off a glove with his teeth and brushes his bare fingers along the cactuar's ribbing. He is, of course, unscathed. He sets it down when Dustin sighs and they stand and watch as both the monster and the boy waddle around the row of planters.

“I suppose it won't do any harm.”

“Score.”

“Hey. I got food.” Gladio grunts at the room when Prompto shuts the door.
“Thanks, dude. Wait, that's food?” It looks like the watery glue that he remembers making paper mache masks with in junior high. He can't decide what he wants more. Shower, food, or sleep. The room and Gladio both smell like expensive soap. The subtly citrus smell doesn't belong. The shield's things smell like something woody and hyper-masculine. Prompto and Noctis both used shower gel and shampoo that reeked of several different and clashing varieties of fruit. Gladio had used Ignis' soap. Prompto's eyes burn.

He ignores the bowl of gruel sitting on the floor of the tiny room and starts stripping off layers of filthy clothing. The gunner watches Gladio as he makes minuscule adjustments to the arrangement of weapons spread across the floor from where he sits cross-legged on one mattress in the middle of the room. He keeps returning to the pieces of the siege engine, now disassembled without the boards that made up the sled. The boards are missing, but that doesn't really matter anymore.

“The hells this thing supposed to be?”

“I dunno really. It was in pieces like that when I found it. The wood too.” Prompto kicks his boots off one at a time into the corner near the door. Gladio's much bigger boots have already made a home there beyond the trail of ash going into the tiny bathroom.

“Was that why the wood was in the Armiger?”

“Nah. I left it there just in case. Came in handy too.” Gladio just grunts.

Prompto holds it together right up until he pulls an orange plastic bottle of Ignis' stupidly expensive bergamot body wash out of the Armiger. Figures he would cry over soap.

By the time he makes his way out of the cramped bathroom, Prompto doesn't have any energy left to brush his own blonde hair out of his eyes, much less pretend to be happy.
“Go light on it. Won't last very long with both of us using it.” Gladio is still moving around the puzzle pieces of the royal arms. When he stretches too far, red and purple welts peek out from under the collar of his soft, worn Crownguard tank. If he wanted to hide them, he should have worn an actual shirt.

“He bought eight bottles. Pretty sure it'll be okay, Big Guy. If you're not gonna sleep, at least use a potion.” Ignis had flipped when he found the stuff in Altissia. He bought every bottle they'd had. Now Prompto wishes he'd checked for more before they came back to Lucis.

“Dunno what you're talkin' about.”

“I'm sorry about Strel.”

“Yeah? Well I'm sorry for Strel.” The shield's voice has gone high and rough with strain and emotion. Prompto knows better than to try to comfort Gladio. At least not right now. Not when they're both exhausted and miserable. The bigger man's temper isn't something he has the energy or patience to accommodate at the moment. Prompto sits back against the empty wall behind Gladio and watches the musculature of his back move under his shirt. There's nothing else to do here.

After quite a while, Prompto's brain kicks into gear again and his mouth spits out words neither of them are ready for.

“He's not dead.” Prompto's eyes burn so fiercely he has to squeeze them shut. The rattle and scrape of metal against the worn concrete floor stops. The gunner's stomach lurches and chest feels tight, but he started it, so what right does he have to complain?

“We don't know that, do we?” The shield sounds like he's been eating glass.

“He can't be dead. He promised.”

“Promised? What?”

“He swore he would save Noctis. He can't be dead.” There's a grunt and a gap of relative silence. The walls are thick concrete with no windows, but the noise outside still filters through faintly.
“Blondie... You know just as much as I do that Iggy's a damn good liar.”

It's true enough, but not quite accurate. He was a good liar when he spoke to Noctis. Not about him.

“I believe him. We have to believe him.”

“Are we seriously gonna argue about this right now?” Prompto opens his eyes and he can barely make out the ragged, deep brown ends of the shield's hair from where his head is slumped between his shoulders. He sounds a little angry. That's okay. Prompto thinks he might be a little angry too.

“Yeah, I guess we are. We are, because if we just give up... If he's dead, then so is Noctis. If he's dead, then we're fucked. The whole world is fucked.”

“The whole world is already fucked!”

Gladio is up on his feet so fast Prompto presses into the wall behind his back hard enough to feel give in the sheetrock. The meager space is too small to accommodate him. Too small to contain the words. Too small to hold them together.

“Where the fuck are you, Prompto? Where is your damn head?” He's throwing tattooed arms around and punctuating with one thick, accusing finger.

“I'm right here! I'm not just going to give up, and I won't accept that Ignis would either.”

“Give up? You think that's how it works? He's not a fuckin' superhero, Blondie. He can't save the whole damn world on coffee and willpower!” His face is so red he might explode. He doesn't seem to realize he's shaking in the effort to contain himself.

“I never said that, dude.” The anger drains out of Prompto and leaves him cold and just tired.

“Then what? What are you tryin' to say?” Gladio's arms drop limply to his sides and he tilts his head up to stare at the ceiling. Prompto watches the blood drain from his face and down his neck. He fidgets with the silver buckle of his armband and gathers his thoughts. The shield doesn't move. The
gunner wonders what he could possibly be looking for in the yellowed and water-stained plaster.

“I dunno about the world, but I know and you know that Iggy would do anything to save Noct.”

“He already did, Prompto.”

“Yeah, and I bet he would do it a million times if that's what it took.”

“Probably would. Idiot.” Gladio drops back down onto the mattress and folds himself back up, but this time he faces Prompto instead of the arrangement of weapons. The shield obviously expects something else from him, but he's fresh out of words. His knees are interesting. There is one thing though.

“You think maybe he put something in the notebook?”

“Notebook? You mean the one in the Armiger you told us not to use?”

“It was kinda dumb, I know.” Neither one of them moves for a moment, but Gladio isn't exactly known for patience when there's something to be done. He pulls the notebook out of the Armiger and Prompto's heart can't decide whether to sink into his guts or escape his throat.

The notebook is open.

They both still and stare at the mostly blank page. Prompto can't read anything on it from where he's sitting, and he's afraid. He's so scared he can't even look at the other man and he curses himself. Gladio tosses the notebook onto the floor between them and the slap of the paper on the concrete makes Prompto flinch. Gladio turns around and lies on his side in the middle of the bare mattress, his knees in his chest. The gunner picks up the book. There are only two words written across the page in a shaky, splintered mockery of Ignis' normally flawless script.

*Im sorry.*
They fall asleep back to back on the single mattress in mirrored misery, both men curled into themselves and only just touching spine to spine. The first time Gladio wakes up gasping at the dark, Prompto gets up and turns on the bathroom light. The second time, the shield shouts in frustration and throws the nearest object into the wall. The buckler leaves a dent in the concrete. They don't try again after that.

They don't talk. When they're both too bored of staring at walls, weapons, and each other, they go out to the command center. Prompto doesn't even see it coming. Cor certainly didn't. Gladio sucker punches the Marshal right in the eye with a giant ham fist. Cor flies backward over a table full of maps and charts and Gladio pulls the notebook back out of the Armiger from over his head and smacks the other man in the face with it. The shield doesn't wait to see what happens. Prompto does.

He sticks around just long enough to watch the blood leave Cor's face and the light leave his one open eye.

Gladio mumbles something about going to see Iris. He doesn't go.

Prompto mumbles something about going to see the chocobos. He doesn't go either.

They wade through the masses back to their tiny room and sit together, back to back, holding each other up in the dark.
- Argument over possible death of Major Character (unresolved)
- Assault between Major Characters
Chapter 22 - Sparingly Change

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

Well, here's Iris. This one is a bit short, sorry about that. I'll try to get the next up quickly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Optional Listening: People Help the People - Birdy

Nobody tells Iris anything.

Its easier to not think about what she's actually doing. Its easier to do what little she can, what little shes allowed, if she thinks about anything else.

Every day is the newest worst day of her life.

Its easier to hand out bowl after mismatched bowl of watery, barely-edible mush if she doesn't listen. Iris can fill her head with all her thoughts and worries about her brother, about the other boys, about their prince, about the sewing that's the only thing waiting for her back in the smallest room in the most secluded corner of the Leville. She doesn't have to share. It makes her feel horrible. The fact that it isn't actually a hotel room, but a converted maintenance closet doesn't relieve a bit of the guilt.

Dwelling in such a way isn't healthy. Iris is young, not stupid. Still, if it helps drown out the sobbing, the begging, the rattling and clanking, and the static roar of a thousand hushed voices whispering and breathing the same stifling air until the walls bleed with condensation, the girl would rather contemplate guilt.
“Here you go.” Sometimes they can't see her very well in this particular alley. Its very dark here. Maybe black isn't the most practical color when a person wants to be seen? Not wanting to see them doesn't mean that she shouldn't try to make it easier on them to see her.

Thinking cannot overpower the smell, however. There are so many smells in Lestallum, each more unpleasant as the last. Sometimes, Iris likes to think she's getting used to it, and then she'll go back to her tiny, safe closet in the clean, quiet hotel and the stink of her own clothes makes her fight the urge to retch. Sweat, breath, mud, grime, mold, mildew, sawdust, ash, and more that the girl refuses to even contemplate sinks into everything. That's why she sprays sylleblossom perfume into her left elbow before every shift for Distribution.

An older man with more ash covering the crown of his head than thinning, white hair coughs wetly into his hand from where he sits in the alcove between two expansion pipes. Its dangerous, but Iris is in too much of a hurry to get away from him to try and explain. The worst part isn't that she cares more about herself than the refugees. Its that they're all so grateful. For everything.

“Thank you, sweet girl.” Iris hopes the expression she makes looks more like a smile than a cringe.

There's a sudden commotion in the crowd maybe forty girl-sized paces further down the alleyway, and Iris crushes the spike of fear that shoots up her spine with merciless determination. She might be a girl, but that doesn't make her any less an Amicitia. She can't help but be just the tiniest bit jealous of her brother as she elbows and wedges her way through bodies.

“Oh, c'mon lady. I bet you Crownguard don't eat this garbage.” A man, maybe the same age as Gladdy and with unevenly-shorn hair so bright it seems to glow in the dim light of the lanterns, looms over Monica where they stand in the middle of an uncovered intersection. Red is not a natural hair color found anywhere in Lucis. Iris would think about where he must have come from, but there's no time for that right this second. He's lifting one arm to point right in the woman's face, and the sleeve of his cheap, ill-fitting, flimsy jacket is torn all the way down to the cuff and rusty with old blood.

“I don't answer to you Lucians. I'm sure as fuck not gonna answer to the chick that hands out the slop.” Then he is Nif. How he got to Lestallum and where from is a problem for later.

“Stand down. I will not tell you twice.” Monica may as well be made of dry ice and diamonds; incredibly cold and impossibly rigid.

For now, Iris may not quite understand the sudden sour discomfort at the situation, but even she
knows that the remainder of this man's life can be measured in milliseconds.

The man's hand opens flat and he pulls back. Monica's implacable eyes flick upward, and a flash of blue sparks signals the end of the Nif's life just as much as the magical crossbow bolt that pierces clean through his jugular.

His hair doesn't seem all that bright anymore.

The careful stacks of rations are ruined. His gasping, stammering corpse crashes through the bowls and splashes into the puddle at their feet. The blood doesn't spray, but instead bubbles and wells around the Nif's hands as he tries to keep it inside his body. Monica's head turns to look over the rickety cart of bowls. She's obviously more affected by the wasted food than the dying man bleeding sluggishly out on her boots.

“There is no room for debate. There is no room for insubordination. No one is being forced to stay in Lestallum. You can live miserable here, or you can die miserable out there. Those are your choices.”

Iris watches the Nif die. She can't look away. Now the stink is copper. Now the noise has gone silent.

“If you don't like those choices, then it would be in your best interests to keep that to yourselves.”

When Iris ducks under the expansion pipe that blocks half the door to her room, she sniffs wetly over and over and scrambles for her smartphone. After the fifth unanswered call to her brother, she gives into the tears. She had wanted so badly not to cry today.

She knows Gladio is back in Lestallum. Why won't he answer the phone? Why won't anyone tell her where he is? For some reason, the completely impractical and decorative moogle-themed cover around the back of her smartphone is suddenly the most childish thing on Eos.

By the time Iris goes to bed, there are no more moogles to be found in her few belongings. There are no more in pictures or themes on her smartphone. There is still one she had made for Noctis
underneath the tiny student's desk she uses as a sewing table, but she turns it to face the wall. When it continues to mock her, she throws a towel over it.

The next 'day', she gives the stuffed moogle to the first child she sees. The little girl is so excited, jumping up and down and swinging the toy back and forth, that she knocks over her rations. Iris gives the child's mother another bowl before the girl even has the time to realize she should be upset.

Iris isn't taking anything from anyone else.

She isn't really hungry anyway.

More time passes. More bowls of gruel. More nameless, hopeless faces. Then something different happens. On her way back from a shift at Distribution, Iris just barely spots beacon bright hair under a black hunter beanie. The opportunity is worth the effort of elbowing people around. She ignores the grumbling. When she taps him on the shoulder, Prompto stops and turns slowly to look down at her. Recognition comes slowly, and he looks... Bad. Really bad. Hasn't slept or eaten in days bad.

“Whoa, Prompto! Who died?”

Iris knows immediately and unequivocally that this is the absolute worst possible thing she could have said.

His freckled face goes from bone-white and slack to flushed and furious in the space between heartbeats. Iris feels herself backing away from him, feels anticipatory dread sink into her stomach, and she realizes that she is afraid.

“He. Is. Not. Dead.” Prompto spits each word through his clenched jaw like each one has committed a very grave injustice. There's so much heat in his words and his expression that his violet eyes burn.
Iris wants to run away from him. Prompto stands and seethes in her general direction, and its only
the hope that he's not angry with her and the fear for what his anger means that forces the next awful
question from her throat.

“It isn't... Where's Gladdy?”

Prompto is still angry, but he shakes his head jerkily and blinks until his eyes are clear again. The
gunner is actually looking at Iris now instead of through her. The stiffness in his stance fades just a
touch.

“He's okay, Iris.” He's hoarse. Not with sickness, but as if he's spent a lot of time shouting.

“Why isn't he answering his phone then?” Prompto sighs and frowns. Rolls his eyes in exasperation.

“Because he's a stubborn jackass.”

“Hey! That's my brother you're insulting there.” He turns to walk away, but pauses to look over
his shoulder at the girl.

“Well, got a news flash for you. Your brother is a stubborn jackass.”

“I didn't say he wasn't.”

“Do you wanna go see him or not?”

“Are you seriously asking that?” The corner of Prompto's mouth turns up just a very little bit. It's
already back into the frown when his feet move again.

“Just... Don't mention Strel or Ignis. Okay?” That's both confusing and alarming.

Iris follows the gunner through and around Distributions and Requisitions and deeper into the
tunnels. There are fewer civilians here. She would love to say that its because this is the
administration section of Lestallum, but she knows its really because the refugees are afraid of the Crownsguard and Kingsglaive now. She follows him around in what feels like a giant circle, but is actually a dead end created by the headquarters on the other side. Iris never would have found it.

Prompto doesn't lead her into the main building, but into a maintenance door. Figures. Are all of the Crownsguard living in utility closets? Do the boys even know that's where they're living? Theirs is fancy. No exposed expansion pipes and they have a bathroom. There's nothing in it really, just a couple mattresses, several uneaten bowls of gruel stacked along a wall, and a haphazard pile of laundry in a corner. There is also a painstaking arrangement of what can only be royal arms covering most of the floor. There is not a Gladio.

“Yeah, I dunno where he went really.” Prompto scratches at the back of his head through his beanie.

“How many places can he possibly go?”

“Good point.”

They head back around the maze of tunnels. Both the gunner and the girl stop short at the sound of someone screaming. Iris can't make out the words, but the voice is unmistakably her brother. Prompto is already racing ahead of her around the corner and through the command center. Iris can't see over the crowd of hunters and glaives.

“Get the fuck away from him!” He sounds like sandpaper feels.

“Gladiolus, you're making it worse, and you're causing a scene.” There's a hissing that Iris thinks might be a very angry chocobo. She wedges her elbows in between two hunters and shoves them apart.

“He means the chocobo, dude. Get away from the bird.” Iris pushes around a glaive and now she can see what's going on.

Gladio, Prompto, and Cor have taken positions in the middle of the highway swept clear of ashes.
Between them, a ragged and exceptionally angry black chocobo hisses and screeches at Cor. The chocobo is covered in ash and royal arms. Iris can barely make out the shape of an unconscious rider. The Marshal makes a move toward the animal again and the bird rears up and hisses louder, crest raised behind a leather mask. The incapacitated rider doesn't fall out of the saddle. He's tied himself into it.

“Cor, I swear if you don't get the fuck out of here..” Gladio growls low and with intent. His stance is wide and low like a wrestler. Iris can't see his face from where she stands.

Cor doesn't back off. The rider lists to one side, and Iris sees his eyes flutter open through the ash covering his face and caked in his hair. If Iris didn't already know this man is Ignis, she would never recognize him. He looks more statue than human. The only part of him that isn't gray with ashes is his eyes. They're wild red with fever, and the vibrant green of his irises nearly consumes his pupils in a half open, glassy, and incoherent stare.

“Calm down, Gladiolus!” The bird rears again. Iris sees a flash of blue sparks.

“Dude. I'm gonna give you one last warning.”

Prompto levels a pistol directly at Cor's temple. His voice is calm. His hands are steady. His eyes are violet magma.

“Then I'm going to shoot you.”

Chapter End Notes

- Graphic depiction of minor character death
- Gun violence (unresolved)
Chapter 23 - Tumbler Down

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

I really did the best research I could for all of this. I hope I'm even close to getting it right around artistic license *cough* embellishment *cough*.

Shoutout to my good friend who knows who she is and didn't get my pun chapter title. I'm still bootyhurt! For the record, the word tumbler can be used to describe an acrobat that performs somersaults and flippy stuff.

Talk to me? I'm not scary!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Optional Listening: Prayer of the Refugee - Rise Against

Two hours earlier -

Gladio can't see. He can't hear. There's nothing to see but fathomless void, and nothing to hear but the empty, static feedback of utter silence. He feels vertigo, faintly and distantly, when he realizes he's floating. There's no ground under him, yet he doesn't fall.

His heart thunders against his ribs, and he can feel panic building, searing and chilling at the same time, but there's no accompanying prickle of sweat between his shoulderblades or over his temples. His ribs expand quickly and shallowly even with no rush of air through his nostrils.

There are flashes in the dark just at the edges of his vision. Gladio turns his head this way, that way, up, down, left, and right faster and faster. He can't follow the burning glow in invisible, insubstantial corners. Shining, crimson eyes flash open in his peripheral vision and disappear just as quickly when he turns to catch them.

A sick, deep purple fog billows into existence above Gladio's head, and he looks up, frozen in fear and immobilized in place, and watches the mist expand and coalesce. He realizes that the void isn't actually dark. There's just nothing else here to see except for the obsidian spikes and overlapping rows of onyx teeth emerging from the slowly-rotating, monstrous cloud. Something is dripping from
it and onto Gladio. He draws a shaking hand over his face. The thick, dark liquid is black and oily between his fingers and his stomach flips and rolls. His head snaps back up just in time to see orange feathers burst out from between the impossible needle-teeth and jagged spikes of the daemonic miasma.

That's when he starts to fall, vertigo washing over him in a tidal wave and guts flying up to clamp his throat shut and steal the air from his lungs, but the creature falls faster. Tendrils of violet smoke and shadowed void wrap around him as it grows and expands to swallow him whole.

Gladio wrenches awake and upright, eyelids snapping wide and sucking shallow breaths through his clenched teeth. His hands scrabble for something, anything to ground him as he fights the panic and sways, disoriented and dizzy. His fingers wrap around something and tighten, vice-like around the object. It takes him several minutes to stop hyperventilating, but his heart still beats like its trying to escape his chest. His eyes focus and the object in his fists pulls away from his deathgrip.

Damn. At least this time he hasn't thrown anything. Gladio would much rather examine the collection of dents in the concrete wall in front of him than the irritated skin of Prompto's pale forearm in the shape of his own mitts. The marks wrap all the way around and cover almost the entire arm. They're probably under the armband too.

Prompto stumbles over the corner of the bare mattress on the way into the bathroom. Gladio frowns at the wall and counts. Seven times he threw one of the royal arms at the wall. Each left its own unique crater in the otherwise smooth surface. The gunner had insisted they switch sleeping positions after the last throw nearly took out his head instead of the wall. He comes back out of the bathroom and kneels in front of Gladio. Prompto raises his left hand, but before he can bring the damp washcloth to the shield's forehead, Gladio pulls his head back and away. Prompto's hand freezes in midair, a bead of water running down the length of his arm. His expression tells Gladio nothing, but the eyeroll conveys plenty.

“I can do it.” It hurts to talk. He's been hoarse for days now.

“Yeah. I know you can. That's not the point.” Prompto's voice scrapes just as much as his own. The other man stays frozen, the wet cloth dripping onto the mattress. Gladio doesn't have the slightest idea what he's waiting for. Permission?

“I'm not him. I'm not gonna be his fuckin' replacement either.” Prompto's brows lower under his fringe and eyes narrow. Great. Here they go again. The gunner's arm stays still in the air, but the rest of him shifts closer.
“I know you're having a rough time right now, so I'm going to let that slide. This time. Get it?”

Gladio doesn't want to fight anymore. Besides, that was way, way out of line. The last two times they had screamed back and forth over whether or not Ignis is dead. Before that, it was a shouted debate over whether or not Eos is doomed. Prompto stands back up and tosses the rag into the shield's bare chest with a wet slap. It falls into his lap and water begins to soak into his boxer briefs. He thinks maybe he just deserves it and leaves it. Its cold. He doesn't really have anything else to put on. His eyes glide past the gunner's legs and to the ever-growing pile of dirty clothing in the corner. They don't even know how to wash their own clothes. How are they going to do this?

Prompto goes back to the bathroom and shuts the door. Mostly. He's taken to leaving it open a crack so there's still light in the main room. Gladio is grateful. He just isn't any good at showing that. They've done nothing but fight for days. He wishes he had some idea of why he feels the need to push so hard. The more he pushes, Prompto pushes less. He hadn't really thought there was an end to the smaller man's patience, but Gladio has a feeling he's dangerously close to finding it.

He's not petty enough to entertain the thought that its because he's not Ignis.

Prompto comes back out of the bathroom and shuffles around, digging various pieces of clothing from around the room and out of the Armiger. He doesn't so much as look at Gladio while he pulls together the cleanest clothing he can find.

“Where are you goin’?”

“I have no idea,” He grumbles as he yanks his beanie down over his head and shoves his hair out of his face and around the rim underneath. “Around. Somewhere. Not here.”

**Fifteen minutes earlier -**

He's managed to get mostly dressed. His coat is ruined and he doesn't have any clean shirts left. Its fine. It isn't even really that cold in Lestallum anymore with all the people stuffed in the town. Gladio has no idea why he's dressed. Neither he nor Prompto can stomach the rations, so there's no reason to go to where they hand out food. They've been eating the rest of the food out of the Armiger just a bit at a time. Gladio keeps track. Nothing has been removed from the Armiger for days that
they haven't removed themselves. He chews absently at a granola bar and counts them again. He counts all of the food and chocobo fodder still in the Armiger every day. The numbers don't change between counts.

There's nothing to do again. Gladio checks his phone. He'd pulled it out of the Armiger after the notebook incident. Most of the towers are down outside of the Lestallum area anyway. Forty-seven missed calls. Twenty-two messages. All from Iris. It isn't that he doesn't want to talk to her. He does just... She doesn't need to deal with all of this. He's hoping it will wear off at some point. He isn't sure which thing he wants to go away more; the nightmares, the anger, or the grief.

Gladio has just about settled on lying on the mattress and staring at the ceiling for lack of anything else to do when his phone rings from where it lies on his bare abs. He doesn't pay it any mind. It hasn't been anyone but Iris calling for ages. A couple minutes later, the phone rings again.

His brows furrow and jaw falls open a bit. Why would Monica call him? She's in charge of food or something now. He presses a thumb to the answer icon, and the retainer's voice starts before he can snap the smartphone up to his ear.

“...need you at command now!” There's a lot of background chatter and some kind of screeching.

“Wait, what?” He's upright, just still confused.

“This bird is dangerous! I'm sorry, but Prompto isn't answering his phone. We need you here, or Cor is going to be forced to kill it.” He's still confused, but he can feel the low simmer of his anger start to boil.

“What fuckin' bird?” He's shoving his feet into his boots and his hands are shaking and he wants to crush the stupid phone in his fist.

“Ignis' chocobo.”

He's out the door and around the corner in half a second and five paces.

Gladio lowers his shoulder and bowls over two civilians at the end of the next corner. His unzipped boots skid on the ashy mud in the next alley and he barely manages to careen into a wall instead of a woman and a toddler.
Most of the glaives and hunters rubbernecking in the command center have the sense to get out of his way. The ones that don't get tossed by arms, shoulders, and collars.

He skids past the last bit of open courtyard and shoves bodies aside and then there's the road. There's Cor, his katana unsheathed in his hand. There's a really pissed off Cicero. There's a filthy and limp Ignis slumped over the bird's neck. Gladio feels grief and despair crush him, and his rage bubble and build steam. A growl rips its way out of his throat. Cor's eye, the one that isn't swollen shut, barely twitches to look at him.

"Are you seriously this fuckin' stupid?" Cicero hisses when Cor raises a hand toward him. Gladio fights the shudder that rips through him at the sound.

"He's vicious, Gladiolus. What else do you want me to do? I can't do magic or miracles." The Marshal gestures vaguely and the chocobo raises his crest and squawks indignation. Gladio fights the urge to back away from him. He covers by lowering his stance, knees bent and arms wide.

"I'm not askin' you to do miracles. I'm tellin' you to get out of here." Gladio needs him gone. Needs Cor gone and Prompto here so he can stop being angry and stop being afraid. So they can take Ignis' body off the chocobo and out of the middle of the damn road.

"Then who's going to handle the bird? You?" The spike of fear that idea brings is followed by another wave of anger, this one at himself. Where the hell is Prompto? Gladio can feel himself slipping, feel his will scrabbling to maintain control over the deluge of emotions warring for dominance in his chest. They're going to cut him to pieces.

"That's real fuckin' cute, Cor. No. You're gonna go back in your little tent and play king of shit city." He doesn't even know what he's saying anymore. The words taste acrid spilling from his lips. Anything to stall Cor until someone gets Prompto here to stop all of this. The fear from being so close to an overprotective and furious Cicero begins to climb closer and closer to panic.

This would be over already if he weren't so damn weak.

"We can fight this out later. Right now we have to separate Ignis from the chocobo."

"Why? So you can take him too?" Right now, Gladio can't put together anything logical. Right now, its hard to see through the haze of terror, hate, and grief. His face is wet.
“You're not making any sense.”

“You're not taking Iggy from us!” His rage is hovering somewhere between his self-loathing and loathing for Cor. His muscles shudder with tension.

“Taking? I'm trying to get him to the medics, Gladiolus.” At first, he can't comprehend the words.

“What? He's not...” Gladio's eyes snap back over to the chocobo and to the ash-encrusted form slumped over in the saddle. For the longest second of his life, he holds his breath and the wave of hope tamps down everything else the shield can't contain. He squints and through the ash, the feathers, and his own tears.

Ignis' left hand is white-knuckle gripped around the saddlehorn. Cor doesn't even give Gladio time to process that Ignis isn't dead.

“If I have to kill the bird to do that, I will.” Kill the chocobo. Cor wants to kill the chocobo.

_He's going to kill the chocobo that, beyond all shadow of doubt, has saved Ignis' life._

“You remember what I told you before? Well, that's what's gonna happen if you touch him. I'll tear you apart with my bare hands!” The words rip out of his throat like gravel spraying through his vocal cords. He's shaking and screaming now, and he can't care anymore. The only logical thought left to him is to _get Cor away, at whatever cost._

“This is absolutely ridiculous.” Gladio lowers his stance again and hunches his shoulders. Cor holds his katana in his opposite hand. There wouldn't be a chance in hells Gladio could disarm him anyway. If he tackles the older man, there's no way Cicero won't try to attack with him. If the bird tries to fight with Ignis incoherent and tied into the saddle, he'll be hurt worse than he already is. That's a risk Gladio can't take. If he could just make himself _walk up to the damn bird_, it never would have gotten this out of hand. The fear and anger have a new challenger. He's never felt so inadequate and helpless in his life. Cor raises an open hand out toward Cicero and the bird warks and hisses.

“Get the fuck away from him!” Just when Gladio thinks he can't handle this anymore, that he's going to either shake clean out of his skin or kill himself trying to maul Cor, Prompto stumbles his way out of the silent mass of onlookers and into the road.
“Gladiolus, you’re making it worse, and you’re causing a scene.” Fuck a scene. Fuck Cor sideways.

“He means the chocobo, dude. Get away from the bird.” Gladio has never been more relieved at the sight of the gunner. He doesn’t take his eyes off of Cor. He clenches and unclenches his fists held out at his sides and almost jumps forward to wrestle the Marshal to the asphalt despite himself when Cor makes a grab for Cicero’s reins. The chocobo hisses and screeches, stubby wings flapping against the weapons tied in bundles to his saddle, and rears. Gladio’s heart leaps further up his throat when Ignis’ slack body starts to slide in the saddle. He’s roped himself in it. The knots and lines of the rope seem random at first, crossing his torso and circling his waist, and then he realizes that Ignis has tied his right arm to his chest. It looks.. wrong. Very wrong.

“Cor, I swear if you don’t get the fuck out of here...” Cicero screams and snaps his beak at Cor's hand, and Ignis starts to shift and slide in the saddle. His head rises from black feathers and lolls to one side. Gladio shifts and he starts to move, toward Ignis, toward Cor, it doesn't matter he has to do something.

“Calm down, Gladiolus!” He's only taken one step forward when the blue flash stops him dead.

“Dude. I'm gonna give you one last warning.” Prompto stands just outside of Cor's reach, stance wide, arms steady, and pistol aimed with deadly intent at the Marshal's skull.

“Then I'm going to shoot you.”

On top of everything else he feels, Gladio didn't expect dread to enter the picture. No one moves for a beat, not the crowd, not the bird, not the men in the street. Its gone absolutely silent except for a shallow, too-quick gasping coming from Ignis. Cor backs up a step and drops his katana. The weapon disappears back in to the Armiger before it hits the asphalt. Prompto doesn't so much as blink as he holds his aim on Cor.

“Now go. We don't need your help. We don't want your help.” Cor's expression is stone. Prompto's is steel. The gunner doesn't drop his target until the Marshal has backed into the crowd behind him. The hunters and glaives part around him like water.

“This isn't entertainment. Go find something else to gawk at.” None of them move at first, but when Prompto doesn't dismiss his gun some of them get the picture. The ones closest to him break off and the crowd slowly disperses. Cicero warbles and coos, and only then does Prompto turn and
dismiss his pistol.

“I need your help, Big guy.” Gladio is still frozen. All the emotions trickle out of him sluggishly. All but the fear of the bird and fear for Ignis. How does he do it? Prompto puts a hand up in front of Cicero and the bird shoves his beak into it. “Gladio. I can't do this alone. Ignis needs a doctor.”

“What... What do I do?” Ignis is slumped over again, unconscious. His breathing is still shallow.

“Cut the rope. Take him to the hospital.” Gladio swallows thickly and pulls a dagger out of the Armiger. He's still shaking, his heart still races, but now its from proximity to the bird, not rage. Prompto holds Cicero's reins so that the chocobo faces away from him. Its just barely enough. Gladio wraps one hand around Ignis' left forearm and starts slicing ropes. He leaves the ones keeping Ignis' other arm tied to his chest. The sleeve of his coat is a makeshift sling. Then he wraps his hands around Ignis' waist to pull him down off the bird. Ignis crumples to the ground, and Gladio gets his first look the other man's face. His eyes are open again, the pupils completely blown and the whites bloodshot through. There's no comprehension there at all. Gladio's brow furrows in confusion and concern and he puts a hand under Ignis' hair and across his forehead.

Ignis' skin *burns.*

“Fuck. This is bad.”

“Just take him to the doctors already. I'll come meet you later.”

“What? Where are you goin’?”

“I have to take care of Cicero. There isn't anyone else. Just go, dammit.” Prompto spits out the last bit and pulls the bird away. Gladio gathers Ignis up in his arms. The other man gasps and makes a pitiful, high, strangled groan when Gladio touches the arm in the sling. This isn't the time. He'll find out soon enough. He stands with Ignis cradled in his arms and glares and grunts his way back into Lestallum. He kicks at anyone not smart enough to get the hell out of his way.

This feels an awful lot like deja vu.
The hospital is a converted barracks. The walls are curtains. Gladio wants to turn around and leave when he hears all the coughing, sneezing, and sniffing. Before he can, a woman wearing white coveralls catches his gaze. She stares him down, then her eyes drop to the ash covered, unconscious bundle in his arms.

“What's wrong with him?” Gladio entertains biting her head off.

“He's got a bad fever. Really bad. There's somethin' wrong with his arm. I dunno...”

The nurse calls for someone, and then before he figures out what's happening, there's a flurry of activity as they take Ignis from him and put him on an old-fashioned steel gurney. When he's gone, Gladio looks down at his feet. Only then does he realize he's freezing, his skin covered in tiny goosebumps. He wraps his arms around his chest. At least they didn't complain about the ashes. He sits in the empty waiting room for a while, glaring at the linoleum and trying to block out the sounds of illness and his own thoughts. Gladio doesn't notice the man trying to talk to him at first.

“Sir? You brought in that hunter, right?” There's a short, middle-aged man in a doctor's coat standing in front of him.


“We need to know what happened to his arm. We don't have the imaging equipment to treat him without any information about how this happened.”

“He came back like this.” The tiny man huffs.

“Follow me.”

They've cleaned him up a bit, but there's still ash in every crevice, and in his ears and hair. They cut his clothes off of him. There are wires and plastic tubing everywhere and Gladio can't make any sense of it.

“I've never seen an infection quite like this. I can't palpate to find any breaks and we don't have the equipment to...”
“I know what happened.”

Ignis’ arm has a round lump right in the middle of it. It bulges out grotesquely. The skin of his forearm is stretched, swollen, and angry red. Gladio tastes bile.

“Well?”

“He used an elixir on it. It wasn't clean.”

“Oh... That's a shame. There's nothing we can do in these conditions except amputate.”

“You're not cutting off his arm.” Gladio doesn't see the doctor's reaction. He can't look away from Ignis. He can't turn away from the horror story written into his skin.

“You... What? I have no way to fix this!”

“Figure it out.” Gladio feels nothing. He feels sick.

“I can't operate blind! That's insane. The fever alone will kill him.”

“You cut off his arm, and I cut off your head.”

Chapter End Notes

Sigh. Where to start?

- Nightmare sequence.
- Major Characters being just awful to each other...
- Discussion of potential Major Character Death, human and animal
- Major Character POV of phobia
- Gun Violence
- Semi-Graphic depiction of complications from serious infection
- Discussion of potential amputation
Chapter 24 - Bearing Without Arms

Chapter Notes

No Chapter Specific Warnings.

As I said in last chapter's notes, all of the medical stuff is approximation/embellishment. Just... Let's suspend our disbelief together!

This is kinda a transition chapter. I'll try to get the next one out faster to make up for it. It happens.

Forgive meh.

Optional Listening: Oceans - Seafret

“It really isn't all that bad, buddy.”

Ignis stares down the length of his left arm. There is plastic tubing sticking out of it, secured and kept sterile with plastic bandaging. The doctor had called it a PICC line. He blinks down at it and wonders who thought it was a good idea to use a clear-plastic bandage for this.

“That thing will come out in a few weeks. It'll be okay. The doctor said it was a good thing they have this stuff.”

His right arm is swaddled up into a sling. Whatever they've used to immobilize it gives Ignis the distinct impression that it was an in-house job. He'd asked about a cast, however the harried, balding man, whom Ignis assumes is the only actual doctor in the building, said such a thing would be necessary only once the swelling went down to an acceptable level.

“Good thing? You mean best possible scenario, Blondie.”

Underneath the foam padding and plastic frame, his arm is held together with surgical steel plates and screws drilled into the bone around the gap in his radius. His hip hurts almost as much as his
arm. That was where the bone graft had come from. Ignis supposes he should be grateful. After all, his friends had threatened the doctor's life. Repeatedly.

“Yeah, it is.” They've been acting suspiciously since he regained coherence. They certainly look suspicious. Gladio sighs and scratches at the back of his overlong mullet and avoids looking anyone in the eyes. He's fidgeting. Prompto's manner of speech is the same as it ever was. His bearing is intense and focused. He is not fidgeting. They both look as if sleep is synonymous with malboro breath. Even more suspicious? They both smell of bergamot.

“You'll have to come back every so often for the antibiotics.”

“I set alarms. So many alarms. You really don't want to know how many alarms.”

“Gentlemen. We cannot leave until I am upright and presentable. A bit of privacy if you don't mind.” Two sets of eyes, one amber, one violet, focus on him. Neither man moves. Today is confusing.

“Uh, buddy? How exactly did you plan on getting dressed alone?”

Damn. It. All.

“Yeah, I'm just gonna...” Gladio scratches at the back of his head again with one hand and points a thumb back over his shoulder with the other. He shuffles sideways around the equipment awkwardly. Ignis has been abandoned. Not that he particularly wants Gladio for this task either. He can only hope the pain and the humiliation are enough to keep anything untoward from happening.

In a way, this is a worst-case scenario. As he understands it, Prompto has served as his caretaker before. Ignis recalls none of it. The events in Ignis' life he cannot remember could fill volumes. Perhaps if he had some idea of what to expect from Prompto, or at least some warning, he wouldn't be so nervous about it.

“It won't be that bad, Iggy. C'mon, up and at 'em!” Everything hurts somehow. Ignis sits on the edge the bed and struggles mightily not to blush. He does not succeed. He can feel the flush creep across his chest, up his neck, and right into his ears when Prompto maneuvers the useless hospital gown off his torso. Ignis would thank the gods that he's wearing underwear, but he has no idea who put them on him. He has a sinking suspicion it was the man in front of him. Dignity is lost on Ignis.

“Gotta get a shirt on you. This one is Gladio's. Before you ask, yes its clean.” Prompto pulls a
small pile of clothing out of the Armiger all at once. This was pre-planned. Hmm.

“Dare I ask whom is responsible for that?” Ignis sits and blushes. Prompto gathers up the oversized black t-shirt and shoves it down over his head. Its backwards. Ignis watches the smaller man’s face as he flips the clothing around his neck.

“Iris. Something about us living like animals. I didn't even know you could do laundry in a bathtub.” He's rambling. A bit of pink across his cheekbones and the bridge of his nose betrays his embarrassment.

"Learn something new everyday, don't we?” Prompto's eyes don't linger. Ignis can't help the disappointment that brings. Wasn't he just dreading this a moment ago? Ignis laces his left arm through it's sleeve while the other man unclasps the sling.

“Remember what the doctor said. Whatever you do, don't twist your wrist.” There is no more blush to be found across Prompto's face. Ignis doesn't want to watch him anymore.

“I sincerely do not believe I can. This contraption is doing an admirable job.” He knows better than to look for something he knows can't possibly be there. That hardly makes any difference in how he feels at the absence of interest. Ignis grits his teeth at the pressure on his arm. Unavoidable. Prompto is perfectly gentle.

“You can't really lift things with the other arm either, you know? Gonna have to take it easy.” The sling is reattached with a faint, metallic click.

“Of course,” Ignis sighs heavily. “You'll be certain to remind me every five minutes I presume?”

“I don't really think you need that, Iggy.” Prompto holds up what Ignis is sure is an ancient pair of Gladio's sweatpants.

“Are you actually planning on dressing me in those?” Ignis doesn't fight when Prompto pulls him to his feet. Standing is more difficult than he thought it would be. Prompto takes his weight like he expects it.

“Did you already forget there's a bunch of stitches in your hip? Are you like... Actually superhuman or something?” It isn't easy to lift his feet into the clothes. They should have done this
while he still sat on the gurney.

“Or something.” Prompto pulls the pants up over Ignis' waist and reties the drawstring. He gently pushes against Ignis' chest to encourage him to sit again.

“Let me know when you figure out where you get a pain-threshold superpower. I dunno that it goes with the space-heater powers, but I want just one cool power.” Ignis hums low at that. Prompto pulls socks over his feet. These, at least, are his. The gunner fusses with them until the seams are perfectly straight over the line of Ignis' toes. He wraps either hand around Ignis' socked feet and stares down at them.

“If you acquire heating abilities, wouldn't that render mine useless?” Ignis doesn't know why he said that.

Prompto's brows lower in confusion and he frowns. His violet eyes slowly drift up to meet Ignis' seafoam. He searches for a moment, irises flickering and intense.

“Ignis.”

“Yes?”

“You know that...” Prompto's gaze drops off to one side then back up again. “We had no idea if you were alive or dead. I mean, we actually fought about it. You understand?”

“Not at all, no.” Ignis very much does not understand.

“I couldn't accept that maybe you had died. Gladio couldn't accept that maybe you were alive.”

“I really am not following.”

“I don't get you.” Prompto's brows lower from under his beanie.

“As you've said before.”
“I’m not sure anymore if you’re doing this on purpose or not.”

“Pardon?”

“Nevermind. Forget it. Let’s just go.” Prompto yanks Ignis' old red-soled Crownsguard boots out of the Armiger and shoves them onto his feet.

Ignis spends the entirety of the route to their shared room leaning on Prompto and wondering what exactly he's done wrong now. Gladio follows behind them far too close. It feels like being stalked by a behemoth in slow-motion.

The room has hardly changed since the last time Ignis has seen it. Same bare twin mattresses. Same tiny bathroom. Different dents in the walls. The entirety of the back half of the floor covered in... Far more royal arms than Ignis had held out hope for.

“How many are there?” He leans back on the sheetrock wall behind him and Gladio helps him out of his boots and adds them to the row of very large boots and normal sized boots along the wall by the door.

“Nineteen. There’s supposed to be another one coming. Aranea's gone after that one. Then Ravus has King Regis' sword too.” Prompto falls clear into the bathroom trying to take off his own boots.

“Just unzip them, numbnuts.” Prompto mumbles something from the bathroom that sounds remarkably like 'I'll unzip you.'

“Are we absolutely certain all of these are royal arms? Some of these look rather... Broken.”

“Its not broken. Just disassembled.”

“That is only one?”

“Yup. Came that way too... Mostly.”
“Neither of you know what it is, do you?”

“Nope.” Gladio grunts.

“That is a ballista. A small one, yet that would hardly matter in a royal arm.”

“How does he know that? I made a sled outta the thing and had no clue.”

“Dunno what you want me to say. He's Iggy.” Gladio pulls his arms over his head and stretches deep. Grunts. “I'm gonna go see about getting some stuff from Requisitions.”

“Get like... Pillows or something. A lamp. Anything really.”

“I still gotta find out what sorta work they've got. Sure they can find somethin for a guy as big as me. Iris couldn't explain how the credit system works.”

Gladio is barely out the door before Prompto levels yet another very intense look at Ignis. Apparently, this is now a thing the gunner does. He has just enough time to gingerly lower himself to sit on the furthest corner mattress before Prompto starts talking.

“Okay, listen up. I know you know that things got really weird, so I'm just gonna tell you now so you don't have to worry about it or find out the hard way.”

Ignis blinks at Prompto several times. If he wanted a response, he should have asked a question. He's still waiting. Ignis hums at him. That seems to do the trick.

“Don't bring up Strel. She's dead. Gladio is afraid of chocobos now. No, he hasn't said anything about what happened.”

“That's...” Prompto holds up an open hand. Ignis lets his open jaw fall shut.
'He has nightmares. Every night. He wakes up completely out of it. Sometimes he wakes up violent. You get what I'm saying?'

"He hasn't hurt you, surely?"

"Not on purpose. He's gotten pretty close. So, normally I would say I'm gonna sleep on the other bed with him so you can heal, but I've taken his crap for long enough. So..."

"The nightmares cannot be his fault."

"True. His attitude about it is another story."

"Ah."

"Not done yet."

"There's more?"

"Yeah. Don't bring up Cor either. We're both pissed at him, but Gladio gets worked up easy."

"What could the Marshal have possibly done to anger either of you this much?"

"Are you really sitting here with tubes and metal in your arms asking that?"

Ignis levels his own look. He's going for mildly exasperated, but perhaps doesn't pull it off. Prompto looks thoroughly exasperated.

"Fine. There was no reason to send us alone. All the crap that happened to you and Gladio might have been preventable. Noct is gonna be gone a long, long time."

"How long?"
“Ten years.” That knowledge smothers Ignis and now he just feels so tired. Its too much effort to keep his eyes open right now. He lies back onto the bed under him, legs still folded.

“There's something else?”

“Well, other than some stuff Gladio won't talk about, there was the thing with the potions, and, if we hadn't stopped it, Cor would have killed Cicero.” Ignis' eyes snap open and he glares at the ceiling.

“The Marshal should consider himself fortunate that I do not currently have full use of my arms.”

“Oh, don't worry about that. I think he's got the picture now.”

“Dare I ask?”

“Probably shouldn't.” Ignis hums.

Ignis is startled awake when the door slams. His arm hurts. His hip hurts. His legs are numb. Should probably not have fallen asleep with them folded. He starts on working the pins and needles out of his legs while Gladio shouts.

“You guys are never gonna guess.” The shield tosses an unlabeled, white plastic package at Prompto. He nearly catches it. Good effort.

“What's in here?”

“Shit tickets.” Two sets of eyes, one violet and one seafoam focus on Gladio. “Really? Toilet paper.”
“And what, pray tell, are we meant to guess?”

“All that crap Cor took and gave to Meldacio? The weapons and everything? They didn't just take it. They *tallied* it.”

“What's that supposed to mean, Big Guy?”

“The hunters in charge of it all said the three of us have enough credits to buy the entire Requisitions storage. We can get anything we want and don't have to bust our asses for it.”

Prompto smiles for the first time since Ignis awoke. Gladio is even smiling. Ignis allows just a small smile.

“As long as we keep ourselves in check, this is a very good thing.”

“Party pooper.”

“Yes, well. *You* are the one holding the *tickets.*” Gladio grunts. Prompto groans.

The next time Ignis is startled from sleep, Gladio shouts and gasps at nothing. The shock from the rude awakening keeps him still. Neither he nor Prompto move an inch, but Ignis can see the smaller man's eyes shine faintly in the dim light from the bathroom. Neither man falls back asleep until Gladio gets up and leaves the room.

One week later, they have acquired a rusty lamp and mismatch sheets and pillows. Gladio spends less and less time in the room. They have no clues as to where he goes. Ignis is more and more irritable by the hour. Prompto's presence is both calming and frustrating in turns.

“Is there nothing *at all* to do here?”
“Newp. Gonna have to get used to it.”

“I miss Ebony.”

“Gonna have to get used to that, too.”

Ignis huffs and glares down at his own arms.

By week two, Ignis can't find the point of doing anything but stare at the concrete between trips to the clinic for antibiotics. He had tried going out into Lestallum, to the greenhouse, or the stables, but between the pain and the anxiety over the pain and crowding he'd been forced back into hiding.

“I know its boring man, but you can't risk some rando smashing into you.”

“I am literally painfully aware.”

“If you're gonna start taking it out on me too, then I can just go.”

“No! No... Apologies, Prompto.”

He leaves anyway. Ignis stays.

Four weeks later -

Someone is knocking at the door. This has never happened before. Iris barges in at will. No one else comes to visit. Ignis decides they must be lost and turns over, cast sticking straight up off the mattress from where he leans it on the elbow. The arm itches. It always itches. If the boredom doesn't drive him mad, the itching surely will. At least he has one fully functioning arm.
“Hey! I know you're in there, Fireman! Open up. I come bearing gift.” The banging continues unabated, rhythmic as a snare drum. Ignis rolls off the bed and upright, hissing at the pain when his still-healing hipbone takes his weight on the edge of the mattress and his foot catches on the wooden pallets Gladio brought in to make an approximation of proper beds. He'd put on a shirt, but it isn't worth the effort of getting a sleeve around his cast. Ignis unlocks the door, and Aranea pushes it open with the hilt of a katana she carries by the cloth-bound blade.

“Wow. You look like shit.”
Chapter 25 - Good Intentions

Chapter Notes

No Chapter Specific Warnings.

I am doing my best at keeping these a consistent length, but sometimes they just don't cooperate.

/waddles off like a cactuar

Optional Listening: Just One Yesterday - Fall Out Boy

“Wow. You look like shit.” Aranea's day just got way more interesting.

Firecracker jerks the door a little bit like he plans to shut it in Aranea's face, then seems to think better of it.

“What? Not in the mood for guests? I'd think you'd be grateful.” It's best to pry gently. Besides, these types know when they're being led. He sighs and ducks his head.

“I assume that means you would like to come inside?” He sounds like shit too. His words come out slowly and laboriously as if speaking is way too much effort.

This is a prime opportunity for observation. Aranea has no doubts that she'll never get to see this man in a state like this again. His dirty blonde hair is in need of a haircut just as much as a comb. She can't really see his eyes behind his fringe. His beard grows in a shade lighter than his hair. Its patchy, and fine, and can't seem to agree on which direction to grow. The man isn't wearing anything other than a way too big pair of gray sweatpants that look like they belong in a museum exhibit and a navy cast over his right arm all the way past his elbow. He holds the casted arm gingerly against his chest. Aranea would say that he's attractive, but he looks like a caveman and she isn't into younger men anyway.
“Well, let's call getting out of this alley my payment for fishing your magical kingly weapon out of Fodina Caestino.” Fireman turns and walks back into the tiny room. It looks an awful lot like a glorified closet to Aranea, but for Lestallum is pretty damn nice accommodations. Well, it would be if it weren't half-covered in weapons and discarded clothing. For whatever reason, the tiny room smells like citrus. There's not much in the space besides the weapons, a rusted old lamp, and a camp stove surrounded by empty Cup Noodle containers and water bottles. They have a cheap, sun-bleached, plastic chair in the middle of the room. Aranea tosses the katana into the pile and makes a beeline for it. There's hardly anywhere left in this town she can trust her ass to.

“I would offer you refreshments, however all we have available is bottled water.” When he turns, the marks on the left side of his torso and shoulder are bathed in the yellowed lamplight. What Aranea had thought were creases in his skin from sheets are actually a faint network of branching lines remarkably like electrical burns. She lets him settle in the middle of the corner bed, long legs folded underneath him, elbows on his knees, and shoulders hunched, before she starts in on him.

“So what did it take?”

“Pardon?” He doesn't even look up. He doesn't sound like he cares either.

“The ring. You put it on. That prissy bitch Ravus has the same scars. He's missing an arm.”

“I died.” He mumbles the words out. Aranea thinks she may have gotten more emotion out of the man if she had asked about the time.

“Okay... Your pretty boy prince save your ass?”

“If you already have all the answers, why ask the questions?” He tilts his head up just right for Aranea to catch the light hitting one green eye. She has his attention. Perfect.

“Well Firestarter, I'm bored and you're interesting.”

“If you insist. I do owe you for the katana, after all. We can start with you using my given name.” He fiddles with his left hand in his lap, thumb worrying back and forth over a tellingly ring-shaped scar.

“Fun. Okay, I can do that. What's your name again, kid?” He huffs through his overlong fringe.
“Ignis. Ask away.”

“Where are your buddies? I can see the meathead going solo, but Freckles left you too? Weren't they falling all over themselves because that asshole lost track of you?”

“Ah... They're not gone.” Ignis' chin drops into his chest.

“Just not here. I get it.” She doesn't have to believe it. “So, why did you put on the ring?”

He turns away from her to stare down the concrete wall. Aranea can be patient when she has to. It takes Ignis several minutes to come up with any answer at all.

“I honestly don't know.” Aranea's head tilts to one side. What?

“You put on the Ring of the Lucii. You died. Your Prince had to bring your ass back to life, and you don't have any idea why you did it?”

“It's more complicated than all that.”

“I'm not sure I buy that.”

“It was either put on the ring or die. Ardyn was going to kill me.”

“You mean put on the ring and die.”

“The specifics of how I die in service to my liege are hardly important. If I had not put on the ring, I would be dead and likely Ardyn would have taken the ring. Wearing the ring allowed me to fight back to protect Noctis. I would gladly do it again. Whatever it takes.”

“That... Is insane.” His glaring isn't very intimidating when he looks homeless.
“I answered your question.”

“Sure, but your answer doesn't make sense. Gonna let you in on a little secret.”

“I cannot imagine.”

“I didn't come here about the ring. I know things about you. You're interesting. Did you know Niffleheim had dossiers on pretty much everyone? There were a couple stand outs, but yours was the only dossier that was incomplete.”

“Incomplete...” Aranea can see his throat work in the lamplight.

“The first six years of your life are just missing. No place of birth, no birth certificate, no parents, zilch. Not from lack of trying. The guy they had on the inside had the highest security clearance your guys hand out. So, either your info was even more classified than that, or it just doesn't exist.”

“It doesn't exist.”

“That's what I said.”

“No... I looked, I asked... Whatever there was to be known was never documented.”

“Somebody has to know where the hell you popped out from. Kids don't just appear out of thin air, not even in Lucis.”

“Out of every individual I ever asked, they all either said they did not know or that I was better off not knowing. Every last one refused to tell me a single thing.” There's a flush spreading up his neck and around his ears. If he weren't so scruffy, it might be cute.

“Hang on. They wouldn't tell you where you came from? Who are these people?”
“The Crownsguard, naturally.” *Oh, this is just rich.*

“Huh. So let me get this right. You pop out of nowhere at age six and become chamberlain-slash-babysitter for a prince less than two years younger than you. Wherever you came from is so classified that you're not allowed to know about your own damn life! You just accept all this garbage and grow up to be a glorified manservant to a prince that can barely tie his own shoes without your help!”

“You would do well not to insult His Highness.” He's angry. Good. He should be. Not at her, but that doesn't matter right now.

“Fine. I'm still not done.”

“Forbid.”

“Just listen. I'm trying to help you,” Ignis frowns hard, and glares harder, but doesn't interrupt. “Alright, so there's all that, and then at the first opportunity you're perfectly willing to kill yourself for your Prince's sake, but you can't even explain why. You say you would do it over and over when you don't know why! C'mon, you're smarter than this. How many times since you left Insomnia have you tried to throw your life away for him?”

Aranea isn't sure what she expects Ignis to say. Maybe a scoff and a rebuttal. Maybe he'll hand out some bullshit line about duty and sacrifice. Maybe he'll just lose his temper and kick her out on her ass. He doesn't do any of those things. He stares at the wall for a while. Then he answers.

“I stopped counting once I realized how morbid it was. You would be surprised what potions and elixirs can fix if you use them promptly enough.”

That's not disturbing at all.

“I didn't think Lucians did that sort of crap.”

“What?”
“The Imperials didn't have any qualms brainwashing kids, but I really didn't think your King would stoop that low.”

“That's ridiculous. His Majesty would never...” Ignis rolls up onto his feet in the middle of the bed and narrowly avoids smacking his skull into the ceiling.

“Take a seat before you hurt yourself.”

“I'll stand. I'll also thank you to leave.” The welcome has definitely worn out.

“Okay, sure. I'll leave. Just one last thing, Spitfire. If no one in the Crownguard would tell you anything, if they all fed you exactly the same bullshit line, they had to be under orders. Who is in charge of the Crownguard, smart guy?”

Aranea is up and on her feet when the door opens. She shoves her way past Blondie and around the rusty firedoor.

“Hey, you're leaving? Did you get the weapon?” The kid is suspicious. Good. He should be.

“Yeah, sure. Left it in your rat's nest. Say hi to Meatbag for me.” Aranea waves casually over her shoulder and strides purposefully around the corner of the alley. She stops in the middle of the empty tunnel in the dark and puts a gloved hand to her head.

“Damn. This is gonna come back to bite me in the ass.” The sound of a door opening comes from back around the corner.

“Aranea! What the hell did you say to him?”

Time to make a swift exit. By the time Blondie comes around the corner, Aranea has already leapt up through a gap in the tunnel roof.
From up here, Aranea could almost be fooled that Lestallum was the same as it always was. On the roofs of the town, she can't see the tunnels. If she faces east, she can't see the greenhouse. Facing west means she can still see the barricades at the front of town. She stands and waits for a while. Aranea would sit, but the ash left over from Ravatogh's eruption covers everything up here with no weather and no reason to remove it. The searchlights at the edge of town are moving back and forth again. The daemons are growing bold.

If she can't keep her nose out of everyone else's business, Aranea can at least go smack around a few daemons. She picks her way around drifts of ash and dilapidated air-conditioning units for a couple alleys and then drops back down to ground level. She wouldn't be able to be so reckless if the town were still so crowded. The tunnels are mostly empty now. Exineris had finally finished their tunneling through the rock. Turns out they were drilling straight into Taelpar Crag. As soon as the workers had broken through, they had started building inside the canyon. Even Aranea can admit that the concept is pretty genius. After all, hardly any daemons are capable of flight, and they're attracted to sources of electricity. The power plant is relatively far away. She pauses at the entrance to the crag, ignoring the few civilians milling around, and considers visiting Biggs and Wedge. There's not much reason to keep them busy anymore with no reason to fly her airship. The vehicle takes a veritable shitton of fuel.

Aranea sighs. The end of the world gets pretty lonely with no one to talk to. At least if she weren't so pushy maybe she could stick around longer than ten minutes. Its going to be a very long ten years.

May as well do the right thing.

By the time Aranea makes her way to the front of town, the glaives have dispatched the latest round of attacking daemons. The spotlights are effective at corralling the lesser creatures, but the larger ones can withstand the bright lights better. There's a convoy waiting to unload and she lends them a hand moving boxes and crates. When the trucks are empty and moving back up the road to Meldacio, Aranea brushes her gloved hands together to remove any dust and starts walking back up the alley toward Command. Enough wasting time.

It's way too late now, but at least she can sort of do the right thing.

“Hey, Cor. I... May have done something I can't fix.”

“Are you saying you need my help?” It would be nice if he were easier to read.

“No exactly. I'm saying there's a really good possibility that I just gave you a huge headache.”
Chapter 26 - Headspaces

Chapter Notes

Chapter Specific Warnings In End Notes.

Well, looks like I went from the shortest chapter yet to the longest chapter yet. Go teem!

I apologize about the update pace slowing down. Unfortunately, the writing itself is becoming more difficult and that is slowing the pace of updates more than any other factor. Please, continue to bear with me.

Oh look... I found the Promnis. Kinda.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Optional Listening: I Found - Amber Run

“Ignis?” He's quiet. “Buddy?” He's hiding behind his hair and sniffling, chin digging into his chest, but Prompto can see his face from where Ignis stands on their bed. “At least sit down? Please?” His seafoam irises flicker back and forth at nothing between blinking away the tears sliding down his cheeks. His sparse and unkempt beard fails to stem the tide, and they slip down his jaw and chin and into his bared chest.

Ignis shudders, if Prompto had to guess with the effort of keeping silent. They've been here before. Prompto shakes as well, but with a different kind of restraint. Its better that Aranea ran. He might have shot at her otherwise. He has to pull Ignis down by the intact arm before he'll sit, and the other man leans forward into his folded legs and wraps his good arm around the back of his skull. The right arm drags on the mattress. Prompto steps closer and shifts Ignis' cast against his leg. When he tries to pull away, three fingers oh, so gently wrap around two of his own.

Prompto wants to do a lot of things in this moment. He wants to throw something at Aranea. He wants to smother Ignis in affection. He wants to run away again, because he's already so tired and everything somehow just keeps getting worse. He wants to take Ignis apart, take out whatever it is that makes him so afraid, and build him back up again. He wants to let go because If he gets any closer he knows he's going to give himself away. He doesn't do any of those things.

He stands there like a coward.
Prompto stands there and listens to Ignis cry. After a while, the fingers let go. They let go, and Ignis wraps them around the fingers of his other hand. Prompto's face burns, and his stomach feels sour, and he's frowning so hard his head hurts. He knows what he wants. He thinks he knows what Ignis wants. Why can't he just do it? Why can't this be as easy as it was before? Prompto takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly and steadily. He drops to his knees and leans in to get a look at Ignis' face, but something unexpected happens.

Ignis meets him halfway.

It isn't a kiss. Prompto can't even see him properly. The press of Ignis' forehead into his own is as perfectly chaste as any casual brush of skin. Somehow, he's absolutely certain that it means so much more. The heat of his skin and weight of bone against bone is familiar. The feather-soft brush of his hair is different. Ignis starts to pull away and something inside Prompto's chest wrenches. He doesn't know what he's doing. He's not ready for this to end. He wraps a hand around the nape of Ignis' neck, fingers sliding underneath overlong strands, and presses skin to skin. Ignis goes very still.

Prompto knows he can't keep his eyes closed forever. He's going to have to answer for whatever that stillness means. When he opens his eyes, another pair greets him. From this close, Ignis' irises are a hundred different shades of green. From emerald to teal, viridian, and sage, they flicker and focus back onto his own. He has no clue what Ignis is looking for. He doesn't know what he's looking for. That doesn't stop the futile hope that Ignis understands.

He's never going to be able to say it out loud.

After a minute, Ignis starts to shift again and Prompto reluctantly lets his hand slide off the other man's nape. He lets his eyes slide shut and sighs. Then Ignis does something else unexpected. He takes Prompto's hand and pulls as he shuffles back into the corner. They settle together, Ignis cramped between Prompto and the wall, arms tangled together, hands clasped tightly, and legs stretched out in front of them and pressed together hip to ankle. They don't speak. Every so often, violet and seafoam meet across the inches.

“Ah... Would you mind terribly lending me your phone?”

“What?” That wasn't expected either.

“I... Please, Prompto.”
“We um, aren't gonna... You know, talk about this... thing?” The gunner gestures vaguely around their collective knees.

“Not... Not right now. I can't. I have to know. I need to...” His voice runs away with him, words spilling out mumbled and frantic.

“Hey, whoa. Iggy, its okay.” Prompto has to fish around between Ignis' arm and hip to get to his pocket. “Here. Whatever you need.” He drops the phone into Ignis' open hand and waits, but he doesn’t make any move to use the device. He fiddles with it, thumb running up and down the side and through the cracks crossing the glass. “Are you gonna use it, buddy?”

“Yes. I... I'll get there eventually.”

“Gimmie,” Prompto takes the smartphone back. “Who were you gonna call?”

“The Marshal.”

Prompto has no ideas why Ignis would be afraid to talk to Cor. That means that whatever he's going to talk about has to do with whatever Aranea said. Whatever she told him is bad.

“You wanna talk to me about it first?” Prompto scrolls back and forth over Cor's name in his very short contact list. Ignis rubs at his scarred finger.

“No, I... I really rather wouldn't.”

“You sure you can do this right now?”

“I have to know.”

Prompto presses a thumb to the call button.

“This is Cor.”
“Uh, yeah. Hang on one sec.” He hands the phone over to Ignis. He doesn't even try to pretend not to eavesdrop. He needs to know.

“Ah... Marshal.” His voice is soft and raw.

“Ignis.”

“I have a question.” Prompto watches him swallow thickly once, then again.

“It isn't like you to waste time, and I have very little of it.”

“Ah... I only... Why would the Crownsguard have orders not to tell me where I came from?” Prompto's jaw drops and his gaze falls to his lap. That's ridiculous, isn't it?

“I really don't have time for this nonsense right now, Ignis.”

“Please... Can't you tell me anything?” Ignis' voice cracks and his eyes squeeze shut behind his hair. There's several seconds of silence on the other end of the call.

“What do you want me to tell you? You wouldn't be asking me if you didn't already know that I issued the order. What makes you think I'm going to tell you anything now?”

“But... Why?” Ignis barely squeezes the words out.

“Because you're better off not knowing.”

The tone signaling the call ending goes off even before the smartphone slips out of his grip. Ignis pulls his knees to his chest and hides behind his arm again. The heat of the body pressed to his side isn't enough to stop the chill running through Prompto's veins.

“Ignis?” He wedges his fingers into the gap at the other man's elbow and pulls. His arm doesn't
move, but the rest of him rocks with the movement. “Whatever it is can’t be that terrible, right?”

Ignis sniffs and swallows audibly. Prompto rests his head against Ignis’ bicep and lets his eyelids slide shut. The skin against his face is just as warm as he expected. Its much softer than he expected. Prompto lets the heat and contact ground him.

He can’t fix this. If Cor refuses to talk to Ignis, Ravatogh would have to freeze over before he’d talk to Prompto. The Marshal hasn’t even looked at him since the incident in the road. He has no reason whatsoever to believe that Cor would be willing to listen to Gladio either. What could possibly be so bad that Cor the Immortal refuses to talk about it? There really isn’t anything Prompto can do. Unless...

His eyes slide open again and focus on his own hands resting in his lap. Prompto hooks a finger under the worn, scuffed leather of the armband on his right wrist. He could do this. Maybe.

“Hey... I don’t know where I came from either.” He whispers as though there were anyone else around to hear. The words echo like gunfire in his ears.

Ignis sniffs again and shifts just enough to uncover his ears. It's progress.

“You know I was adopted, but that isn't the whole story. I know I'm Nif, that's really obvious. Pretty sure everybody already knew that part. I mean... You're okay with that, right?”

“Why wouldn't I be?” His voice is muffled and wet, accent muddled through emotion just as much as his elbow. Prompto blows out a deep breath at the assurance. Of all the ways Ignis could have chosen to say it, those words go a very far way into making the rest of this feel easier. As it is, he's feeling a little nauseated and a lot nervous.

“That's good. Yeah, but... I need you to watch me for the next part.” Ignis peeks his head out from the cradle of his knees and rests it against Prompto's. Red-rimmed, watery emerald meets amethyst blue again. “Not that this isn't great, but I need you to look at my hands, Iggy.”

A furrow forms between finely sculpted eyebrows, and the eyes shift down to Prompto's fingers fidgeting with the steel buckles of his leather armband. The strand of barbed-wire that circles his left wrist was a present to himself when he turned eighteen. It didn't mean anything, he'd just wanted to distract from the faded, eight-pointed star already there. The overlapping points mean nothing to him either, but Prompto hadn't chosen that one. He'd stopped trying to hide that mark years ago.
He bites down on his lip and slowly, hesitantly unbuckles the first strap and then the other. The skin revealed is paler than the rest of his forearm, but there's nothing out of the ordinary on the underside. Fear creeps up on Prompto slowly, and now he can't bring himself to reveal his secret. His arm lies still on his thigh, resting inside the unbuckled leather. Ignis shifts, and his hand slides, feather-light down the length of Prompto's forearm.

Prompto doesn't fight the gentle grasp. He forces himself to stay pliant and allows Ignis to turn his arm over. He can't watch. There's nothing for several seconds. Just silence. Then Prompto feels Ignis' thumb stroke along the lines and bars tattooed into his skin. His touch isn't gentle, not exactly. Each sweep of his thumb is firm and deliberate. Prompto imagines he's counting. After several minutes of repetition, Prompto manages to work up the nerve to open his eyes. He can only see Ignis in profile, but what he sees is unmistakable.

Ignis is furious.

He's flushed all the way to his ears, and a muscle in his jaw jumps with tension. His eyes are pure venom, scalding and toxic pools set on the barcodes and numbers embedded in Prompto's flesh with laser precision and impotent rage.

“There's no one to be angry at. I don't know where they came from. I don't know what they mean.”

“This is monstrous.” His voice is low and dangerous. For a moment, Prompto fears Ignis might cut the tattoos out of his skin. The nervous laughter escapes him without any of his own input.

“Heh.. Well, I still need that arm.” The stroking and glaring continues. Prompto isn't sure that Ignis is hearing him. “Ignis, mind letting go?”

“Right. Apologies.” The cage of Ignis' fingers loosens and the poison in his gaze fades back to whatever depths of his mind he hides everything else he can't afford to feel. What's left over is stagnant and flat. There's no sign of the anger, but Prompto knows it isn't gone. This is not what he intended to happen.

Prompto buckles the armband back on, and Ignis head tilts away from him. His empty eyes stare at the cast on his arm against the concrete wall.
The front door opens and Gladio stumbles in accompanied by a wave of the stink of alcohol. There's a bottle clutched in one of his fists. Prompto might not believe in luck, but Murphy's Law is starting to sound pretty accurate.

“You're drunk, dude.”

“What gave you that.. idea?” The bathroom wall shudders when Gladio flops against it. He fumbles with his boots, uncoordinated and slow.

“We talked about this, Big Guy. You don't come back here drunk.” Ignis remains motionless at his side. Neither man has moved from their cramped spot in the corner of their bed.

“Yeah, but... There's... Nothing to do out there.” Gladio finally manages to kick off a boot, and abandons it where it lies in the short hallway. He seemingly forgets about the other and shuffles awkwardly over toward them.

“There'd be plenty to do if you didn't stop drinking that crap.”

“What? Shovel shit? Mm not doin' it... Hey,” Gladio stoops over and peers down at them. He smells like Lestallum after an unseasonable liquor shower. His breath is somehow not worse. It certainly isn't any better. “You two look cozy. That's why you don't want... me here.”

“Where has he been getting alcohol?” Ignis' head peeks out from behind his arm just far enough to show the scar across the bridge of his nose.

“Requisitions. I've told them twice to knock it off, but they don't give a crap.”

“Iggy... Why you cryin' this time?” Gladio is way too close now, and Prompto holds him at bay by the shoulders so he doesn't fall over on top of them. Ignis retreats. “Did you do it, Blondie?” Gladio tries to poke at him with the bottle of whiskey he still clutches by the neck.

“Ugh, no. Go take a shower, you stinkin' behemoth!”
“I will... when you tell me why.”

“You can't protect us from everything, dude. Sometimes it's just way too late.”

Gladio's thick eyebrows furrow deeply. His eyes are the exact shade of the whiskey in the yellowed lamplight. He stands upright, slowly, and looks both of the other men over from his vantage.

“Yeah, okay,” He grunts out and, before the turns to shuffle into the bathroom, deposits the open bottle of liquor in between Ignis' feet. Prompto barely manages to stop their bed from getting soaked in alcohol. He sighs and places the bottle on the floor next to Gladio's bed. So much for keeping this from Ignis.

“I got an idea.”

“Dangerous or desperate?” There's no playfulness there, but he's making an attempt.

“Neither. You guys both need haircuts.”

“Is right now terribly necessary?” Ignis does sound tired, but he's done a whole lot of nothing for weeks now. Can't be that bad.

“Yup. I have decided. Besides, you're starting to look like a hermit.” He really is.

“However you would have me.”

Prompto can't help but smile just a bit at that. He didn't know Ignis even knew how to display that kind of affection. When he turns to Ignis, the other man's expression is as carefully blank as ever. Maybe not then. The gunner knows he shouldn't take Ignis' coping mechanisms personally, but it still stings.

He sets the rickety, old, plastic chair up in the hallway with an extra sheet underneath. He'd do
this outside, but the alleyway is singularly unpleasant. Plus, it's a little chillier with all the civilians being moved out of this side of town. Prompto checks his kit and tests his clippers. He's cut his own hair since... High school he supposes. Professional stylists were ridiculously expensive in Insomnia. After they left, he was the only one among them with any experience cutting hair at all. Besides, the gear is his. When Gladio wanders out of the bathroom in nothing but boxer briefs and still somehow wet, Prompto grabs him around one thickly-muscled arm and pulls him down into the chair. He grunts.

“I'm just gonna have to get right back in the shower.”

“You'll be okay.”

“It takes like... Two towels to dry me off.”

“You're still wet, Big Guy.”

Gladio grunts at the eagle on his chest. Prompto can't be sure if it's directed at him or not. Gladio forgets his disagreement with his tattoos when the towel over his shoulders shrouds them.

“Iggy. Go shower while I do Gladio.” Ignis pads across the room. Prompto stops him before he goes in the bathroom door. “Please shave. Really. Do it for me?”

Ignis hums. Gladio chuckles.

The shield's hair is easy enough, besides he isn't all that picky so long as the undercut is right. By the time Prompto finishes, Gladio somehow looks even more like a behemoth. He wobbles off while Prompto cleans up his tools. He swipes the bottle of whiskey off the floor and settles back onto his bed against the wall to watch Prompto work. The gunner smirks. The tiny hairs covering Gladio's face and torso and stuck in his beard will get into everything. His problem.

Ignis exits the bathroom right on cue, and Prompto has to consider himself lucky that he's seen all of the man before, because he's all the way down to his boxer briefs as well. The view isn't the same when Ignis is unconscious. The gunner starts up a mantra of do not embarrass yourself in his head while he wraps a fresh towel around Ignis' shoulders.

“So... You just want the usual? Vaguely shorter?” Ignis' haircut is much harder to replicate than
Gladio's. If Prompto were being honest, he would admit that his amateur approximation of the original style had slipped into something much more nebulous months ago. Ignis never once complained.

“Whatever you wish, Prompto.”

He's not sure if he should be flattered or concerned. At least Ignis finally shaved. Flattered it is then.

Prompto has done this before, at least a dozen times, but this time feels different. Combing Ignis' water-darkened hair and clipping tiny section by tiny section is calming now, where before he had been nervous every time. Ignis peeks up at him through the pin straight rows the comb creates and Prompto smiles at him faintly. There's no answering smile, but the eyes continue to follow his every movement. When he moves around to the back of Ignis' head, he chews on his lip and frowns as he works around the whorl of hair at the crown. Prompto was hoping getting cleaned up would help Ignis feel better. Now he just feels like he's being pushy. Ignis hadn't been doing that well before all of this. Prompto can hardly expect him to just snap out of it.

Ignis spends the rest of the time in the chair staring at his cast. When Prompto finishes, a whispered thanks and brush of fingers down his arm is all Ignis can muster on his way back into the bathroom to rinse off. Prompto frowns at his tools and the towels covered in two different shades of brown hair, and pretends he doesn't know Gladio is still watching from his bed polishing off the bottle of whiskey.

Ignis emerges from the bathroom again, this time fully dressed in most of a hunter outfit. Prompto stands up from the bed and watches him pull on his Kingsglaive boots and zip up the backs.

“Where are you going?”

“I thought surely some fresh air was in order.” He sounds better, and he looks better, but Prompto isn't sure he's convinced.

“Um... You want me to come with?”

“Air really isn't what I'd call 'fresh', Iggy.”
“Ah... No, I'd like to step out alone. Perhaps next time.”

He's out the front door before either Gladio or Prompto can say anything else.

“Blondie, who's he pissed at?”

“What? I dunno.”

“He's lyin', and now so are you.”

“Why does everything have to be your business?”

“Because I got the feelin' Iggy is about to do somethin' stupid.”

“Cor. He's mad at Cor.”

“Fuck. I'm drunk. You better run or he's gonna get himself killed.”

Prompto doesn't get there in time to stop Ignis.

He does get there in time to see Ignis struggling to hold Cor in front of him, the elbow of his cast held tight under the Marshal's chin. There are words, all spitfire venom and Prompto recognizes neither the sound of Ignis' voice, nor the picture he sees.

“Tell me! Why don't I deserve to know?” Ignis is frantic with wild desperation.
“It's not... Nothing like that.” Cor is wheezing around the plaster cast, face beet-red and veins bulging.

“Then its true? Was I brainwashed? Was I brought up to be a science experiment, or a sacrifice?” The accusations come faster and more desperate with each one, Ignis' voice straining and cracking with what Prompto recognizes as fear.

“That... is ridiculous.” Cor is slowly shifting his greater weight to force Ignis closer to the wall behind them.

There's a flash of blue and Ignis has summoned a dagger. Its already too late. Cor hurls them both backwards into the wall once, twice, and again, and Ignis falls limply to the ground. The dagger despawns back into the Armiger. Cor looms over the younger man and takes heaving breaths.

“It won't... The truth won't make you feel any better, Ignis!” Cor wheezes a few more times. Prompto has never heard the Marshal raise his voice before, but to him it sounds just as afraid.

Ignis slumps against the wall like a broken doll.

“You'll get no absolution from it! You weren't brainwashed, or any other ludicrous garbage that Highwind woman stuffed into your head!” Cor takes a few more breaths, these easier than the last. “I haven't the slightest idea what's gotten into any of you boys lately, but this is insane!”

Ignis curls up against the wall behind him.

“You can't beat it out of me, Ignis. You're smarter than that.”

“You are the only person left alive that could know. Am I to spend the rest of my unnatural life entertaining hundreds of scenarios, each more depressing and horrible than the last?” The venom is gone, washed away in an ocean of hopelessness.

“I'd hope for your sake you would learn to let it go... The truth, is far simpler than you imagine.”

“Then why?”
“Because it's just shitty, Ignis. I would rather go the rest of my life being the only person who remembers than relive it just to make you feel even worse.”

Ignis doesn't have anything left to say.

“Prompto, take him home.”

He wants to laugh bitterly at the words, but he doesn't. Home is nowhere now after all.

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Chapter End Notes

- Non Graphic depictions of anxiety
- Non Graphic depiction of alcoholism
- Assault between Major Characters (yes, again)
Chapter 27 - Coming Together

Chapter Notes

No Chapter Specific Warnings. Except, well...

This chapter took a particularly long time for me to finish. I am #sorrynotsorry, because you can blame the characters for getting impatient with my hemming and hawing around with their relationship.

So have some awkward smut.

Also, shoutout to Pinknoonicorn yet again for the chapter title. I claim no responsibility for this one. I couldn't think of anything better, so here we go.

Optional Listening: Four Walls - Broods

Prompto is too afraid to take his next breath.

Nothing is happening. There's no urgent problem to address, or stressful situation to monitor. No crisis, of conscience or otherwise, currently occupies his time. Still, the chance of shattering a peace as fragile and precious as this is worth holding his breath for eternity. Too bad that isn't an option.

Ignis is asleep.

He hasn't slept for three days. Well, the equivalent anyway. Three whole days of watching Ignis fret into his knees or worry with his chin in his chest. Prompto had tried valiantly to stay awake with him, but he has limits. Ignis' anxiety can't keep Prompto awake, at least not without a few gallons of very strong coffee. There is no coffee.

Prompto dares a careful and slow breath. Ignis' eyebrows furrow and he turns his face further into the gunner's soft t-shirt and flat belly. Prompto decides its worth the risk to continue gently pulling his fingers through Ignis' hair. His lips fall open just enough to show the white of his teeth peeking through, and Prompto can't help but smile fondly at his overbite, at the bump in the bridge of his nose and the scar crossing it, at every tiny eyelash and imperfection. Of course, Ignis is gorgeous. That
goes without saying. When he's asleep, he can't hide. When he's asleep, Prompto doesn't feel nervous or self-conscious about blatantly staring at him.

They haven't talked about... whatever this is. It was all Prompto could do to get Ignis back to their room under his own power. He had kept trying to stop and just stand in the middle of alleyways and intersections. Prompto hadn't stopped pulling him forward no matter how many times Ignis hit the brakes. Whatever had been going through the other man's mind, he hadn't shared. The hours between were spent... cuddling for lack of a better word. Sure, Ignis was busy contemplating his knees, but that didn't stop Prompto from clinging to him with a tenacity usually afforded to plastic wrap. Ignis hadn't seemed to mind.

Prompto sends off a quick, semi-threatening text to Gladio. Not that he thinks the big man would mess this up on purpose, but there was always the risk he would come stumbling in. Just another thing to worry about. A returned text in acknowledgment is enough to reassure the gunner that it would be quiet for at least a few hours. He lets his own eyelids slide shut and takes advantage of the quiet.

Prompto's brow lowers and his lips turn down. Something has woken him up. The weight of Ignis resting on his abdomen is still present, but the breathing has changed from quiet, calm, and deep to quick and shallow. He peeks an eye open. Ignis is awake, eyes wide and staring at somewhere beyond Prompto's own head.

“Hey, you okay? Had a nightmare?”

“No. Well, perhaps.” The green gaze refocuses onto Prompto.

“Maybe? You don't know?”

“I never remember dreams. I know that I have them. I simply cannot remember.”

“That's starting to sound like a theme with you.” Ignis' eyes turn to stare at Prompto's arm and he hums lowly. “I don't have any room to talk though. I don't remember dreams either.” He takes a risk and resumes his earlier stroking Ignis' hair, pulling his fingers through the strands from over the crown of his head down to the fringe over his eyes. Prompto bites his lip and fights the smile when Ignis' eyes flutter shut again. That's just... cute.
“How long did I sleep?”

“How long did I sleep?”

“Nowhere near long enough. You should go back to sleep... so I can go back to sleep.” Prompto punctuates the thought with a yawn.

“I'm disturbing you. Apologies, I...” Ignis rolls up onto his knees and stands at the side of the bed, but doesn't make it any further. There's not really anywhere to go. He looks lost in a 12 x 12 room. Prompto smiles up at him.

“You're being ridiculous. Come here, Iggy.” Prompto holds a hand out and hooks the fingers exposed from Ignis' cast. “I'm perfectly happy being a pillow if that's what it takes to get you to sleep.”

Ignis smiles back, just a little one, and wedges and wiggles his way between Prompto and the wall. Then he wraps his limbs around Prompto like a very large and very warm octopus. Ignis' left arm is under Prompto's head, but the cast lies awkwardly along the length of the gunner's torso. Ignis' entire body is flush with Prompto's except for one leg pulled on top of his own.

Prompto really had thought this could be an embarrassment free day. Not so much now, but with Ignis' face buried into his shoulder, he really just can't bring himself to complain.

Prompto is awake again. Something has woken him yet again. Ignis is still wedged into his side, but he's way too quiet to still be asleep and very still. There is something hard pressing into his hip, but the cast is still lying across his chest.

That couldn't possibly be... could it?

“Iggy?”

“I'm sorry.”
“Okay, let's start with that. Why are you sorry, exactly?”

“Must I really say it?”

“I'm just making absolutely sure I'm not hallucinating.”

Ignis responds with a slow, pressing roll of his hips followed by a swallowed, high-pitched groan right into Prompto's ear that he doesn't quite manage to suppress. Blood rushes south. If he weren't already rock-hard, he certainly would be now.

“Is that for me?”

“Ah... Do you want it?” Prompto's head whips to the side and a hairsbreadth away from headbutting Ignis. He's... smirking? He sits up and folds his legs underneath him.

“Okay, wait. We're doing this sorta backwards, aren't we? Where's all the kissing and stuff?” Isn't this sort of fast? Well, they've known each other for years, but still.

“Is that what you want?” Still smirking. Its cute, but distracting.

“Ignis, we haven't talked about any of this. We can't just... go straight to the fun stuff and skip all the hard stuff.”

Ignis sits up across from Prompto and smiles, closed-mouthed and mischievous.

“I thought it was all hard stuff.”

“Ha ha. Very funny, smart guy. I'm serious.” The smile drops off of Ignis' face. “I need you to actually talk to me. No compensating with humor or sarcasm. I get that you're nervous. I'm nervous too, but skipping all this stuff isn't gonna make it go away. Okay?”

“Apologies.” Ignis is still looking at him, but he's fiddling with the scar around his finger, and his head is tilted down.
“I don't want you to apologize, I want you to be honest. That means telling me what you really think, or feel, or whatever.” So Prompto doesn't have to guess anymore.

“Anything you wish.” Ignis' voice is soft and colored with something that Prompto can only describe as reverence. It's confusing.

“About that. You keep saying that. Why?”

“I don't understand why you're here. Like this... with me.”

“Why wouldn't I want to be with you?”

“Any number of reasons. I could make you a list.”

“Try me.” Prompto arches one eyebrow.

“You have never shown any perceivable interest in men, to start.” Point.

“But that's okay, because I have plenty of interest in you. Keep going.” Counterpoint.

“Oh... Well.” Ignis furrows his brows and clears his throat. He’s blushing all the way into his ears. So grinding on Prompto's leg doesn't make him blush, but telling him he's hot does? “I cannot imagine that I am easy to deal with, and yet you're not only willing to put up with my idiosyncrasies, but willing to enter into a relationship with me? You've been so kind and patient with me these last weeks, and I have done nothing to earn your favor. I don't deserve you.” Ridiculous. Where does he come up with this stuff?

“I disagree. Moving on.” Ignis scoffs. Time to test a hypothesis. “You realize you're basically a model, right? I am super not that. You could have anyone you wanted in a heartbeat and for some reason you want this guy. What makes me special?”

“You're perfect.” The blush glows. Hypothesis confirmed. “I have never been attracted to anyone
“Huh. Just me. So I'm it for you?” Prompto thinks maybe he should feel something other than overwhelmed. Does he even realize what he's just said? “Wow. That's... that's a lot, Iggy.”

It is a lot. For a minute, it feels like too much responsibility. What if it doesn't work out? What if he can't make Ignis happy? What if they're incompatible in some as of yet unforeseen way? What does Ignis even want? He doesn't ask for anything from anyone. How is Prompto supposed to know what he wants if he won't talk about it? Ignis doesn't talk about much of anything with emotional weight.

“Ignis... What exactly do you want out of a relationship? With me?” It's Prompto's turn to blush. He can feel the heat of it spreading across his cheeks.

“I haven't said?”

“Not really.”

“I'm grateful for anything you're willing to offer me. I wouldn't presume to ask for anything more.” More reverence. More confusing grace and humility that Prompto is certain shouldn't be directed at him.

“That's... Iggy, that's not what I asked. I need you to be honest.” He's trying not to get frustrated, he really is. The gunner runs a hand through his hair and sighs.

“Does it have to be so complicated? The only differences between now and before are that we are open with one another and... maybe the inclusion of sex.” Blushy smirk.

“Sex is good. We should definitely do that. Just as soon as we figure out how.”

“Oh, come now. It can't be all that difficult, can it?” Ignis leans forward, bare inches away. His seafoam eyes flicker from Prompto's own irises down to his lips.

“We still haven't even kissed yet.” How is this his life? Prompto closes the distance until the
breath is shared between them.

“Easily remedied.” Ignis leans in the rest of the way, and Prompto closes eyes. After a few seconds of nothing happening, he opens them again. Ignis has... stopped. All the confidence has drained out of him like water. He's afraid.

“Hey. Where'd you go?”

“I'm sorry, Prompto. I'm ruining this already.” His words are strained as if he's trying to push them past something. When Ignis ducks his chin, Prompto tips him back up between a finger and thumb. No more hiding. Not today.

“It doesn't have to be perfect, Iggy.” Prompto places a chaste kiss just at the corner of his perfect cupid's bow. “We're just gonna have to practice like... all the time.”

He hopes it pays off. He's probably used his smoothness ration for the week.

The first kiss is little more than a slow, firm press of dry lips. There are no teeth or tongue, but Prompto feels something grip him from somewhere he didn't even know existed and yank his consciousness into hyper-awareness. The second kiss is just a little more wet and still no teeth or tongue, but that doesn't mean there isn't more. There's a hand sliding up Prompto's thigh and he doesn't know what to do with his own hands, so he sets them on Ignis' shoulders. The third kiss, Ignis' lips fall open and Prompto presses inside just enough to run his tongue across an even row of teeth, and Ignis groans into his mouth. Next thing he knows, he somehow has a lap full of Ignis. They fall over backwards with Prompto underneath and Ignis wraps both long legs around his hips and yanks ineffectively at his shirt.

“Hang on, hang on!” Prompto pulls his shirt over his head while Ignis leans back on top of him and pulls off his own. One graceful, long-fingered hand slides smoothly up his flat abdomen and over his ribs and Prompto looks back up to Ignis and can't believe what he sees there. His chest heaves with every breath and his expression is as open as Prompto has ever seen it. There's a flush from his chest all the way up into his ears, and the viridian gaze pulling Prompto apart is that of a starving man in front of a royal banquet. Prompto can feel... something, he isn't sure what, rubbing subtly against the steel trapped in his own pants with every barely-controlled movement of Ignis' hips, and for the first time it occurs to him that he's making out and possibly about to have sex in some form or fashion with another man. With Ignis.

He doesn't have time to wrap his mind around that one. Ignis smiles, openly and earnestly, all wide eyes and sharp teeth, and leans down to settle on top of Prompto and resume their previous
kissing. For a moment, Prompto is entranced by the feel of soft lips and softer tongue, of a slightly-rough hand tracing the muscles of his chest, and of the weight of Ignis' body above his. He's enraptured by the sensation of feather down soft hair in one hand and the movement of muscle underneath silken skin under the other. However, none of those can distract from Ignis' hips rolling painstakingly slowly against his own, or the delicious press of his clothed erection with every pass. When Ignis breaks free of the kiss and begins to mouth under Prompto's jaw, he needs the pants gone.

“Iggy, hey. Wait.” Ignis looks down at him somewhere between amused, concerned, and very aroused. “Just wanna get these off...” He seems to get the hint quickly enough when Prompto nearly racks him trying to kick off his own pants and helps by pulling them down by the waistband. He helps a little too well, and Prompto finds himself completely nude far sooner than he had been planning. His cock slaps into his stomach and Ignis choking out a whine. The sound makes Prompto twitch, and a bead of precome stretches between the head and his flat belly. Ignis holds up his left hand and it hovers inches above Prompto's cock. He doesn't move any further. His eyes are locked onto Prompto's erection.

“Oh, shit! Hng.” Ignis chuckles and wraps his hand around Prompto's shaft, thumb rubbing gentle circles against his frenulum. He lowers his head further between Prompto's spread thighs, and the gunner bites his lip over the groan that squeezes out when he realizes those deep, measured inhales mean that Ignis is smelling him. There's a low hum from beyond his balls, and Prompto thinks for a second that Ignis is going to lick him and he's going to come right then and there. He leans up on his elbows, and gets a view of mostly the top of Ignis' head. Another beautiful, open smile is directed up at Prompto. Cheeky bastard. He softly smacks the hand away from his dick.

“Hey. This isn't fair. You're not naked.” Ignis somehow manages to shrug with the shoulder he isn't leaning on. His weight is resting mostly on his cast. That can't really be comfortable. Neither can his pants. “C'mon. Swap with me.”

They scramble around in the blankets and pillows again. Prompto can't decide if he wants to bite his lip more or Ignis'. There's just so much smirking. He dips in for another round of kissing, and this time there's suction around his tongue when he pushes it between the other man's teeth. He runs a hand down Ignis torso and fumbles with the fly of his pants, but he's clumsy with the position and even more clumsy with the movement of the hips below his. Ignis' hand drops from his nape to assist and Prompto breaks away from the kiss to rest his forehead on the chest below him to see an upside-down view of Ignis pulling himself out of his boxer briefs.
Prompto is at a loss.

“Um... dude. That's uh...” His nerves must show through his voice. Ignis freezes underneath him. “Have you ever... you know... measured it?”

There's several seconds of stillness and silence. “I never felt the need.”

“Really? Heh heh... You're just... Kinda intimidating?”

Prompto has never felt inadequate in this department before. He never had a need to. He doesn't exactly feel inadequate right now either. His own equipment is exactly not too long or too short, and exactly not too big around. He knows. He'd measured. Six and a half inches, cut because Nif. An absolutely respectable amount of dick.

“Is it... bad?”

Ignis dwarfs him. He's got to be at least nine inches, maybe nine and a half, and as thick around as Prompto's wrist. He doesn't know how it never occurred to him this was a possibility. After all, he's seen Ignis bared several times, he just assumed that what he saw was what the other man had to offer. Ignis reaches down to push his cock back into his clothing, but Prompto stops him with a hand around his wrist.

“Just... wait a minute. Don't run away from me. Give me a minute to wrap my brain around this.”

“I'm sorry.” At that Prompto pulls his eyes away from Ignis' flagging erection to his blank expression turned toward the wall.

“No, its not. Iggy, I'm just surprised. That's all.” Prompto is sure that if this isn't the new stupidest thing he's ever done, its at least the new shittiest he's ever felt.

“It's alright. I understand.” Ignis flips over between the brace of Prompto's arms and buries his face in his left elbow. The gunner has to take a moment to breathe through his frustration and remind himself that Ignis is still very fragile, probably depressed, and anxious by default.
“Iggy, you gotta stop assuming things. You're making me feel like an ass.”

“What would you wish of me then?”

“Pay attention.” Prompto lays his entire body over the top of Ignis, being very careful of his still very healthy erection, which from their height difference slides right into the dip at the bottom of the other man’s spine. He whispers right into Ignis' ear, “You paying attention, Ignis?” Then he thrusts his hips forward into warm, smooth skin and lets himself gasp and pant as he licks and mouths at the column of Ignis' neck and behind the shell of his ear. He tastes like salt and smells like clean sweat and bergamot, and the barely-there scrape of beard-shadow across his lips and tongue makes Prompto moan deeply. He slides both palms along the bars of Ignis' ribs and down to hook into his waistband. “You understand now, Iggy?”

Ignis nods.

“Then turn over and do this with me, because I'd really rather do this with you.”

Now it's Prompto's turn to nearly get racked when Ignis flips over again underneath him. The gunner doesn't waste anymore time and yanks the pants all the way down Ignis' long legs. He drags both palms slowly up the thick muscle and fine, sparse fur of Ignis' calves and thighs up to grasp around the other man's sharp hipbones. He wonders, fleetingly, how Ignis would smell, how he would taste, but he doesn't have the patience for any more playing around. Neither it seems, does Ignis.

He pulls Prompto down on top of him and lines up their hips. Ignis isn't even fully hard again yet, but it's all Prompto can do at this point not to just thrust wildly into him. He distracts himself by pulling Ignis into a rough kiss with way too much teeth because both of them are smiling and gasping into each other's mouths. He can feel the hardness sliding alongside his growing longer and thicker, and his own leaks moisture when Ignis lets out a muffled groan into the kiss. Ignis wedges his hand between their bodies, and at first Prompto is confused, until he grasps the gunner's cock and pulls along the shaft and over the head and then spreads the precome over the tip of his dick.

“Oh, fuck. This isn't gonna last very long.”

Ignis chuckles and pulls Prompto up until the tips of their cocks are aligned. He's surprised to find that this brings him face to face with Ignis. Convenient. Prompto sucks a trail down the front of Ignis' neck and the sound that he hears when he gets just under the apple of the other man's throat reverberates through his own. Its somewhere between a moan and a choked whine, and Ignis' voice just gets louder when he puts his own hand over both of their erections and holds them aligned.
tightly against his own abdomen. Prompto doesn't need any encouragement and starts thrusting into the cage of Ignis' fist, his hands locked around slender hips and his cock sliding up the length of Ignis' over and over. His ears are filled with choked, aborted moans and frantic gasping, his mouth is full of salt and skin, his thighs burn with the effort of his frenetic thrusting, and whole body thrums with the arousal concentrating in his dick. Prompto can feel his balls tightening and his orgasm building, but its too soon, and he feels a pang in his chest at the thought that this could be over.

He’s trying desperately to hold back, when Ignis lets out a particularly deep, choked moan and then stops breathing. He feels Ignis' cock throb and spill over and over into his fist and the heat and the slickness throws him over the edge to add his own come to Ignis' with every deep thrust. Prompto groans and hears Ignis inhale sharply as he starts breathing again.

They lie together for a time, until their breathing is normal again. Prompto speaks from where his head rests alongside Ignis'.

“So, we're probably going to stick together.”

“More likely than not.” Ignis sighs and pulls his hand out from between their bodies. He examines the sticky, come-stained fingers like they’re a fascinating puzzle to work out.

“I don't think we can both fit in that shower. Especially not with that cast.” Prompto reluctantly rolls off of Ignis and pads over to the bathroom. He cleans himself, then wets a washcloth in the sink and wrings out the excess water into the shallow basin before padding back to Ignis.

“How much longer again?” The other man allows Prompto to wipe and clean his fingers and palm, but takes the cloth from him when he makes a move toward his cock. Fair enough, he barely knows what to do with a foreskin anyway.

“Tomorrow actually.”

“Finally. My purgatory ends.” Ignis wipes halfheartedly at the puddle on his abdomen, but really he’s just smearing it into an even bigger mess.

“Nah. Then you get to start physical therapy. Well, at least as close as we can get.”

“Please, do not remind me.” He gives up and yawns quietly, dropping the soiled washcloth onto
his stomach. “Come sleep with me?”

Prompto scratches at the back of his head. “Maybe we should actually get cleaned up first."

Ignis hums and looks dejectedly down at the mess he's made of himself.

“I suppose it couldn't hurt.”

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