Faustian Bargain

by pikachumaniac

Summary

It does not escape his attention that no one is willing to look him in the eye. That’s because they’ve already decided, he realizes distantly. This current display of hand-wringing is nothing more than a farce, to keep up the pretense that the betrayal they debate is difficult. It serves no purpose but to make themselves feel better, for it certainly does nothing for him.

He notices abruptly that there are more guards than usual at each of the exits, as if they truly expect him to run. He almost wants to summon a dagger just to see them all flinch. It is a petty thought, but when they speak of giving him up like a piece of property, a little pettiness seems warranted.

Ignis Scientia has always known that he might be required to sacrifice everything for the sake of his country, but that does not make it any easier when the king agrees to an unexpected term in seeking peace with the enemy: to hand over the prince’s advisor to Niflheim, as a token of good will.

Notes

I’m sorry for writing this, but apparently not sorry enough to stop writing it. To be honest, this started off as a way to vent when I was having problems with my main stories, but at some point it developed a somewhat coherent storyline, character arcs, and chapter breaks. I know what is going to happen for 90% of it, and needless to say, it is not a happy story by any stretch of the imagination; the warnings are there for a reason.
“They cannot be serious,” the king says, but from the expressions on every councilmembers’ face, they are quite serious indeed.

“Your majesty,” Councilman Fermin replies, “I can assure you that the Niflheim delegation was quite clear about the terms, and—”

“Did you ask for clarification?” the king’s Shield interrupts coldly. “I find it unlikely that the Empire would risk peace for such a petty demand.”

“Isn’t that what we are considering, if you were to turn their proffer down?” a voice murmurs softly, but to no one’s surprise, the speaker is not eager to reveal himself to the rest. Neither is the rest of the Council particularly interested in determining who has said what surely is on everyone’s mind, even before he had spoken.

Still, the words have their intended effect, as Councilwoman Aletta cuts in, “Are we considering turning this offer down? Even with their newest demand, the terms are as favorable as we can expect, considering how close Lucis is to losing this war. If we were to ask to renegotiate, who knows what they would ask for in exchange?”

Councilwoman Clarise laughs, although her words are dry as dust. “And what else could we possibly exchange at this point? Those terms you deem to be so ‘favorable’ require that Lucis give up its claims to all lands outside of the Crown City. Compared to that, what is one person, fond of him as his highness is?”

And with that oblique acknowledgment, the floodgates open, as everyone shares their opinions on the treaty terms, whether or not they are invited.

“He has too much information. We cannot have that information falling into the Empire’s hands.”

“They have made assurances that information is not their aim.”

“And since when have we taken Niflheim’s promises at face value?”

“What choice do we have, when the war goes so poorly?”

The voices are all blending together, the half-hearted arguments and even less enthusiastic counterpoints fading into background noise as he watches the Council bicker. It does not escape his attention that no one is willing to look him in the eye, despite them ostensibly discussing his fate. That’s because they’ve already decided, he realizes distantly. This current display of hand-wringing is nothing more than a farce, to keep up the pretense that the betrayal they debate is difficult. It serves no purpose but to make themselves feel better, for it certainly does nothing for him.

He notices abruptly that there are more guards than usual at each of the exits, as if they truly expect him to run. He almost wants to summon a dagger just to see them all flinch. It is a petty thought, but when they speak of giving him up like a piece of property, a little pettiness seems warranted. Still, he has been trained too well to act upon it, and he keeps his hands still and on the table, so as not to appear a threat.

“What do you think, Darius? The boy is your blood, after all.”
Even now, they cannot stand to acknowledge him, so they will speak to his uncle rather than himself, despite the fact that they sit side by side. Darius Scientia, at least, is capable of looking at him, although their eyes lock for barely a second before his uncle turns back to the councilmember who addressed him. “As Lady Aletta said, we cannot expect better than the terms that are before us. As for their newest demand… when weighing one life against so many, what choice can be made?”

“It depends on that life, doesn’t it?” the Marshal asks conversationally, and he does not know what that question was meant to accomplish. But whatever the man’s intentions were, they are quickly lost as the room again erupts into meaningless debate.

All the while, he can only sit there, watching all of them as they wonder what the Empire could want of him. Fermin and the other negotiators had not asked, and that just leads to a whole new argument of why they didn’t, even though it barely matters. Still, they would prefer to talk about anything, rather than acknowledge the choice they have already made.

He is not the only one who is silent, as the councilmembers fight for their voices to be heard. Since he had been informed of the terms, the king has said nothing, his eyes closed as if hoping to detach himself from this entire situation. Lord Amicitia, by his side, looks no more pleased than his liege, his jaw clenched in a way that is familiar to anyone who has dealt with that family.

“Enough.” The single word is soft, but it demands respect, and immediately the room goes silent. The king has still not opened his eyes, but it is clear who is in command. The Council has their voices, but it is the king who must sign the paper, who will be the face of this treaty and must, in turn, face the consequences that stem from it. “Lord Fermin. They gave no explanation for why they want my son’s advisor?”

“None, your majesty.”

“But they would not relent on this?”

“They…” the councilman swallows, perhaps sensing that he will need to provide some explanation other than because. “They said it would be a token of good will, that you were serious about this peace.”

The Council remains deathly silent, as the king considers this information. “I see.”

Does he? he wonders to himself. Because he certainly does not. The Empire has no need for assurances when Lucis is on the brink of total defeat already. These peace negotiations are but a sham, when one side has nearly all the advantages. If not for the Crystal and the Wall, Insomnia would have fallen already, and even that seems only a matter of time. Given the situation, Niflheim could have asked for anything… so why him? As Noct’s advisor, he has information, that is true, but what need would there be of that if the war is ended? Perhaps their aims are more long-term then, to weaken Noct’s eventual rule, but that seems to place too high a value on him to the prince, even in his own mind. It would hurt Noct more emotionally, but that is hardly a mortal wound, at least not one worth making a demand over.

But perhaps the hurt is the point. For it has also not escaped his attention that the prince is not here, despite how this decision would impact him. Should he learn of what transpired here, he may never forgive the king, for Noct is still too gentle to be able to weigh the life of his friend against the needs of the many, and to make the right decision.

Whether or not that is truly their goal, it matters not; he knows it will be the inevitable outcome, and so does the king. But unlike Noctis, King Regis does not have the luxury of sentimentality, and
the king rises to his feet.

“Tell the Empire’s negotiators that Lucis accepts these terms,” he says to Fermin, but his gaze never leaves him. “All of them.”

A king pushes onward always, accepting the consequences and never looking back. Those were the first words that the king had ever spoken to him, and today, he is the consequence that the king must accept. At least the man has the decency to face him, when even his own family now studiously avoids looking in his direction.

It does not make him feel much better.

“Your majesty,” Fermin says, hesitating before the words come out all in a rush. “Regarding Scientia, Niflheim made clear that they expect this term to be performed immediately.”

“I am aware,” the king replies coolly. “Another token of good will, I take it?”

The councilman is intelligent to know that the bitter question requires no answer of him. He bows quickly and scurries away, but even he cannot leave through the doors quickly enough for them to avoid seeing the Niflheim guards that stand just on the other side. Their presumption is startling, but not actually surprising; everyone knows there was only one way for this to turn out. The other councilmembers and advisors exchange looks, wondering what is expected of them now, but the king quickly makes their role clear to them. “You may leave, all of you.”

While framed as an option, it is anything but, and they all quickly gather their belongings and depart. The guards hesitate, but they too are dismissed with no more than a glance. For his part, he stays seated, knowing that he is not a part of that group; the ability to choose, illusory or not, is not something he is entitled to any longer. Soon, Captain Drautos is closing the door with a heavy finality, leaving only him, his king, and the king’s Shield, who is not so easily cowed by any man, especially the one he serves.

“Ignis.”

Slowly, he turns to look at the man. It is not the first time they have had to face each other today, although it may very well be the last. This time though, the king looks almost as broken as he is starting to feel, as the reality of what is happening truly begins to sink in. “I love you as my own son, truly, but... we need more time. This peace treaty gives us that.”

He can tell that the king wants him to say that he understands. The king wants absolution. And there is, in fact, a part of him that does understand the terrible choices that a ruler must make. There is even a part of him that wants to offer that forgiveness, the part of him that has been loyal and obedient for all of his life, and made sure to do everything in his power to serve.

But then he remembers that he has given everything in service to this kingdom, and as his final act, they will give him away too. He has never been so naïve as to think that he would not be expected to sacrifice everything for this country, but in all his wildest nightmares, he never thought it would end like this.

The hand that rests on his shoulder is heavy indeed, as the king lowers himself so that they are at eye-level. There is something peculiar about their positions, which would almost suggest they are equals. But it is a mere mockery, given the true inequity of power that rests between them. As if to emphasize that, the king touches his brow, and says, “I am sorry.”

He is expecting it, knowing that they cannot leave him with access to the Armiger if he is to be
given to the Empire. Still, he flinches as his connection to Noct is broken, but that is nothing compared to what comes after, the emptiness that settles over him. For so long, he has always been aware of his prince, but now that is gone, as well as his link to Prompto and Gladio, and… oh. Gladio. Belatedly, he remembers that they were supposed to have dinner that very night, perhaps even catch a movie, with the strict understanding that if he was too tired, he had the right to use his lover as a not particularly comfortable pillow. He glances over at Lord Amicitia, somber and stone-faced. What will he tell his son? What will the king tell Noct?

He supposes it is no longer any of his business.

“I am truly sorry,” Regis says again, for the man is no longer his king. He has no king now, and likely no future either, as he stands as best he can on legs that cannot quite stop shaking, before turning his back on them both in order to deliver himself to the Empire’s soldiers.
Chapter 2

Thank you for the feedback! I still feel terrible for writing this, but at least I’m taking you all down with me.

In the time it takes to walk away from Regis to the guards waiting him, he considers his options. There are not many, and none are good.

He could be compliant, as everyone obviously expects him to be. It should be easy enough, given that he has spent most his life making his own needs subservient to that of Lucis’s. But that was before his country sold him, and while peace is a precious commodity indeed, it does not change what has been done to him. He is not even a hostage – that would imply that his health still matters. It does not. He has been given to the Empire for whatever they so desire, whether it is torture or execution or the former followed swiftly by the latter. Given that, does he not have the right to be resentful?

That is the other possibility. He could resist. He could be stubborn, create a scene, and make this as difficult as possible for everyone involved. But he cannot imagine that would accomplish anything except his own humiliation, not when both Niflheim and Lucis have a vested interest in making sure that he ends up where he is supposed to be. He finds that likely outcome distasteful, particularly when pride is all that he has left to him.

In the end, like so much of his life, the choice is taken out of his hands. He is barely through the doors when Niflheim’s soldiers descend on him, holding him still as they bind his wrists behind his back. Perhaps they recognize that he has no say in this, and thus has little incentive to cooperate. Perhaps they simply do it to be cruel. He suspects the latter; their words are certainly cruel, the men mocking him as they march him to their main airship. It is easy enough to ignore.

Harder to disregard is that although it is the middle of the day, there is no audience to this spectacle. Doubtless Regis has taken steps to keep this as quiet as possible. It certainly reduces the chances of a spectacular rescue, although he was never naïve enough to put much stock in that. But he had hoped to see the others one last time; of course, that is almost certainly what Regis is hoping to avoid most.

(Then again, does he truly want the others to see him like this? Perhaps it is not only for Regis’s benefit that they are kept away.)

The Niflheim airship is a technological marvel, even if he has no interest in admiring it. Unlike the empty halls they passed through in the palace, the airship is crawling with people. Most are too busy with their tasks to notice the armed party in their midst, but a few stop to stare, as confused as he is to why he is here.

As they move through the maze of corridors, he maps their path and takes note of potential exits. While likely futile, he cannot help himself; he cannot simply turn off his mind because of his circumstances. Besides, it proves a useful distraction from whatever fate awaits him.

The door they stop before is as nondescript as the other eight they passed along the way. It is
unlocked. One soldier simply pushes it open, before another shoves him forward. He stumbles, expecting their laughter at his ungainliness to follow. If it does, he doesn’t notice as he straightens, and finds himself not in a barren cell, but an elegantly furnished room.

“What is this-?” he asks as he looks back at the guards, only for the question to be lost in the slam of the door and the turn of the key, securing him in.

He doesn’t know how much time passes, as he waits for the room’s owner to arrive. For that much is clear, as these luxurious surroundings were most certainly not designed for him. It is no mere showroom either, meant to impress more illustrious visitors. This room is lived in, each fixture carefully curated not simply for appearances, but for utility as well. He would almost admire the owner’s taste, if he wasn’t too busy worrying about his own future.

He is not required to wait too long before the door opens, and a distorted voice asks, “Have you been standing this whole time?”

He turns slowly, as he does not need to look to know who is there. “General Glauca.”

Niflheim’s high commander stands in the entryway, the shifting metal of his armor difficult to focus on. He suspects that is part of its advantage, distracting an opponent, but keeps the thought to himself. A military commander of the general’s renown does not need him to expound on battlefield tactics. But then, the general has no need for him at all, yet here he is, watching intently as the man closes the door and strides in.

Cold metal fingers take hold of his chin, turning his face so that he can be inspected like a prized dog. He has no idea what the general is looking for but permits it, not wanting to give the man any excuse for injuring him at this early stage. If they do not intend to execute him immediately, he must conserve his strength, if he is to have any hope of escape.

Except where could he escape to? the treacherous voice of reason asks. Lucis has given him up, and the surrounding countries are mere puppets of the Empire. Nowhere in this world is safe for him if he is recognized; he would be handed back over to Niflheim immediately. That thought is sobering, but he refuses to give into despair. He will cross that bridge when he comes to it, assuming he survives long enough to get there. Which is a significant assumption, to be sure.

“I can hear you plotting,” Glauca grunts, releasing him with a disgusted sigh. “Best to put those thoughts out of your head.”

“You think I should resign myself to whatever you have planned?”

“You think you have a choice?” the general replies. “Your country has sold you. It is time to accept your new position.”

The truth of that sends a shudder through his spine, but it does not stop him from saying, “In service to the Empire? I think not.”

Glauc is unmoved by his defiance. “In service to me. The request for you was the Emperor’s favor to myself.”

Is he supposed to be impressed by this information? He is not, as he demands, “And what interest could you possibly have in me?” As far as he knows, he has never even crossed paths with the man. There is no reason for Glauca to know who he is, let alone demand that he be given to him. This entire situation is absurd, and-
And then the general is removing his helmet, a soft hiss as the metal releases the man beneath. His blood runs cold. Oh. Now this would explain why the Empire was so willing to “make assurances” that they would not seek the information in his head. They would hardly need it, now would they.

“Captain,” he says, the title tasting like ash in his mouth.

“Scientia.” Titus Drautos sets the helmet aside, before peeling off his gauntlets. “You don’t seem surprised. But you always were a difficult one to read.”

“Why?” he asks numbly. “Why would you-?”

“-betray Lucius?” Drautos finishes for him. “You really have to ask that when you stand before me as a prisoner?”

Prisoner seems a gracious way of phrasing it, when he has been given away like property. He bites his tongue to keep from speaking his mind, and watches as Drautos continues to strip off the armor, leaving a familiar figure in the general’s place. For someone who claims to have asked for him, the captain pays him little heed before asking idly, “Tell me, Scientia. Did they even pretend to debate the Empire’s proposal, or had they already made up their minds by the time you were brought into it?”

“You would know that better than I.” For the man was surely witness to the initial negotiations, whether as General Glauca making that inexplicable demand, or as Captain Drautos pretending to protect the interests of the Crown. He had certainly been at the Council meeting, silently lurking in the back of the room. It burns to think how pleased he must have been by how easily they had given in to his desires, but he pushes aside his anger to try and focus on what matters. “What does that have to do with anything?”

The captain finally deigns to look at him, eyes dark. “For years, we refugees protected and served the king and the City, yet they did not hesitate to give up our homes to the Empire. Is it any wonder the kicked dog would eventually turn?”

“Spare me your excuses,” he retorts. For hearth and home, the captain had always said, but the explanation rings hollow in the face of cold facts. “You have been Glauca far longer than the treaty has been agreed to, and-”

The hard strike catches him off-guard, and he just manages not to go sprawling from the force of the blow. It is a hollow victory at best, as Drautos watches coldly as he struggles to regain his balance, his cheek ablaze in pain.

“That is your only warning,” the captain informs him. “You do not speak until I am finished.”

He glares but says nothing, and the man takes his silence as capitulation. “As I was saying,” he continues, lowering his hand. “They gave up our homes, and they gave up you, but do you think they would have agreed so quickly if you were not an outsider, but one of their own?”

He breathes in sharply, suddenly glad for Drautos’s prior command, for it gives him an excuse not to respond. He had not expected the conversation to go this way, for the captain to give voice to the thoughts that had festered in the back of his mind for most of his life. His mother might have been Lucian, and high-born at that, but his father was Tenebraen, and the City had never let them forget that. It was why his parents had moved to Tenebrae, and there they would have stayed if not for the Empire invading. They had managed to get him out in time, but at the cost of their own lives, and the first thing he had been made to do when he reached Insomnia was to change his last name.
“It’ll be better for you,” his uncle had told him, but it had never been enough; despite years of etiquette and Lucian education, there were always parts of him that betrayed his true heritage. There were always people who would not let him forget. While few dared to frame their objections to his position in such terms, they made their displeasure known in other ways. He’s seen the disdainful looks some of the councilmembers give him, endured being assigned tasks by the higher staff that were beneath his station, heard the suggestions of the aristocracy that their children – their pure, Lucian children – would be better companions to the prince. He’d made excuses for them, attributing it to his youth, to their jealousy, to simple greed for more influence with the royal family – anything to avoid the truth.

(And when Noct and Prompto mimicked his accent, he made excuses for them as well, telling himself that they meant nothing by it even when it bothered him more than he wanted to admit. Gladio sometimes saw that, and would tell them off, but even he did not truly understand why it bothered him so.)

There is no avoiding it now, as his mind wanders back to that meeting, and how eagerly his detractors had spoken in favor of handing him over while those he once saw as allies kept silent. In a treaty as one-sided as that, at least they would get something from it, an opportunity to rid themselves of the foreign upstart they had so long detested. “It depends on the life, doesn’t it?” the Immortal had said, but was that a futile attempt to shame them, or was it a reminder that his life was worth less than theirs?

He can only hide for so long, as Drautos says, “You may speak.” It is not a suggestion.

“And what do you expect me to say?” he asks because he still does not understand what that ugly reality has to do with his present situation. “Do you wish me to applaud your brilliant insight, that we matter less to them because of our ancestry? If not, tell me what you want, so we may get this over with.”

He flinches when the captain reaches for him, steeling himself for another blow for his insolence, but the callused fingers against his unmarked cheek are surprisingly gentle.

“I wanted to give you a chance,” Drautos explains, his words as soft as his touch, but all that truly matters is the terrifying possessiveness in those eyes. “You’ve spent so much of your life catering to others. Has it never occurred to you that you should be something more?”

“How can you ask that now?” He stares at the man, who is beginning to frown, and he knows he should stop for his own sake. But he cannot, his voice rising with each demand. “You bring me here in chains, to be your slave, and you dare to suggest that this would make me something more? You think you do me a favor, by stripping away my right to choose? You think you are better than those you betray, simply because you are open about your perverse-”

The words end in a strangled gasp, as a hand wraps around his throat. This might be the best he can hope for, a quick if brutal death, but Drautos has never been impulsive. Years of bending the knee to a king he despises has taught the man self-control, so although it hurts, he is never truly at risk of dying as he is dragged to the bed by his neck. The force with which he is thrown onto it knocks away what little breath he has left, and then the captain’s full weight presses against his torso, while his own hands dig painfully into the small of his back.

He tries to buck the man off of him, but Drautos barely takes notice as he leans down to unbutton his shirt. The actions are unhurried and efficient, as the fabric falls away to reveal his skin. He expects some mockery of his appearance or the futility of his increasingly desperate struggles, but the captain is silent as he raises himself just enough to turn him onto his front. When he tries to lift his head to look at the man, a hand twists in his hair and shoves it back down, nearly breaking his
glasses, while the other pulls his shirt and jacket back, bunching them in a messy knot around his bound wrists.

“Your tutors always spoke highly of you,” Drautos observes finally, and he jolts as the man reaches beneath him to unbuckle his belt and slide his trousers and underwear off, exposing him fully and making his face burn in a way unrelated to the previous blow. “But they seem to have not taught you much in the ways of gratitude.”

“You’re insane,” he pronounces, the words muffled against the bedding. How can the man speak of gratitude when he brought him here unwillingly? How can the man be so calm and earnest, when he prepares to rape him? At the very thought of the word, his heart seems to stop, as he repeats with no little desperation, “You’re utterly insane.”

He doesn’t know what he had hoped to accomplish with that, whether it is to try to bring the captain back to his senses, or to simply make the man angry enough to knock him unconscious.

“Perhaps,” is all Drautos says in response, before his world falls to pieces around him.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the long stretch between updates; it took me a while to get this chapter started (and then, of course, I wrote it all in a day).

The warnings come into play here. I tend not to be very descriptive of the physical act, but it is clear what is happening.

His breathing is harsh as he tries to force himself up, but the arm across his shoulder blades is like iron, unyielding against his struggles. It’s not the first time he has been in this position, but Gladio would immediately get off, having made his point about whatever he had done wrong in their sparring match. Drautos, by contrast, does not relent, keeping him down no matter how hard he fights against the man’s hold.

It means he is helpless to do anything, when a finger, cold and slick, presses into him without preamble. He still tries though, his entire body surging forward in a desperate bid to get away from the intrusion. He gets nowhere, and the pressure on his back increases, driving the air from his lungs in a strangled gasp. He is as unprepared for the second finger as the first, and it sends a shock of pain through him as he tenses reflexively.

“Calm down,” Drautos hisses into his ear. “You’re only making it harder on yourself.”

There is truth in those words, but not one that is acceptable. Everything the man does, yet still he places the blame on him? He nearly curses him, but a sharp twist inside him reminds him that it is futile, that he has no real way of stopping this from happening. He has no control over what Drautos does to him, but he can control himself, to limit the physical damage done. The emotional fallout, he could deal with that later, if there is a later, if he is capable, if-

(It’s not like he has a choice about that either.)

No, he cannot escape what is happening, but he can push those thoughts away, withdrawing into himself to focus on his breathing, on forcing himself to relax. But he has never been good at blocking out the world around him, so even when he closes his eyes, he cannot ignore the captain’s grunt of satisfaction at his surrender, or when the fingers are withdrawn, only for their place to be taken by-

The desperate sound he makes is stifled against his gritted teeth, which means it is not near loud enough to drown out the sound of flesh against flesh. He buries his face in the blankets, no longer concerned about the state of his glasses, as he tries to persuade himself that there are worse things than this. They could torture him, beat him bloody and rip out fingernails and molars, skin him piece by piece. They could kill him, drawing it out so long that death will be a mercy. Compared to such fates, this is... nothing, this is....

He is amazed his teeth do not break, as he bites back a cry from a particularly deep thrust.

So perhaps he cannot convince himself that it is nothing, but then it is not as if he is unused to sex. Except Gladio would never have done this to him, his lover always putting his pleasure first,
making sure they were both satisfied. Drautos cares little for his pleasure, and he is not even certain the man seeks his own. Maybe on some level, but it comes second to the need to put him in his place, to make it clear that he is subject to the captain’s desires, that he is Drautos’s now, whether he likes it or not. And he does not like it, not in the least, as the man takes him with the same ruthless efficiency with which he tackles all of his duties, whether it is playacting as a loyal soldier to Lucis or killing innocents in the name of the Empire.

A soft groan is the only warning he gets, before he feels the man spilling in him. Somehow the intimacy of completion is more awful than the violation itself, and he has not even begun to comprehend how that can be when Drautos is pulling out, pushing him to the side. He stares at the man, who looks barely affected by what he has done, except his slightly heavier breathing. Whereas he… his mind has gone blank, unable to process what is happening, but then why does it hurt so much more than it logically should, why does he feel so sick, why does he suddenly want to scream and never stop?

He nearly does, when Drautos pulls him into a standing position. But whether it is due to the shredded remains of his pride or the way his throat tightens, he settles for a soft hiss as the manhandling sends agony careening through his spine. If the captain notices, he spares no sympathy for it, summoning a knife and cutting through the rope around his wrists, before pulling off the remains of his clothing. “Go clean yourself up.”

The man speaks as if he is a child who has made a mess, as he shoves him in the direction of where the bathroom presumably is. It is no wonder that despite the dull ache of his newly freed arms falling to his sides, his hands clench, trying to wrap themselves around his daggers. But nothing comes because unlike the traitor, his access to the Armiger has been cut off completely, and Drautos for the first time looks amused by this irony.

“You still don’t get it, do you?” the captain asks, shaking his head as if he pities him. “You’re nothing without the king’s magic, except what I make of you.” His eyes darken, cold and merciless. “Now go, and do as you’re told.”

He goes, if only to be out of the man’s presence.

The bathroom is small and everything is bolted down, an acknowledgment of the fickle nature of air currents. But the water is hot, and he lets it wash over him as he stares at nothing in particular, trying to forget the touch of Drautos’s cold hand on his hip as the man fu-

He stumbles, his hand reaching out to brace himself against the wall. The shower stall is tiny, which is to his benefit as he is clearly not capable of standing on legs that won’t stop trembling. What would the others say, if they could see him now, barely able to hold himself together after a single act of depravity? He can think of Noct, Gladio, and Prompto for only a second before he banishes their horrified faces, unable to tolerate even the possibility. Instead, his mind wanders to his detractors; would they be pleased to see him fall so low, would they think he is getting what he deserved? Did they know that this is what awaited him, and revel in it so?

Did Regis know?

He can only assume not; the councilmembers, for all their duplicity and backstabbing, are not good actors, and they seemed as perplexed as anyone of Niflheim’s last-minute demand. But would it have changed anything? Would Regis have still agreed, knowing what Glauca wanted from him? He doesn’t know why it matters, why this would be different from what they had already assumed the Empire would do to him, but the question festers in his mind.
This is not so bad, he tries to tell himself again. Torture and death, that is what they had anticipated for him, and his expectations were no different when he had turned himself over. But he is still alive, and physically sound. If this is all Drautos wants from him, he can endure it for as long as it takes to figure out a means to escape. He will endure it, until he ends the man’s life with his own hands.

He tells himself this, over and over again, and he is still trying to convince himself when the hot water runs out.

Drautos is waiting when he finally emerges. The man makes no comment about the time he took or the towel wrapped around him, but his impatience is revealed by how he takes him by the arm and practically drags him to a table, where food has been set out. He’s pushed down into one of the chairs, and his right wrist tied to its wooden frame because of course Drautos hasn’t forgotten his little display of rebellion, even if it had ended in abject failure. That would explain the lack of utensils too, as apparently he cannot be trusted even with a spoon.

The captain sits down across from him, proceeding to eat without giving him a second look. He watches for as long as he can before he turns away, no longer able to stand the sight of his captor. The sight of the food is no better though, as just a glance at it causes his stomach to roil. The thought of eating is almost too much, but he knows he must eat something if he is to keep up his strength.

Slowly, he reaches out for a roll, using his right hand to hold it as his left tears small pieces from it. Difficult as it is to choke each one down, it is even harder not to throw it back up, as the food seems to sit in his stomach like a stone. In easy reach is a glass of wine and a cup of water, and as tempting as it would be to temporarily lose himself in an alcoholic daze, he knows he must keep his senses intact as well.

The water is bitter and acrid, just like everything else that passes his lips, and he nearly spits it back out when Drautos asks, “Are you prepared to listen to reason now?”

He stares at the man, not sure he could possibly have heard right. When he realizes that he has, a hatred that he never knew himself capable of surges through him, so overwhelming in its intensity that he can hardly bear it. But how dare Drautos act as if he is being irrational, how dare he act as if he is in the wrong, when this is the man who stripped him bare and stuck his cock in him, in order to prove his ownership of him.

There is that momentary pang of fear, but it cannot withstand the hatred he feels for this man, who examines him with such calm. “It doesn’t have to be this difficult, Scientia,” Drautos continues, when he stays silent. “The Empire can make use of someone like you. Work with me, and I will see to it that you are well-rewarded for your efforts.”

Perhaps he should have chosen the wine, for what use are his senses when everything in this world is so damnably wrong? He swallows hard, fighting to control his rage, to use it as a sword and shield rather than allow it to be a crack in his defenses for the man to exploit. “And what did they promise you, that you would betray your country?”

If he hoped to shame the man, he has failed. “My home,” Drautos says. “They will give me my home, once the king and his brat are dead.”

“They bought you cheaply then,” he snaps. He has the man’s full attention now, which should be and is in fact terrifying. It doesn’t stop him. “I’ve read the reports of what Niflheim does to the areas they conquered. The most important ones, they permit to operate under the illusion of self-
governance, but everyone knows who pulls the strings. The lesser ones, those of strategic importance, they send their troops in to ensure that the residents are obedient. And the rest, the ones that do not matter? You know as well as I do that your hometown was burned to ashes years ago, with no one left to place gravestones for the dead.”

For a long moment, Drautos just sits there, his own wine glass raised halfway to his lips. It is hardly silent though, as he hears his own heart racing, the pounding in his head echoing its rapid pace. Just as he starts to wonder if perhaps the captain somehow didn’t know of the fate of his hometown, despite having the intelligence of both the Empire and Lucis at his fingertips, the man says, “I am aware, yes. But what was lost can be rebuilt, better and stronger than before, to make a worthy addition to the Empire.” Drautos takes a sip of his wine, but his eyes never leave his. “Just like you.”

There’s a high-pitched buzzing sound in his head, which seems to drown out his ability to understand what the man is saying. Because the alternative is to accept that Drautos sees him too as something to be razed into nothing and remolded, to become that amorphous something more the captain had spoken of earlier.

“No,” he says, his mouth so dry he can barely speak. “I want no part in your foolish endeavors, and your people would be ashamed of what you have become.”

“There your wants are meaningless, and my people are dead and incapable of shame.”

He shakes his head, a gesture he regrets immediately because gods, how it hurts, the stress and the energy it takes to hate this man so thoroughly. “And whose fault is that?” he asks, ignoring the pain as he tries to reason with a person who is so steeped in his own loathing and rage that it has driven him well and truly mad. How could no one have seen this before, the insanity that is now so clear in his eyes? “The Empire destroyed them, yet still you would serve it?”

“And what is the alternative? Bowing and scraping to the king who abandoned them?” Drautos replies. “No. I would rather be a dog to the Empire than a pawn for a king who cowers behind his walls, and would let the world outside it burn to the ground.”

And they will burn with it, if the captain is to have his way. Be that as it may, there is one thing he is certain of. “I will never serve you.”

“You already are,” Drautos points out coldly. “Thanks to the king who abandoned you as well.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but he will never know what he intended to say as the entire room sways.

He’s lucky that he is sitting down, that his wrist is tied to the chair, except that luck seems a strange way of describing these circumstances because if he had any luck, he would not be in this situation in the first place. But at least he manages not to humiliate himself entirely, as his left hand grabs onto the arm of his chair to steady himself. Each breath is short and shallow, and it hurts so much that he can barely think, but it does not stop him from recoiling when Drautos appears at his side.

“You-” he tries to say, his eyes struggling to focus on the man, his vision fading in and out in a truly alarming way as whatever drugs the man put into his drink work through his system. “You.”

“To keep you calm,” the captain says, as if that makes any of this acceptable. “I hoped you would see what is best for you, but I know you are a loyal man. Eventually, you will understand who your loyalty should be to.”
The desire to curse the man returns with a vengeance, but it has nowhere to go as his body slumps. He cannot speak, can barely keep his eyes open as Drautos unties him and lifts him up, carrying him easily to the bed. Thinking is quickly becoming impossible as well, but he has enough sense to know that the hand that brushes his hair back in a cruel parody of affection is so very wrong.

That just makes it all the more terrible, when he can do absolutely nothing about it.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A warning for descriptions of vomiting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He wakes up to Drautos on top of him.

In that instant, the full horrors of his new reality come crashing down on him. There is no momentary confusion, no misplaced belief that he is still back in the Citadel. He knows exactly where he is and what is happening, and as if in confirmation, Drautos gives a particularly deep thrust. He doesn’t recognize the sound that is wrenched from him, some cross between a snarl and a choked cry. If the man hears it, he certainly does not acknowledge it, and all he can do is grasp the sheets with shaking fingers as he shuts his eyes and endures this newest violation.

The captain finishes quickly after that, although it feels like an eternity. His head is spinning, and before he knows what he is doing, he shoves the man off of him. That Drautos allows it has more to do with the man’s surprise at his audacity than his own strength, but he has no time to worry about the consequences as he staggers to his feet, rushing towards the bathroom.

He barely makes it there in time before he falls, the impact of his knees on cold tile reverberating through his entire body. His stomach lurches, and he grabs the sides of the toilet, bracing himself just as the convulsive spasms of his stomach rejecting its contents overwhelm him. The acrid smell of his vomit makes him retch over and over again, each heaving gasp punctuated by harsh, hacking coughs as he forces out what little he has remaining inside him. By the time he is finished, he’s barely able to hold himself up, his head pounding and his skin damp with sweat. There is a wetness at the edge of his eyes, which he cannot attribute purely to the physical stress of throwing up.

A heavy hand rests on his shoulders, shifting him back until he is sitting against the shower stall, far enough from the toilet so that he is no longer gagging on the stench of his own sick. Even this touch makes him shudder, but he cannot move away; he may have thrown up whatever it was that the man had given him, but in its place is an exhaustion that seems to have settled down to every bone of his body.

“A lower dose next time,” is all Drautos has to say, and he opens his eyes to stare at the man in disbelief. “Or do you intend to cooperate?”

His silence is answer enough.

The captain sighs, like he doesn’t understand why he is like this. “I told you before, Scientia. It doesn’t have to be this way. What do you hope to gain by being so stubborn?”

“What do you hope to gain through force and rape?” he retorts, his breath catching at the end of the question. It is such an ugly word, but it is not as if he can pretend that it is not what is happening. Drautos may delude himself into thinking that he does him a favor, but he will call this out for what it is, no matter what it costs him.

He steels himself for another blow for his defiance when Drautos reaches towards him. But what
happens is far worse, as callused fingers dance gently across his lips, a reminder that pain is not the only tool the captain has at his disposal. He reels back, but doesn’t get far as the man quickly hooks his index finger under the chain of his necklace, the one thing he still wears.

“I remember when the prince gave you this,” the man says softly, looking down at the tiny skull. “You bent your knee before him and swore an oath, and he put this on you like a favored pet.”

The captain wraps his hand around the skull and pulls gently but firmly, and he has no choice but to move forward until he is on his knees before the man. He doesn’t know if Drautos fails to see the hypocrisy of his actions, or if the man simply doesn’t care. But what he does know is that Drautos is nothing compared to Noct, the one who he freely offered his loyalty to, and who has never been just his liege but a friend and a brother. “That was my choice,” he says furiously, and although looking up causes the chain to dig into the back of his neck, he bears the pain to glare at Drautos, who dares to think that he is anything like Noct. “This is not.”

“No, it isn’t,” Drautos readily agrees. “Because they never even gave you the choice, did they?”

He gasps as he is dragged even nearer, until he can practically feel each word being said. “You see, this is what I’m trying to save you from. You would have done anything for your prince, but they didn’t even give you the opportunity to make this sacrifice for him. Was it because they didn’t trust you to do what was necessary, or did they simply not care? You meant nothing to them, so they just handed you over, without bothering to give you the right to decide for yourself.”

“What difference would it have made? Even if I had said no, you still would have gotten what you wanted.” His words are barely more than a rasp, and he tries to tell himself that it is because of how close he is to choking, and not because of the pit that is opening up inside him. It is most certainly not because Drautos might have a point, that if he had chosen this for himself, maybe it would have been more bearable because at least then he would have been doing it for Noct. At least then he would have had a reason for enduring this other than because his country had agreed to it, something to hold onto when it became too much.

But they wouldn’t even give him that.

“I would,” Drautos agrees amiably. “But then you wouldn’t have seen how little you mattered to them.”

Before he can reply, the captain yanks sharply, snapping the chain. Despite everything, his hand flies up to grab at the broken ends but it’s too late, and he can only watch as the necklace dangles from the man’s fingers. His own fingers, now trembling slightly, trace the lines of where Noct’s gift to him used to lie, before coming to a stop where the skull would have rested on the hollow of his neck. The lack of the familiar weight makes him feel empty, like when Regis had removed him from the Armiger. Even though he knows this is more trivial, a mere trinket compared to the loss of the king’s magic, it feels like anything but. That necklace had represented his connection to Noct, and that is something far more intimate and important than any magic in the world.

And now it is just one more thing that Drautos has taken from him.

“I know it’s hard for you to accept,” the captain murmurs, and there is something almost like pity in his voice. “But one day you will understand that this is for your own good.”

“No.” The denial sounds hollow, even to him. “I don’t want this.”

“A lot of people don’t want what is good for them,” the captain replies, in a tone that might have been reasonable if not for the absurdity he utters. “That’s why they require guidance. And you will
get that, when we reach Gralea.”

“Gralea?” he asks dumbly, although most of him is still struggling to process the idea of his rapist knowing what is good for him. “We’re-?”

“Of course,” Drautos cuts off impatiently, as if it should have been obvious. “You didn’t think we would be staying here, did you?”

And the man is right; it is painfully obvious that they would not be staying here forever, when he is Drautos’s and Drautos is a creature of the Empire. But he thinks he can be forgiven for not having figured this sooner, when he is still dealing with the shock of everything that is being done to him, from being bartered away as collateral to being raped by a man who somehow believes that it is to help him. Given all that, it’s a wonder that he hasn’t started screaming from the injustice of it all (except that he knows that if he starts, he might never be able to stop).

Drautos sighs again, before he explains, “The treaty signing will be in Gralea, and Regis has put me in charge of security. Once the bureaucrats have finished with their bickering, I will go to Niflheim to oversee the arrangements. Obviously the Empire will handle everything, and then I need only report back to that old fool what has been decided.”

The captain may look down at Regis for trusting him with something so important, but it wasn’t just the king who had made that mistake. Never once had any of them stopped to consider why Drautos would owe any loyalty to the crown when it had done nothing to save the one thing that mattered to him. But the man has played his part well, blinding them all to reality. “You must have enjoyed your deception, treating us all as fools.”

“Not really,” is the unexpected reply. “I’d much rather have put a sword through that coward’s chest and been done with it.”

Despite how much he does not care about what the man thinks, he’s surprised by the honesty of the admission, as if Drautos truly is tired of having to hide his visceral hatred each day. “Is that why you’re being so candid now?”

“I can afford to be candid with you. It’s important that you know I mean what I say. Besides,” Drautos adds, lest he be so naïve as to think that he is being shown an honor by being trusted with the truth, “who would you tell? If all goes as scheduled, we will be returning to Gralea in two weeks’ time. In the meantime, you will remain here, and the drugs will keep you from acting out.”

“You would go that far?” he asks, not wanting to believe that Drautos would really keep him drugged for the next two weeks. But then, why wouldn’t he? It’s an admittedly effective plan, keeping him unconscious so that he cannot come up with a means to escape, let alone act upon it. And he hardly has any way of stopping him from carrying it out, having thus far proven himself wildly incapable of keeping the man from taking whatever he pleases, no matter how devastating the loss.

“It was either that or chain you. Is that what you would prefer?” Drautos looks down at the broken necklace, still entwined between his fingers, and a sardonic smile stretches across his face. “Perhaps you do. You’ve certainly grown quite used to it.”

He flushes, but before he can spit out that it’s not the same, that it’s not even comparable, the man is striding away, so certain in his control over him that he does not even worry about leaving him on his own. As badly as he wants to prove him wrong, to get to his feet and fight his way out, he can’t. He’s still so tired that it takes several minutes for him just to move, to sit back up so that his head is no longer bowed, so that he no longer looks quite so broken. He knows it is too early in this
to be giving up, but it’s increasingly difficult not to feel like his surrender is a matter of when, not if. Drautos has been cutting off each path of resistance available to him with brutal efficiency, and frankly he hadn’t had that many options to begin with.

What will happen when he runs out of options completely?

As if on cue, Drautos returns; the necklace is gone, and in its place is a glass of water. He flinches when it is held out to him, knowing what must be in it, as the man orders, “Drink.”

He doesn’t move.

Drautos doesn’t either, not bothering to hide his displeasure at his refusal to oblige in his own degradation. “Must you be this way? You can either make this easier for yourself by cooperating, or I can summon the guards.”

“What kind of choice is that?” he demands bitterly.

“It’s more than what they gave you,” is the cold response, like the man actually thinks he does him a favor when this is anything but. All Drautos offers him is the method of his humiliation: does he prefer to have the guards hold him down like a wild animal to be force-fed, or to voluntarily take the drugs that will render him senseless? The outcome will be the same whatever he chooses, so it’s just a matter of whether he would rather be complicit or have the soldiers touching him… and when he frames it like that, there’s no choice to be made at all. It’s bad enough that he cannot stop Drautos from taking him whenever the man pleases; he cannot stand the thought of anyone else getting near him.

Yet still he finds himself unable to speak because all he can think is how can this be happening? How has his life been reduced to these two appalling options? Barely twenty-four hours ago, he had woken up in his own bed, with a day of tedious, low-level meetings ahead of him and a night with Gladio to make up for it. It was all so ordinary, but he had not even made it to his first appointment when a breakthrough in the negotiations with the Empire had been announced, and the Council had been hastily gathered to hear Niflheim’s final demands. He should have known that something was wrong when he was told to attend, seeing how he would normally not be permitted. Maybe he had on some level, but this? Never had he expected his kingdom to give him away to this madman to be abused and drugged and raped and-

His throat clenches as Drautos turns away to carry out his threat of summoning the guards. He almost wants to let the man go, to make the choice for him, but not doing anything now is a choice in and of itself. And as much as he does not want to, he says quietly, “Wait.”

He half-expects the man to ignore him, to teach him a lesson that there are consequences to his willfulness. But Drautos wants this more, the satisfaction of knowing that he has given in, so the captain stops and turns to look at him expectantly.

It’s impossible to describe how much he hates himself when he holds out a hand. He feels so numb that he doesn’t react when the glass is pressed into his palm, but then Drautos is there, helping to curl his fingers around the smooth surface. His heart is pounding and he’s shaking so badly that he nearly drops the glass anyway, the thought of being drugged again and losing even more of himself being near unbearable. But now that he has started the process of his own destruction, the captain is more than willing to help him finish it, guiding the glass to his lips. With this at least, Drautos is patient, allowing him to set the pace as he drinks, but he knows it is no favor. It’s just helping the man get what he wants.

Knowing what is to come, he is better prepared for it this time, but it doesn’t dull the effects as his
eyes grow heavy and his limbs unresponsive, his mind going blank with startling quickness. Yet even as his senses shut down one by one, somehow he must still endure the feel of Drautos touching him, the drag of rough knuckles against his cheek before his face is tilted up, cold lips pressing against his in a possessive, unrelenting kiss, and isn’t this the one thing the drugs should be sparing him of?

*How horribly unfair,* he thinks, before he sinks back into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

I had hoped to get this done sooner, but then I got stuck on a second scene. Then I rewrote that scene, and rewrote it again, and finally I threw out everything and redid the entire chapter. I think it works better although probably not completely, but to be honest I think another rewrite would probably drive me mad, so hopefully this is not as terrible as I worry it is.
Chapter 5

He opens his eyes when the ground beneath him shudders.

At first, he can only lie there, struggling to understand its significance. It is the first time in a long while that his mind is not clouded by the drugs, yet he is unable to comprehend what is happening until the airship lurches again, causing him to sit up so quickly that his vision blacks out.

“No,” he breathes out, but the frantic denial is quickly lost beneath the hum of the engines. “Astrals, no.”

And then he is throwing himself off the bed, desperate to prove himself wrong, that this isn’t actually happening. Yet even as he moves, he doesn’t expect to get far, his skin already prickling in anticipation of an iron hand grabbing his arm and pulling him back, as has happened every other time he has woken up. But for once, it does not come, meaning that he is not prepared to succeed.

He crashes to the floor, and although the thick carpet absorbs most of the fall, the force of the impact still knocks the air right out of him.

He’s not sure how long he stays there, remembering the last time he had fallen like this. Newly orphaned and fleeing from Niflheim’s army with so many others turned refugee overnight, he’d lost his balance when the airship had lifted off the ground. He had tried to stand, but unused to the sensation of flight, he’d fallen over and over again, until finally he had lain on the cold metal floor, curling into himself as he remembered the sound of his mother’s screams, right before the soldiers had murdered her. He might have stayed that way for the rest of the long journey, if not for the old woman who had come to his side. She had lost her entire family to the war, but somehow still had kindness to spare, and she had helped him to his feet and looked after him all the way to Insomnia and the safety it promised.

And now, a decade and a half later, Lucis is sending that boy right back to the Empire it was supposed to protect him from, a reversal of fortunes so complete that it is truly dizzying.

(As for the old woman, he had looked for her when he was older, only to discover that she had died alone and unwanted in slum housing, not long after they had arrived.)

Of course, there is no kindness to be offered now, no helping hand. He has only himself, and slowly he stands, using the bed as support even though a part of him recoils at having to touch it. It’s far harder than it should be, but it is not because of the vertigo-inducing sensation of being so high above the earth, or even because of his body’s weakness from being constantly drugged. No, he struggles to rise because he does not know why he bothers. Regis had once asked him to stand by Noct’s side and help him push forward, but what is the point now, when Noct has been taken from him and the only thing he has before him is Drautos.

The mere thought of the man almost causes him to collapse again, as the memory of the last two weeks comes rushing back. Or rather, what he assumes was the last two weeks. Trapped in that drug-induced haze, he’d had no way of telling how long had passed between each fleeting bout of consciousness. The only thing he had known was that every time he did open his eyes, Drautos was always waiting for him.

He still has no idea how the captain had managed that when the man has two masters to serve, but
it hadn’t taken him long to decide that he didn’t particularly care. All that mattered was that Drautos was there, dragging him close every time he tried to pull away, pinning him down with an ease that would have made him scream in frustration, if not for the drugs that sapped all of his strength. The drugs made it impossible to fight back, to do anything but suffer the bruising hold on his hips, the cold press of lips against his spine, the unrelenting pressure of intrusion. And worst of all was how the drugs prevented him from even thinking about anything except what was being done to him, as if there was nothing else in the world but Drautos. But that was what the man wanted, was it not? To make him completely dependent, to the point that even now, free of both the drugs and the man’s immediate presence, still the only thing he can think about is Drautos.

It’s terrible, how the captain’s efforts are working, but not nearly as terrible as when the door opens and he finds himself staring at General Glauca. Instinctively, he pulls a sheet up to cover himself as best he can, even though there’s nothing that Drautos has not already seen for himself. If his futile attempts at modesty amuse the man, he cannot tell; hidden completely by his armor, the general reveals little, not even something as human as breathing. It is further evidence of the utter inequity of power between them, when the only means by which he has to hide himself is a blanket and the fraying remnants of his self-control, both of which Drautos can easily wrest away from him.

He tenses as Drautos approaches, the liquid metal making a peculiar hollow sound with each step. But instead of ripping the blanket and his dignity away from him, the man walks right by, stopping at the window on the other side of the general’s quarters. He follows Drautos’s gaze, and although he had expected it as soon as he realized the airship was in flight, his throat still tightens when he finds himself staring not at the looming walls of the Citadel, but the endless expanse of stars, the very ones he and Noct used to sneak onto the palace roof to gaze at. He remembers his prince tracing the constellations, naming them all before looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to tell the story behind each one. And that he would do, talking until Noct fell asleep with his head on his chest, and he’d rest a hand in that soft black hair and close his own eyes, pleased that he had brought some measure of peace to his friend.

There is no peace to be had with Drautos, and he does not dare close his eyes, unsure of what he will see the next time he opens them. But he cannot bear to look at the night sky either, not like this. With Noct, it had represented an escape from responsibility, a time for two young boys to be normal despite their positions that marked them as anything but. With Drautos, the stars feel more like a condemnation, a reminder of everything that he has lost.

Unblinking eyes rest on him, the slightest tilt of the head as Drautos considers him. “You are upset,” the man observes, his sigh more like the death rattle of a corpse. “Why? Did you actually expect them to change their minds?”

He startles, looking back at the general, who is now removing his armor. The thought had never occurred to him, if only because the drugs had not permitted it, but it doesn’t stop Drautos from continuing. “They never even tried to think of another way, you know. Once they washed their hands of you, they barely ever spoke of what they did. I heard the prince and his Shield keep asking about you, but Regis has proven quite the adept liar when it comes to hiding the truth from his son.”

He wants to ask what Regis had told Noct and Gladio, although he doubts that the lies are nearly as effective as Drautos suggests if the two are still inquiring after him. But that is precisely why he doesn’t ask. He doubts that the captain will outright lie to him, but any information that comes from the man will be twisted to suit his needs. Instead, he says, “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you still think you owe them something,” Drautos replies. “Your king and country betrayed you, your prince and lover failed you, yet still you cling to them. Still, you resist what I
am trying to do for you.”

“Are you serious?” he asks incredulously, unable to help himself. Granted, Drautos has made no secret of his intentions, nor of his loathing for everything that defines him. It’s why the man is so determined to strip everything away from him, whether it is his clothing, his agency, his home, and his very identity. Each of those things had marked him as Lucis’s, so Drautos has taken them away in order to turn him into something else entirely. But what the captain is saying is a whole different level of insanity, for him to even suggest…. “You think that because they wronged me, that I should welcome your abuses? You think that because I owe them nothing, that I would decide to turn to you to find my purpose?”

“Yes,” Drautos says. He can feel the acidic burn of the bile rising, although whether it is because of the man’s easy conviction or the fact that removed of his armor, he continues to strip off the rest of his clothing, he cannot even begin to speculate. “As I already told you, I’m doing this for your benefit.”

“How could you possibly know what would be to my benefit when you care nothing for what I want?”

“Because you don’t know what you want.” He stumbles back as the captain comes for him, nearly falling over when his legs hit the bed. He clings to the blanket like a shield, although it protects him from nothing when a hand rests on the back of his neck, squeezing ever so slightly as Drautos leans close. “You’re so blinded by their lies that you cannot see what is good for you. That is why you choose to make this so difficult for yourself when-”

“I choose nothing,” he snarls, knocking the hand away even though he knows it is a mistake. But the thought that this is his choice, that this is his own doing is intolerable. He has never had a say in this, in being turned into a bargaining chip, in being raped and abused, in being taken from his home, in anything at all. Drautos controls every facet of his existence, but only because Lucis allowed it to happen. Never once had either of them considered what he wanted, and to suggest otherwise is infuriating. “You claim this is for my benefit, but Lucis and you, you’re both the same. Neither of you gave me any choice in this, neither of you care for what I want, but at least Regis was honest about the reasons for his betrayal. You, on the other hand, hide behind your false superiority and high-minded motives when the reality is that you are no better than him, and-”

He sees the blow coming, but it is too late for him to do anything to avoid it. It’s much harder than the last time Drautos hit him, the force of the strike knocking him backwards onto the bed. The pain is blinding, making it impossible to think of anything else until it is too late; by the time he recovers, Drautos is already on top of him, yanking his wrists together and tying them with a belt, before securing them to the bedframe.

“I told you before,” Drautos says with that terrifying calm. “You do not interrupt me.”

Not a word about the comparison to Regis and Lucis, nothing about his hypocrisy. Drautos cares for none of those things because he does not care about what he has to say. Instead, the only thing that matters is his failure to obey. A man like that can never be reasoned with because he is incapable of hearing anything but what he wants to hear, so certain that he is that he is right, and the realization is sickening.

Yet perhaps there is some anger at his words, some lingering humanity that is capable of hurt. For rather than take him quickly and harshly as he usually does, the man takes his time, running his hands down his skin in a slow, lazy exploration. He tries to resist, but Drautos will not be denied, ignoring his useless, pathetic struggles that serve only to exhaust him until all he can do is lie there, shaking. Without the drugs to deaden his mind, he feels every lingering caress as the man searches
for his most sensitive spots, the places he has only ever shared with Gladio. He hates how easily Drautos finds them, but not as much as he hates how the man exploits them, forcing him to choke on desperately stifled moans with every kiss pressed against his hipbone, the inside of his thigh, the hollow of his neck where Noct’s gift once rested. It would have been better if the captain had hurt him physically, rather than play at being his lover, inflicting upon him a punishment of the most intimate violation as the man leaves no part of him unscathed.

But even that is not enough for him, as the captain orders softly, “Look at me.”

He does not. He cannot. It is too much already, what is being done to him, and he cannot stand anything more. But Drautos is not done pushing him past his limits, and callused fingers dig into his jaw, squeezing until he is forced to open his eyes, forced to look.

He looks at a man who convinces himself that every appalling act of cruelty he commits is justified, a man who is so incapable of empathy that he does not understand why anyone would want something other than what he forces upon them. He would wonder how someone like that could exist, except that he already knows the answer to that. Drautos took his anger and sorrow at his losses, and allowed them to fester into a compulsive need to force his vision upon others, even if they want nothing to do with it. And he knows this because maybe he would have ended up the same way, if he had been permitted to drown in his mother’s screams all those years ago, if all he had known was the casual discrimination of an entire city. But he hadn’t because he’d had people to protect him from being taken over by bitterness and resentment, and that is precisely why the captain chose him because they could have been the same. They could still be the same, in his mind.

“How? he rasps, despite knowing that his words will have no impact when the man will not listen anyway. “Did you really think that I would ever want you?”

His vision is blurred from the pain and unshed tears, so perhaps he imagines it, the hurt that flickers across the man’s face. It’s almost as if the captain had actually wanted something more than his obedience or even his loyalty, as if Drautos wants something more real than forced familiarity. But if that is the case, he hides it quickly, the familiar mask of cold indifference sliding into place as he shuts away any part of him that once had the ability to care about others.

This chapter really didn't go the way I expected it to, changing drastically over the course of three drafts. Part of it is because I didn't really have a plan for this part of the story before I started working on it properly, so I'm sort of blindly making my way through it, hoping desperately that what I'm writing makes any amount of sense.
He doesn’t move when the door opens. If anything, he shuts his eyes more tightly, as if in the hope that he can will himself into losing consciousness, even without the aid of the drugs. It won’t stop Drautos from doing whatever he wants, but nothing else he has done has worked either, and at least this way he will not have to feel it.

There’s a part of him that resents himself for not trying harder, but it’s a part that grows quieter each day. Maybe it would have been different if there was a point to this, if holding out was necessary to the protection of another (Noct). But as Drautos had pointed out, he hadn’t been given that choice. He hadn’t mattered enough to be given that choice, which means that what he does or does not do matters to no one except for himself and the captain, and lately he’s not sure about even that anymore.

Drautos may have denigrated his place with Noct as that of a favored pet, but he would be so lucky to be even that to the captain. Ever since that night on the airship, Drautos has treated him as an object at best, something to be used when and how he pleases. It doesn’t require years of tactical training and psychological study to figure out the reasons for that; Drautos had revealed too much of himself that night, of his wants and therefore his weaknesses. And although he never asked for that glimpse of humanity – never wanted to be the reason for it – it doesn’t stop the man from taking it out on him by treating him as if he is nothing. Drautos does not even bother to pretend that this is meant to better him, barely acknowledging him at all even when shoving him face down on the bed and taking him, ignoring his muffled sounds of pain when the man pushes in too hard, too quickly, as if he thinks that callous brutality will make either of them forget that brief moment of vulnerability.

Perhaps that should have made it easier, to at least no longer have to listen to Drautos’s poisonous justifications. It doesn’t. It doesn’t change what Drautos does to him, doesn’t change the hurt and humiliation he suffers, doesn’t change the fact that he honest to gods misses the drugs. He misses the way they dulled the pain when the man fucked him, but not nearly as much as he misses being dead to the world because while he hated not knowing what was happening around him, at least it meant he wasn’t awake to be utterly terrified that this will be the rest of his life.

He knows he needs to fight back, to keep his fears from becoming reality, except that he also knows that he can’t. He couldn’t defend himself when he was first handed over to Drautos, and he has only weakened since by the constant abuse and limited food. He couldn’t reason with the captain before the man had closed himself off to him, and when he does try to speak now, he usually ends up with a hand around his neck until he stops trying. The best he can do is concentrate on not falling apart entirely when Drautos touches him, stifling the screams and tears that echo through his mind because even now, he does not want to give the man that satisfaction. But it’s a token piece of resistance at best, and he can barely manage that now because what is the point, what is the point of keeping up the façade when he cannot stop Drautos from taking what he wants, when he knows that this time will be no different from the countless previous times?

It’s why it takes him so long to realize, through the rising panic that threatens to choke him, that something is different. Because usually by now, the captain would already be on top of him, asserting his dominance without hesitation. But there is not even the sound of those hollow footsteps drawing closer, although he is certain that the door had opened, just as he is certain that
there is someone else in the room, watching him.

And there is. It’s just not Drautos.

An unfamiliar man sits casually in the armchair on the other side of the room, the one piece of furniture that had always seemed out of place. Like his room on the airship, everything in the captain’s quarters seems specifically chosen to fit Drautos’s needs, but he has never seen the man use that armchair, nor can he imagine him doing so. It suits the stranger perfectly though, as he leans back with his legs crossed and fingers interlaced, watching him with a wide, easy smile that doesn’t come close to reaching his eyes. They’re a touch more gold than Gladio’s amber, which is fitting for they lack all of the warmth of his (former?) partner’s.

“I’m sorry,” the man says, but there is no apology in the words, only thinly veiled amusement. “I do hope that I didn’t wake you.”

There are so many ways to respond to that blatant lie, yet he cannot think of anything to say except to ask warily, “Who are you?” Distantly, he thinks that he would never have been so blunt before, but that was back when things like diplomatic protocols still had a place in his life, back when he was still a person instead of just a thing.

As if reading his mind, the stranger chuckles, a dark, condescending sound that makes his stomach churn. “How disappointing. I would have thought that Lucis would have instilled better manners in the future king’s advisor. Although,” he pauses meaningfully, slowly looking him over to take in the bruises and bite marks, the sunken eyes, and the tattered remains of dignity in the form of the blankets he clutches uselessly to his naked form, “we can hardly call you that anymore, now can we?”

He wants to deny it, but doing so would require ignoring reality. And while he would like nothing more than to do just that, it wouldn’t change the fact that the stranger is right. Unlike Drautos who tries to make it something commendable, at least this man sees it for what it truly is: a pathetic joke. He spent so much of his life doing everything he could to be the perfect advisor to Noct, but it hadn’t been enough to save him from this. And now it doesn’t matter at all because the only thing that Drautos wants from him is his surrender, although lately he’s settled for his body instead.

“This,” the man continues breezily, as if oblivious to the significance of what he is saying. “I suppose it makes sense. After all, why waste the resources on someone who is doomed from the beginning?”

He blinks, unsure what the stranger is saying. It sounds almost as if he is suggesting that Lucis’s betrayal was inevitable, which is certainly what Drautos has been saying all along. Yet somehow it doesn’t seem right because whatever this man’s motivations are, they are not the same as the captain’s. The stranger doesn’t care about him, except as a source of temporary amusement, and he barely seems to be speaking of him. But then who is he referring to, and what could he possibly-?

There’s no opportunity to finish that thought though, let alone ask for clarification, as the familiar armored footsteps draw near. They’re quicker than usual, almost as if someone is running, and he turns in time to see General Glauca at the open door, although the man has eyes only for the stranger. “What are you doing, Izunia?”

The words are distorted by the armor, yet Ardyn Izunia, chancellor of Niflheim, smiles even wider at the unmistakable anger beneath them.

“General!” he exclaims like he is greeting an old friend, straightening ever so slightly although not out of respect, certainly not that. This may be the first time he has seen the chancellor, but the
man’s reputation (if not his face) precedes him. He has always heard that the man is brilliant, and he must be to have found such political favor despite the open contempt of everyone around him. “Just the man I’ve been waiting for. I have a little task for you, if you would be so kind.”

The contempt is mutual, judging by Glauca’s harsh response. “And since when did you see fit to assign me tasks?”

“It shouldn’t take you long,” Izunia says cheerfully, as if the general had not spoken. “Just a few territories here and there that need some… reminding of their place. Seeing how you are the man who conquered Tenebrae in just a few short days, I cannot imagine that this will take you more than a week, unless your blade has grown rusty amongst the Lucians?”

The chancellor speaks in generalities, but he makes his meaning more than plain as he glances back at him. Izunia doesn’t get the chance to look for long though; in an instant, Glauca inserts himself between them, moving far too quickly for someone who is clad from head to toe in armor. “Is this your will or the emperor’s?”

Although he cannot see the chancellor, he can feel the amusement radiating from him because he is not the only one who noticed how quickly the general moved. Drautos may have spent the last few days pretending that he does not matter but it is ultimately only an act, and his possessiveness now betrays him, to Izunia’s obvious delight.

“Why, I am but a humble servant of his majesty,” Izunia practically purrs, the words sickly sweet yet somehow still disdainful, even of the emperor that he claims to serve. “Everything I do is for his sake, of course. Is that not the same with you?”

“What are you insinuating?”

“Nothing at all,” Izunia replies. “I’m just curious why you hesitate. Is there something more important right now than the glory of the Empire?”

Clearly the man’s genius was not overstated, for it is clear that the chancellor knows as well as they that Glauca has never cared for the Empire, except that it offers him more than Lucis does. But such an admission would mark him a traitor, as would a refusal of Izunia’s “little task,” which means the general has little choice but to say, “A week at most, you say?”

“Yes, but you must hurry,” the chancellor responds. “The airship will be leaving in the next hour.”

The general is not pleased by this information. “You couldn’t give me more notice?”

“It was just all so sudden,” Izunia lies shamelessly. “And you’ve never had a problem before with leaving on such short notice. Is it because of this new pet of yours?”

“That is not your concern,” Glauca snaps.

Izunia shrugs. “The emperor might disagree, if he interferes with your duties.”

“You think I would be so easily distracted?”

“Of course not, of course not,” the chancellor says in what is meant to be a placating tone, if he wasn’t so busy trying to bait the other man. “Still, best to leave him behind, I would think. You have seemed a bit on-edge, ever since you brought him here. It almost makes one think that you may be overly fond of him.”

This is like the last time, he thinks suddenly, when the Council had debated his fate. Like the
councilmembers who spoke of his worth as if he was not there, Izunia exploits his mere existence to manipulate the general without actually acknowledging his presence. Even now, especially now, he is simply something to be used, although he had never expected to be used against Drautos so easily.

He is not the only one who is caught off-guard, for Glaucia does not move as the chancellor gets to his feet and heads for the exit, pausing only to tip his hat in a mocking farewell. “But far be it for me to tell you what to do, general. Still, if you are worried about your charming pet, I would not worry. Surely you must have noticed that this door has been open the entire time, yet he has made not one move to see himself out.”

And with that parting shot, the door closes, the quiet click of the locks engaging echoing through the room before he realizes that the chancellor is right. Ever since Izunia has arrived, the door had been open, and with it an opening to escape. Indeed, given Izunia’s blatant disregard for Glaucia, the chancellor may even have let him walk free just to toy with the other man. But he had not even tried, had not even considered it, and that is perhaps the most damning indictment of what he has become because how could he have failed so completely at not only seizing the opportunity before him, but simply recognizing it?

Of course, it is too late to do anything about it now as Drautos turns on him, grabbing hold of his shoulder before he can think to back away. “What did he say to you?”

“Nothing,” he says, and it might even be the truth because he still doesn’t understand what Izunia was trying to say. It is not the answer that the captain wants though, and he cannot hold back the hiss of pain as armored fingers dig into his flesh.

“I don’t believe you.”

“And of course you don’t,” he replies, but there is no anger in his words, only that quiet resignation. “Because that would require you to listen to me.”

And that is the one thing that has not changed, even after Drautos had stopped speaking to him. Nothing he has to say matters to the man because he has never said what the captain wants to hear, and that would not change now even if he was to repeat verbatim everything that Izunia had said to him. After all, Drautos’s frustration is not with anything the chancellor actually said, but the simple fact that Izunia knows what he means to him, the weakness he cannot tolerate. Except this time the captain cannot simply take his frustrations out on the chancellor, trapping Drautos in this corner in which he wants to reject what Izunia had to say, but knows that he cannot.

He is very familiar with that feeling.

But unlike him, the captain does at least try, staring at him in silence as he attempts to figure out a way around Izunia’s so-called suggestion that he be left behind. Drautos clearly does not want to comply, but defiance would only serve to prove the chancellor’s point about his weaknesses. And he knows the moment that the captain is forced to accept that because the grip on his shoulder loosens so that it is no longer agonizing, although the man still cannot let go completely.

“You are staying here,” Drautos says finally, and it is not only a capitulation to the chancellor’s demands but a demand of his own. “I will be leaving the soldier’s instructions, and I expect you to cooperate.”

There is nothing for him to say to that, but the captain is not satisfied by his silence as he leans in to warn softly, “Don’t make me do something I may regret, Scientia.”
He should have nothing to say that as well, yet he finds himself replying, “And since when have you ever regretted anything?”

Chapter End Notes

I’m not really happy with this chapter, but after struggling with it for the past month, I finally have to just throw my hands up and put it out there. Still, I apologize for the mess it is, and hopefully the next one will be better (famous last words).
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The bowl is practically tossed onto the table, landing with a clatter that echoes through the room. He looks at it, then over at the guard, who scowls. It’s a familiar expression, although there is as little reason for it now as there was then, when the soldier had been one of many taking him from the Citadel to the airship. Each of those men had seemed to enjoy their small role in ripping him away from his old life, but whereas most had settled for hurling petty insults at him, this guard had taken particular offence at his failure to respond. It was as if he had felt deprived of the opportunity to use something more than words to hurt him, and clearly he does not intend to miss his chance now.

“Well?” the guard says, a hand already inching towards his weapon, as if he could ever pose a threat. “Will you eat, or will we have to make you?”

He doesn’t know why the man would care one way or another if he eats, until he remembers the last time he was given this choice. The glass of water being held out to him, the captain’s simple threat. Either he could drug himself or the guards would force him, but whereas the thought of the men – and this one in particular – touching him is still unbearable, the prospect of forced unconsciousness no longer is. All he can think is of course Drautos would do this, to keep him under his control even when the man is gone. Of course he cannot be permitted a single moment to himself, let alone an entire week, and what does it say about him that he accepts this so readily?

Because what other choice does he have, when the soldier is looking for any excuse to use force? He cannot fight back against the man, let alone the three other guards he had spotted on the other side of the door before it had been slammed shut. He may not like it, but it is better to accept that this is not the time for desperate acts of rebellion, that he must be practical and save his strength for the right opportunity.

Except. Except that is what he has been doing this entire time, waiting for an opportunity that the captain has been meticulous in denying him. First it had been the drugs, and then it had been the despair, for there is no other way of describing it. He could try to justify his inaction by pointing out that it is Gralea, a city that he is wholly unfamiliar with and therefore unlikely to make his way through unscathed, but the truth is that he simply never thought about it. At some point, he had simply stopped considering the possibility of escape, which was almost certainly what Drautos had been hoping for. And perhaps the man would have gotten what he wanted if not for Izunia’s mocking observations about just how lost he had become.

He is still unsure why the chancellor would point this out at all. Given their thinly-veiled hostility towards one another, it’s more than likely that it was just another of Izunia’s attempts to aggravate the general, yet somehow it does not feel that simple. He doesn’t linger on it though because whatever the man’s motivations, he cannot deny that he is right. He has given up, justifying it with logic and rationality, convincing himself that he is simply biding his time for the right opportunity when the reality is that the longer he waits, the less capable he will be of taking it.

But what is there to even take? He may recognize his weaknesses but that does not mean he can change them, nor can he change the fact that unless he wishes to be pinned down on the bed and force fed, he can only make the same choice that he had all those weeks ago. Yet still he doesn’t move, which might explain why the soldier is losing what little patience that he has.
“Look at you,” the guard sneers. “How pathetic can you be?”

The man has plenty more to say, but it is easy enough to ignore. After all, it is nothing he has not heard before, even if his detractors usually had the sense to whisper them under their breaths. And when they did have the nerve to speak openly, they would phrase it in more politically correct terms, those unfailingly polite, subtle suggestions that he was unworthy of his position because of his age, lineage, or whatever else it was they found fault with (everything). It had never worked, not with Regis, but they had still gotten what they wanted in the end. Because here he is, not responding to the soldier’s insults because he cannot refute them. He cannot deny what he has become.

Suddenly he just feels tired, not only with listening to the guard’s voice but of his own indisputable uselessness. The prospect of the drugs, which was once so appalling, now beckons him, offering him a temporary reprieve from reality and his own thoughts. He really is pathetic, to consider that an escape when he is just trapping himself further, but he is too tired to care about that either.

He turns away from the guard, not caring how it is perceived as he picks up the bowl. Let him think what he wants; it makes no difference to him, although somehow the man treats even this as a slight, lunging at him with the clear intent to hurt. Yet it’s the very same apathy that gave the guard an opening that saves him because he doesn’t flinch, doesn’t bother to glance up at the attack, which means he does not see so much as feel the man coming to a stop mere inches away, as if an invisible leash has snapped taut.

At this, he does look over, and has to stop himself from smiling bitterly at the obvious frustration on the soldier’s face.

His amusement, if one can call it that, has nothing to do with the man’s ineffectual anger. No, that is reserved for Drautos and his possessiveness, his aversion to having his property handled by anyone else, for that is the only explanation for the guard’s inability to carry out his threats. The captain must have told his men not to touch him unless absolutely necessary, and he knows from personal experience that the man has little patience for disobedience. Just as rational explanations do not work on him, neither will excuses, and the soldier does not have even that at the moment.

But he too has no excuse not to obey Drautos’s commands, despite the man not being here. He has no interest in finding out just what qualifies as absolutely necessary, particularly when he has far less to fear from the drugs than from being awake. There is little point in putting off the inevitable, except then he takes his first bite and finds himself blinking, staring down at the food in bewilderment.

The guard recovers quickly from his embarrassment, mistaking his expression entirely in his eagerness for any chance to bring him down. “Not to your liking is it? Not good enough for you and your refined tastes?”

It is not, the rations bland and tasteless, but that is not the reason for his reaction. No, what is surprising is that he can notice it at all, rather than being overwhelmed by the bitter taste of the drugs. Could it actually be that he has misread the situation entirely, that Drautos is so convinced of his surrender that he doesn’t think such measures are necessary?

Something almost like resentment surges through him at the thought that the captain could not even grant him this, the mercy of unconsciousness, and it is so irrational that it takes him a moment to recognize the familiar haze that he associates with the drugs. But instead of seeping through his every thought and stealing his strength as it usually does, it hovers at the edges, dulling his mind without taking it away completely.
This too, takes him too long as well, the realization of why.

He has always had a higher tolerance for drugs than normal, a lesser-known part of his training as Noct’s advisor, but something that Drautos would have been privy to as someone Regis trusted. The captain would have known to increase the dosage that first night, and that amount would only have gone up to keep him under on a near-constant basis over those two weeks.

But clearly the soldiers have not been informed of this because they have not given him near enough, which is why instead of losing consciousness with the usual quickness, he has time to actually consider options that he had long assumed were foreclosed. Without the drugs to keep him compliant, and with the soldiers constrained in their ability to control him by force, could this finally be the opportunity that he had claimed to be waiting for? His heart is racing, and for once it is not from the fear but the suddenly very real possibility that he could end this.

But not at this moment, not with the soldier still looking for any reason to claim necessity and the men waiting outside. Not when the drugs are clouding his mind, not quite pulling him under but slowing him down nevertheless. A week at most, Izunia had said. Not long, and with the unpleasant variable that Drautos could be back sooner than that, but perhaps it would be enough.

(And even if it is not, it is still the only opportunity he has.)

When the opportunity does come, he still nearly doesn’t take it.

Whether it is because the guard has other duties or has simply grown bored with his not entirely feigned capitulation, it is not the usual man who brings him his food that day. He doesn’t recognize him, this soldier who is so focused on his task that he does not remember to close the door. A quick glance over confirms what he has already noticed, that with each meal the number of men waiting in the hallway had dwindled to zero, as they had clearly become bored with watching a drugged man eat. It helps that he had barely seemed a danger when not drugged as he imagines that he must look as ragged as he feels, to the point that no one gives a second thought as to why he is always awake when they return for his next feeding.

It’s as ideal a set a circumstances as he could have hoped for. There are no locks to be concerned with, no soldiers other than the one, and enough time has passed so that he is no longer feeling the effects of the drugs. Yet still he hesitates, watching as the guard slides the bowl onto the bedside table before stepping back, waiting for him to be obedient because that was what the other men had said, that he is too broken to do anything but submit.

And maybe he is. Maybe it would be easier to do what is expected of him rather than attempt what is, by every objective measure, a foolish endeavor. Free of the drugs, he is also free to put to work all those years of studying battle tactics and strategies in calculating each and every reason why this plan of his will fail. Certainly, he could escape this room, but that is only the first step. How can he possibly expect to escape this place when he is not sure where he is or where the exits are, not to mention everything in-between? And if by some miracle he does make it out, he will still be in enemy territory, with no money or resources to hide or bribe his way through an entire country of people who, if they recognize him, will turn him back over Drautos to be-

The thought of Drautos being anywhere near him again drowns out all of the uncertainties. Before he quite realizes what he is doing, before he can allow himself to be stopped by the voice of reason that has defined his life for so long, he grabs the bowl and flings it directly into the guard’s face.

The soldier stumbles back, although countless drills and exercises have him automatically moving to protect his weapon, his hand quickly covering the handgun strapped to his hip. But that is his
mistake because that was never his aim. He knows how to use a gun, of course, just as he has a passable knowledge of every weapon available to the Crownsguard. But the daggers were always his favored weapon, and in one smooth motion, he yanks the blade out of its sheath before slicing it across the guard’s throat, cutting the man’s windpipe so that instead of a cry for help, all that comes out is a gargoyle of blood. He still covers the man’s mouth as they crash to the ground in a tangle of limbs, and feels the bloody spit bubbling against his palm.

He doesn’t know how long he lies there, one hand wrapped tightly around the stolen dagger and the other still pressed against the soldier’s lips. It is not a quick death, but he never looks away. He simply watches silently as the man dies, his own breathing heavy and a mockery of how the soldier still tries to draw in air, even as blood seeps through the gaping wound and he starts to choke and convulse.

When the man finally goes still, he stumbles backwards, his knees slipping in the blood as he tries to put some distance between himself and the corpse of the first person he has ever killed. In death, he looks even younger than he already did, and he tries to remember when Niflheim ended its conscription policies, favoring the MTs over human cannon fodder. It is possible that the man wanted to be here even less than he did, that he did not deserve such a miserable end.

His hand covers his mouth as he wills himself not to be sick, although that turns out to be a mistake because his fingers are tacky with blood. He shouldn’t be so affected by this, seeing how he has trained for this, trained for the inevitability that he would one day have to kill to protect his prince. But that was not what he has done; he has killed only to save himself, and it is all too likely that given how poorly thought out his plans are, the soldier has died for nothing.

He really does nearly retch at that thought, but just manages to swallow the vomit before he stands and approaches the body. As he pulls the clothing off, he wonders if it really would have been any different, if he had done this for Noct. He would have done anything necessary for his friend, his brother, but would that have silenced the pangs of guilt he feels as he puts the uniform on?

He supposes he will never know the answer to that, not when his duty to Noct had been taken away from him.

The uniform is not as blood-stained as it could have been, as most of the soldier’s blood had ended up pooling on the ground rather than soaking into the fabric. It still feels odd against his skin, not because it is too short and too bulky for his size, but because it has simply been that long since he was permitted the privilege of wearing clothing.

At least the shoes fit tolerably well.

Sparing one last look at the body, he heads for the door, still holding tightly to the dagger. Even that insidious voice of reason is silent, recognizing that he cannot waver now, not after what he has done. He has made his choice and now he must live with it, and that is even odder than the feel of the uniform of his skin, the ability to make any decisions at all.

But he has other choices to make now, as he steps into the hallway. It is empty and dark, giving no indication of which side leads to where he needs to go, although then he is not exactly sure of where his destination is either. Anywhere but here seems to be the best place to start, so he takes in a deep breath, blindly chooses a direction, and goes.

He doesn’t even make it down the third corridor.
His head is pounding when he regains consciousness, and it is not helped by the yelling.

He opens his eyes slowly, blinking a few times until his vision is clear, although he still cannot make out the words being said. He can, however, stare at his hands tied in front of him. There’s more blood on them than before, and it takes him several long seconds to remember the group of soldiers who had found him. He had tried to fight them off, lashing out wildly, but that had been his mistake, hadn’t it? Because if he'd actually been calm enough to put some thought into it, he would have known that it was a losing battle.

He would have known that he should have used the dagger on himself.

But it is too late for that, as he listens to the person yelling about how he killed three of his men, something he finds unbelievable because how could he possibly be capable of that? Except then he recalls that they had pulled back as well, trying to subdue him with their hands rather than taking him out with their weapons, as they easily could have done. Apparently Drautos’s orders extend further than he realized, although he is hardly grateful when it would have been so much better if the man had ordered him to be executed on sight.

That is when he notices who the yelling is being directed at, the screen from which Glauca listens in silence. As difficult as the headache makes it to think right now, he can feel the man’s eyes on him, despite the metal armor that hides the general away and the miles that physically separate them.

Now that he is awake and, more importantly, aware of what is happening, Glauca no longer has any interest in listening to the man’s complaining, interrupting, “It seems this could have been avoided if you had trained your men better then, commander. I told you to not let your men get complacent.”

The commander sputters in outrage, obviously not expecting to bear the brunt of the blame. “You did not warn us that your whore would be such a danger.”

“So you are suggesting that this is my fault?”

“No. No, I would never… I… no, of course not,” the man says, practically deflating in what is otherwise an impressive display of survival instincts. “But… your orders did make it difficult to control him. Is he really worth the trouble? Why does he matter so much to you?”

Glauca does not react, yet somehow he knows how much the words affect him. Izunia had seen it, the fact that he cares too much, and while this commander is nowhere near as intelligent as the chancellor, his question hits too closely to the open wounds that Izunia had scored. The weakness he represents, the risk that others will come to learn what Izunia had… it is a risk that Glauca cannot take, even if he cannot see the commander’s hands curling into fists behind his back. Because the general knows that his control over his soldiers is based solely on fear rather than respect of a man who is rarely present, which is why he says coldly, “He doesn’t.”

But it is not enough to lie. Glauca must back up his words in a way that shows his men that he does not care what happens to him, without actually allowing him to be irreparably harmed. Except their definitions of irreparable harm are very different, which means he realizes what Glauca will do a split-second too late to try to save himself.

“But perhaps you have a point,” the general says, not once glancing in his direction before he condemns him. “I still have business to attend to here, but will be back in a few days. Your men may enjoy him in the meantime, as recompense for their trouble.”
Chapter End Notes

Just as a note, a few people have mentioned having problems getting alerts for this story, which I can only assume is AO3 trying to save you all. I don’t know how to fix that, but I am going to try to get this story to a more regular update schedule (namely weekly updates on Wednesdays) so that hopefully the lack of alerts won’t matter as much.

Also, in general, sorry.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I know I tend not to tag much because by this point, I assume you know what you are getting yourself into, but this is still not a pleasant chapter.

“Stop,” he says hoarsely. “Stop.”

He does not know how many times he has told them to stop. He does know that they have ignored him every time, from the very beginning when he had still tried to fight back. It was always an exercise in futility, with so many against one, but it had seemed better than the alternative of simply giving in without resisting. But he had underestimated the human capacity for cruelty, not realizing how much they relished showing him how weak he was by pinning his arms down and spreading his legs, before taking their pleasure from him one by one. He has no idea how anyone could take pleasure from this; what monsters could enjoy doing this to another person? But he is hardly a person to them now, just a thing for them to wound.

That is why they did not stop later, when the humiliation of his uselessness had finally caught up to him and he had started screaming instead. He had at least had the sense to know that was a mistake, clamping his mouth shut before he had fully processed what he was doing. But it was too late by then because they had heard his weakness, and responded by goading each other to see who could make him scream again first. He had tried not to give them that, to deny them the amusement of knowing just how hurt and terrified he is, but soon he cannot hold back anything as they continue to touch him, to fuck him, to wear him down completely until he simply does not know how to stop screaming anymore.

And they certainly do not stop now, when he adds the word, “Please.”

They do not even pause, the man inside of him thrusting hard, but now that he has said it once he cannot restrain himself at all, saying over and over again, “Stop. Please stop. Please, please, just-”

Perhaps they don't hear him, when his voice is a shadow of what it once was. It is more likely that they simply do not care, not understanding how ruined he is to have resorted to pleading, to begging them to stop hurting him. He tries to make them listen, pushing desperately at his latest tormenter, but the soldier just bats away his bound hands.

His hands have not even hit the ground when he starts crying.

He knows that is a mistake too because he can hear them laugh at his weeping, but he is too far gone to consider stopping. He has no control left, not over what they do to him and certainly not over himself because there is nothing he can do to stop this, so why bother pretending that this isn’t breaking him completely? He is so tired and scared and he wants this to stop, he needs this to stop, but nobody cares what he wants as he starts to sob helplessly because it hurts so much.

It should not be possible, for a person to hurt this much and still be alive. If he has run out of the strength and the will to defend himself, surely he must have run out of the strength for everything else too. Yet there he is, crying as one man is replaced by another, as one violation ends and the next begins, and how much more of this does he have to endure? How much more of this is he
Sometimes he passes out. It is the closest he comes to getting what he wants, but that just makes it worse because he always wakes up to someone else inside of him, tearing him apart in more ways than one. Then he starts crying and pleading all over again until everything goes black, setting off a vicious cycle of pain and hysteria that he is increasingly certain will never end.

When it finally does, at least for the moment, he is almost too delirious to notice. His entire body is alight in agony, his mind too far gone to comprehend that they have finished because all he knows is that it hurts. Every piece of him, whether physical or mental, is limp and useless, unable to react when they pick him up and carry him to gods know where. To Drautos, to a hangman’s noose, or to hell itself – he does not know and he does not care because it is all the same by this point.

It turns out to be a cell, something so ordinary that it almost makes no sense because nothing in his life has made any sense since the day he attended a Council meeting and was told just how disposable he was. He doesn’t react when they drop him on a cot so tiny that if he was to stretch out his limbs, a good part of his legs would likely dangle off the edge. He doesn’t care, lying there long after the cell door slams shut until he finally manages to drag himself up to curl into the corner where the walls meet, pulling the thin blanket over him. Even these smallest of movements causes him to shudder in pain, but he doesn’t stop because it is nothing compared to what he has suffered or what is to come, which is why it is suddenly so important that he appear as small as possible, to not be noticed because what happens when they return for him, what happens when they want more.

The mere thought of this repeating sets him off again, the dry sobs wracking through his entire body because he does not have any tears left to shed. He had thought himself broken before, and maybe he was, after being sold to the enemy without a second thought, being drugged for weeks on end, being denied the ability to decide anything for himself, being raped by a man who views him as nothing more than someone to be possessed. But broken or not, that doesn’t mean there were not still ways of dehumanizing him further, even though he had been so sure that there was nothing left of him to take, that there was nothing left for him to give.

That is the most devastating thing of all, the realization that it is not over. As long as he is here, as long as he breathes, they will always find another part of him to ruin, and there is absolutely nothing he can do to stop them.

He has no idea how long he lies in the darkness, drifting in and out of consciousness before the door opens with a screech of metal that would wake anyone but the dead. Unfortunately he is still very much alive, even if he is unable to do much more than wedge himself more tightly into the corner, refusing to look up because it does not matter who is entering the cell. They will hurt him regardless.

“Leave me alone,” he says, the words too broken to be a command, too controlled to be a plea, and too lost to ever be recognized as his. “Just leave me be.”

He is not so naïve as to expect his words to have any effect, but when the footsteps do not stop, he can feel the terror building, choking off his air. But it does not have the kindness to end him, nor does it stop him from whispering, “Just go. I can’t. Not now.”

“Calm yourself,” Drautos replies, clearly irritated by his weakness, but the order has the opposite of its intended effect as it seems to open up the floodgates. Before he knows what is happening, before he knows what he is doing, he is screaming, and it is a pitiful sound at best, although not nearly as pitiful as his attempts to fling himself past the captain as if he has someplace to go. But
the possibility of being trapped here with Drautos is beyond horrifying, and when iron hands grab
his wrists, he shrieks. Any touch is more than he can stand, especially one that promises nothing
except more hurt and pain, and his breath is coming hard and fast, too quickly to actually give him
air. The fear of not being able to breathe returns, but it is nothing compared to his fear of living, of
going through this again. It is why he cannot stop even though he knows he must, continuing to
pull away, to fight back, to do anything at all because he cannot go through this again, he does not
want this anymore, he just wants it to stop as he screams and screams and screams.

He hears the blow a split-second before he feels it, the pain blossoming from his cheek where
Drautos struck him. Despite the armored gloves, the slap is not as hard as the first time the captain
had hit him, but it cuts through his panic instantly. His heart hammers in his chest as he stares into
those dark blue eyes, which are somehow colder and more pitiless than the armor Glauca had
hidden behind when the man had offered him to the soldiers as recompense for killing their
comrades. And when Drautos leans towards him, he cringes, shrinking back into the corner and no
longer too proud to beg because what pride could he possibly have left by this point. “Please.
Please don’t. Please, I… I won’t run again, I just… I’m sorry, please, I’m sorry.”

He should hate that he apologizes to the man who rapes him and permits others to do the same
because it suggests that this is his fault, that he is in the wrong, that he deserves this by refusing to
give in all these past weeks. But somehow that does not matter anymore; they are just words and
they do not make a difference, not to him and certainly not to Drautos, who continues watching
him like he is pathetic. And he can hardly deny that, broken down as he is, especially when the
pleading dissolves into uncontrollable sobbing. He just wants the pain to stop except there is only
one way for that now, and he knows he can beg until he runs out of breath but the captain will
never give him what he wants. And that realization is killing him, just not in the way that matters.

The shrill sound that escapes him when Drautos touches him is pitiful, as is the keening whimper
that follows when the man does not stop. He buries his face in his arms, as if he actually thinks not
seeing the man will make him go away, like he is a child trying to ward off the proverbial monster
under the bed. But Drautos is flesh and blood and so is he, and he cannot do anything to stop the
captain from peeling him away from the cell walls. The man is careful to keep the blanket between
them so that the armored hands do not actually touch his skin, but that scant consideration is of
little comfort when he is picked up again.

The cell was not comfortable, but it is also the only place he has been where he has not been
violated. The thought of leaving it is terrifying because he knows where they are headed, but as
always no one is asking him what he wants, especially not Drautos. All he can do is let the man do
what he wants, and hope he does not have to bear it for much longer.

He does not remember much of what happens next. He vaguely remembers crying when he is
carried through the hallways (burying his head in Drautos’s chest, trying to avoid the open stares of
everyone they pass), when he is washed clean of the blood and semen (hands holding his shoulders
tight enough to bruise, to keep him from trying to drown himself in the bath), and when a medic is
summoned and starts to probe at him (“Nothing an elixir cannot fix,” the man assures, apparently
failing to notice that there is nothing left to fix). At least the last one is enough to tip him over the
edge into unconsciousness, but that only means he wakes up tied to that hateful bed. Drautos is
clearly not taking any chances now, and all he can do is lay there, his head turned to the side and
his body curled as best he can when he is bound so.

He is not awake for long when the bed dips under the familiar weight of another.

“No, please,” he begs as Drautos turns him onto his back before getting on top of him. “Please. I
can’t, I… I can’t.”

He may mean it sincerely but it would not be the first time he is wrong because apparently he can, and apparently he must. He is able to handle the perfunctory preparation with no more than quiet, shattered gasps, but then he cannot stop himself from wailing in utter despair when the man slowly pushes into him because it is too much, it is too much, and he thinks he will die if this continues but that would not be such a bad thing because he wants this to stop, he just wants this to stop.

But Drautos does not stop, and neither does he. The betrayal of his own body is infuriating, but why had he expected anything else? He has been pushed to the brink so many times before and each time managed to survive, so what is once more, or twice, or the rest of his life by this point?

Except this was never supposed to be his life. He had a future, a place at Noct’s side and people he loved deeply, who had cared for him in return. But that is what makes it so much crueler, the loss of the life he had made for himself, stolen not just by the Empire but Lucis as well when they had traded him for the promise of peace. He hopes they enjoy it because there will never be any peace for him now, not when all he has to look forward to is being the whore of a traitor and whomever else the captain feels like giving him to. The thought that this is what he is reduced to, that this is all he will ever amount to… he doesn’t want it. He doesn’t want any of this. He wants the life he had chosen for himself, but barring that he will settle for the cell because being left alone to rot has to be better than this. Anything is better than this.

But that is not his choice anymore. Perhaps it was never his choice, when his life was subject to Lucis’s needs. And they have decided that this is where he needs to be, pinned beneath a man who he hates so much and fears even more, with no ability to protest what is done to him. They all expect him to lie there and take it, although he can hardly manage that anymore as he suffocates beneath Drautos’s weight and the force of his own sobs.

He does not know when he started crying again, or maybe he just never stopped. Maybe he will never stop. It is hard to tell much of anything now except for the feel of Drautos inside him, as the man rips the last shreds of humanity from him.
Chapter 9

When he comes to, Drautos is gone. The bindings are not.

He stares at them, noting in an almost detached sort of way the angry marks on his wrists from where he had fought against the ties. He pulls, unsurprised when it does not give, but then he pulls again, and again, and again.

Everything seems to be happening in the distance, as if he cannot process what he is doing. Even when he yanks hard enough that the skin splits and blood begins to run, he thinks not about the pain but of a documentary he had watched with Gladio another lifetime ago, of wild animals chewing off their limbs to escape a trap. He hears screaming, but cannot connect it to his own voice, wondering instead who could sound so desperately wretched. The tang of blood, the salt of tears, the bone-deep pain that the strongest of the Empire’s lab-created medicines will never take away – none of it seems to be his, his mind unwilling or unable to accept what is happening to him because it knows he cannot tolerate anymore.

But what he can and cannot do is no longer up to him, hands grabbing his wrists and slamming them back into the bedframe so that he cannot injure himself further, no matter how he strains against the cold grip. He finds himself staring at Drautos, who snaps, “What do you think you’re doing, Scientia?”

He doesn’t reply because he honestly has no idea, but that is not good enough for Drautos, whose expression darkens as he orders, “Answer me.”

Answers. He clings to the command like it is a lifeline because that is what it is, a chance to save himself in the only way he knows how. After all, he has always had the answers, whether to Noct’s schoolwork questions or matters of state, or the thornier challenge of balancing a prince’s duties with a king’s desire that his son have a normal life, namely by giving up any semblance of normalcy in his own life. Compared to that, this should not be difficult, yet he can think of nothing despite how important it is to say something because if he does not, there is no telling what Drautos will do to him. The man can do anything to him, give him to anyone, and gods, not that again-

Desperately he tries to speak, but all that comes out is a terrified sound he would never have imagined himself capable of making.

That just makes Drautos angrier, his grip tightening until he is gasping in agony. But the physical pain does nothing to distract from the dread, only highlighting the power that the man has over him and how helpless he is to protect himself. Even now, when he is driven purely by base fear, Drautos takes it as a slight, as if he thinks that he is doing this on purpose, as if he is capable of making any conscious decision when he is not. If he had the ability to do so, he would say anything to satisfy the man, repeat whatever lie the captain wants him to declare if it will earn him a moment’s respite. But that is the real lie because he will never be free of this. He will spend the rest of his life waking up tied to this bed, hearing the soldiers laugh as they rape him, pleading for this to just end already despite knowing that he will never be able to escape this horror because they will never allow it. He might as well be one of those wild animals caught in a steep trap, except he does not even have the option of self-mutilation as a means of escape when Drautos keeps him pinned so.

Maybe that is why he is screaming, although it is astounding that he is able to manage that at all, with the fear clawing at his airways until it is near impossible to breathe. Drautos is wholly
unimpressed by this though, judging from the blinding pain from where the man hits him, and then once more when he does not (cannot) stop. The force of the second slap is enough to make him taste blood, but that is a mere discomfort compared to what the captain can and will do to him, and does little to quell his panic.

And that is what this is, isn’t it. How odd, to know what is happening yet be unable to do anything about it. Except it is not odd because has that not been the very definition of his life as of late? He had not been able to stop Lucis from selling him or the men from raping him or Drautos from breaking him, and he certainly was not able to stop himself from falling apart even when pride was the only thing that was left to him. Now the only thing he has left is fear, and he has plenty of that as he loses himself completely.

He sees rather than hears Drautos yelling at him, unable to make out any of the words. He is too trapped in the blind panic, to the point that he does not even realize Drautos has unhand him until he feels the sharp prick of a needle in his arm. Given his frantic struggles, the needle should have broken off in his vein, but of course he would not be so lucky. Whatever is in it works quickly though, his entire body sagging even as his mind continues to shriek. But that quiets as well with the drugs sweeping through his system, stealing his ability to do anything at all.

He might have detested it, this latest loss of control, if he was not so damn grateful for the world fading away into nothing.

The next time he opens his eyes, the restraints are padded.

He is hardly sure what the point of that is, when he is so tired that he barely has the strength to think. He is not surprised by it though, just as he was not surprised to be waking up even when that was the very last thing he wanted. But he knows better than to expect to get anything he wants, as aptly demonstrated when Drautos asks, “Have you calmed yourself yet.”

It is a question, but at the same time not, sounding more like an accusation for why he was behaving so foolishly. It might have sent him into another panic if not for the exhaustion weighing him down, far more absolute than any previous time. He wonders if that is because Drautos used a higher dose or if his body is now so weak that it has become that much more susceptible to the drugs, but immediately decides that it doesn’t really matter. Nothing does, as he lies there, unable to even consider moving away when the captain reaches over to brush back his hair.

“That’s better,” he murmurs, clearly mistaking his fatigue for the calm he desires. “You see? It doesn’t have to be so difficult.”

He doesn’t respond, doesn’t even react when Drautos gently tilts his head up so that they can look at each other. There is something almost like sympathy in the man’s eyes as he says, “You asked me if I have ever regretted anything. I may have gone too far this time.”

There is no opportunity to consider this barest of admissions because then the captain continues, “Still, you must realize that none of this would have been necessary if you had just obeyed.”

The man makes it sound so easy, as if he was unreasonable to ever consider anything other than submission. Perhaps he has a point. Deep down, hadn’t he always known that he would never be able to escape? Yet still he had tried, despite knowing that there would be consequences to his defiance, consequences that Drautos had even warned him of before he had left. Under those circumstances, did he not deserve what had happened?

Drained as he is, he recoils from the thought. No. No, a thousand times no. Nothing he has done
could ever justify this, and how pathetic has he become to consider it for even a second? He never asked for this, never wanted to be a part of whatever it is that Drautos is trying to do. But something of his horror must show because the captain sighs, like he is sincerely frustrated by his inability to get through to him.

“I know what it’s like,” Drautos tells him, and he stares at him, unclear how a man who rapes him could even begin to feign empathy because if he understood at all, he would stop this. But Drautos has no interest in stopping anything, leaning towards him to say, “I know what it’s like to give up your wants and desires in service to the crown. All my life, everything I did was for another, but it wasn’t enough. Lucis still stood back and let the Empire burn down my home, and then I thought I had nothing left. My people were dead and my king revealed to be a coward, unable and unwilling to protect anyone outside his precious wall.”

The hand holding him spasms, the only evidence of the captain’s anger. But it passes too quickly to cause any lasting harm for that was never Drautos’s aim, even now. “I could have given up then. But rather than allow Regis and his weakness destroy me, I chose to make something of myself. And that can be the same for you. You don’t have to be beholden to a country that never cared for you.”

He cannot deny that the man may be correct, but that is beside the point. Drautos is making a mistake if he thinks that this has anything to do with loyalty. He may not owe anything to Lucis, but no matter how Drautos tries to position himself as the only other option, it is one he cannot take. The only things he associates with the man is pain and humiliation; how could he ever willingly choose that? How could Drautos ever think he would want that?

But that is his own mistake then, to believe that Drautos cares about what he wants. It has never been about him, only the captain’s interests, and that is made clear when Drautos says, “It’s why I chose you.”

He is completely frozen as Drautos reaches over to undo the bindings, his wrists falling to his sides. He barely gives a thought to using that temporary freedom to fight back because what will it earn him, except for more pain? Yet he has to wonder if pain might be preferable to this, when the man draws him close, holding him as a lover might if Drautos was capable of such emotions.

“So you know how hard it has been, watching you waste your potential?” the captain asks softly, running a hand through the tangles of his hair the same way Gladio used to after a long day of running himself ragged in service to the crown. The similarity of the gesture from a man who hurts him so badly is sickening, but not as much as when Drautos keeps speaking. “Playing at nursemaid for a son who is even weaker than his father when you were capable of so much more, and for what? Their betrayal of you was always inevitable, but you let yourself believe otherwise. You’re intelligent, Scientia, but also so naïve, which is why you needed to be saved from yourself. Better to learn the truth of them now, then after you gave up anything more.”

It’s the same reason that Drautos had given him that very first day, but it makes even less sense now than it did then because how can he possibly be something more when he feels like nothing? Everything that he has ever had is gone, yet it still is not enough for the captain as he feels the hot breath against the back of his neck.

“I’m trying to help you,” the man says, and there is no plea in the words, no attempt to convince. They’re matter of fact, like it should be obvious, except it isn’t. It is anything but. “You’ll appreciate it one day.”

Finally, the calm certainty is too much for him and he tries to pull away, but Drautos does not let him go. Drautos will never let him go because he honestly believes that he will save him this way,
and before he knows it, he’s crying again. It is not the shuddering, frightened sobs of a hurt child, but something far more despairing as he realizes that this will never stop because the captain is not capable of understanding that his claimed attempt to save him is destroying him from the inside out. And unlike Drautos, he cannot imagine ever making something out of the pieces because that presumes that there is something left, when there is not.

If Drautos notices his tears, he doesn’t comment on it, laying him back down on the bed. He cannot resist because it will get him nowhere, and so the only thing he can do now is let the man take what he wants, all in the name of his own salvation.

After that, the days quickly start to blur together, nothing to distinguish them beyond his varying levels of ability to feel something other than misery. He spends most of his time lying in the bed, his wrists trapped in those padded cuffs that seem less about restraining him than preventing him from hurting himself, a not uncommon occurrence when he descends into another panic attack. There is no predicting when they happen, which means there is no way of preventing them from occurring either. All he can do is endure it, if that is even the right word for it when he barely seems to know what is happening.

Sometimes Drautos is there to force him back to reality, but sometimes he is not, and he is not sure which one is worse. Possibly there just isn’t a difference because whichever happens, he is left wrung out and empty, a mere shell of the person he once was. He doesn’t know how much longer he can stand this, and more importantly he doesn’t understand what Drautos wants from him now, no matter how many times the man tries to explain it. Because explanations are meaningless with Drautos continuously trying to take by force what he does not know how to give, which means they are trapped in some type of limbo, each wanting from the other that which they cannot have.

All of that changes the day he wakes up to find someone beaming down at him.

“Hello, boy,” Ardyn Izunia says with that smile that does not reach his eyes. “I have some people I would very much like you to meet.”
“Oh gods. What is this?”

He might have asked the same question once, except that he knows the Astrals have nothing to do with this. No, there is something uniquely human about this latest act of cruelty, something so petty and spiteful that no god could ever dream of it. Besides, if the gods had cared at all for human affairs, they would have acted when Niflheim had murdered Shiva, destroying the country in a single strike in revenge for their fallen brethren. But they had not, so here they all are in the heart of the Empire, a fact that he might have resented if he was not so horrified by what is happening.

“What is this?!” Noct demands again, his voice rising with each word. In all his life, he has never heard his friend sound like this, not when he was most upset and frustrated by his slow recovery from the daemon attack, the crushing burden of his responsibilities to the throne, or even the prospect of his father dying. So many had deemed his prince apathetic, including the two Councilmembers who now accompany him, but they would never again dare think such a thing as they watch him like this, his eyes ablaze with barely contained rage as he asks, “What have you done?”

At his back, Councilman Fermin, who has gone completely white, stammers something about negotiations and obligations and it had to be done, your highness, we had no choice, but Noct isn’t listening. Nobody is, not Gladio, who is failing to conceal his anger behind a clenched jaw and knuckles white with the tension of keeping them still, or Prompto, who doesn’t even bother hiding his emotions and stares at him with his mouth open in surprise.

And especially not Drautos, who stands behind them, his expression flat and empty at the sight of his property being paraded before them, and his inability to do anything about it. But that will not always be the case, and if the captain should choose to take this out on him, to punish him even though it had not been his choice to leave….

How wrong is it that it is this – not the shock and distress of his friends, but the fear of how Drautos will hurt him this time – that finally spurs him to react. Except his body is unsure of what to do, numbed by his own shock, torn between pulling back to escape or throwing himself forward to apologize. But in the end, it is not up to him when Izunia’s hand rests on his shoulder, keeping him firmly on his knees next to the man as he watches them all helplessly.

“My sincerest apologies,” the chancellor says, ever the gracious statesman, seemingly oblivious to the consternation he has caused. “I had assumed you had been told all of the terms of the peace treaty, but perhaps I assumed incorrectly?”

The question is rhetorical at best, when it is so obvious that Izunia has taken such pains to present him like this, trussed up and utterly degraded. Even the clothing that the chancellor has permitted him is a calculated slight, dressing him in the traditional black of the country who sold him. The clothes are so similar to the Crownsguard uniform he had left the Citadel in that he had at first thought them the same, but that was likely the intention, to highlight how much he had changed without resorting to simply parading him naked through the greeting hall. After so many weeks of abuse, they now hang off his frame, and Izunia has seen fit to make sure his sleeves are pulled up and his collar unbuttoned just low enough to reveal the dark bruises on his arms and neck for
everyone to see.

“The terms,” Noct repeats, unable to look away from every mortifying mark littering his skin and what they represent. “You... what are you even saying, he’s a person, not a-

“A mere token of good will, I believe it was phrased,” Izunia cuts off, smiling beatifically at Councilman Fermin, who manages to turn two shades paler. “Which the king agreed to.”

Noct’s mouth opens before snapping shut, unable to deny the evidence of the betrayal is right before him. Instead, he finally rasps, “Why?”

The chancellor shrugs, not a care in the world. “Who can say what goes on in the minds of kings? Certainly not I. But I am sure he had his reasons, even if he chose not to share them with you.”

The prince doesn’t seem to hear the implicit comment of his ignorance, simply continuing to stare at him, unsure of what to do but desperate enough to at least try. “Look, there must be something else you want, something we can-”

“Oh my,” Izunia tuts disapprovingly. “Were you never told not to show any weakness when bargaining? It’s one of the basic rules of negotiations, or so your dear advisor should have taught you. That seems a rather disappointing oversight on his part.”

The criticism barely registers when the hand on his shoulder squeezes so hard that it feels like his bones will snap. Yet for the first time in so long, he tries not to surrender to the agony (because it is Gladio and Prompto and Noct and for them he will always try), but it is as futile as every other time he has tried because the chancellor does not relent until he lets out a soft cry of pain, muffled behind the gag that Izunia had unceremoniously shoved into his mouth before dragging him from Drautos’s quarters. He slumps when the man lets go, but he can still see Noct stepping forward, reaching into the Armiger for his weapon.

“Your highness,” Fermin says shrilly, while Councilwoman Acantha gasps at the sight of their fragile peace collapsing right before them. But neither is brave enough to make a move to stop him, and Gladio stands there looking torn between stopping his prince and helping him as Prompto glances nervously around as he tries to figure out what to do.

But Drautos does not hesitate to step to the forefront, one arm thrown out to halt Noct’s forward progress as he says harshly, “Don’t make a scene. It’s what he wants.”

Perhaps it is, but that is not what the captain is concerned with. He does not care about the peace or even of depriving Izunia the pleasure of tormenting Noct like this. Drautos acts only because he cannot have the prince stealing back what is now his, and he wants to scream at them all to see the truth of that. But he can only watch as Noct glares at the captain, clearly ready to go through him to do what he wants.

Except in this instance, Drautos’s interests seem to align with Izunia’s, and the chancellor clears his throat with unnecessary volume, giving them a common enemy to face even if for very different reasons. “How moving,” Izunia says, quite unconcerned by the fact that he was very nearly attacked. “But as impressive as your devotion is, Prince Noctis, alas, it is not my decision to make. The boy is General Glauca’s, and there is not much I can do about that, I’m afraid.”

“If he is the general’s, then why this display?” Drautos asks coldly, his arm still held out to keep Noct back. But whereas the others think that the captain’s anger is directed at his pathetic fate, both he and Izunia know the truth of it, although Izunia for one chooses not to take heed.
“Well, you see, General Glaucu couldn’t join us today,” the chancellor explains unhelpfully. “But he was generous enough to lend us someone in his place. And given how close he was to the prince, I thought it would be kind for them to see each other.” As if anyone would believe that, but it isn’t about sincerity. It’s about power and control, which Izunia wields over them all, including the man who should be his ally.

“That seems unnecessary,” Drautos says, a clear warning in his tone.

Izunia’s smile, if anything, becomes more vicious. “Was it? If that is how you feel, perhaps we should take our leave so as not to cause you any further distress.” His own distress is not at issue though, as the chancellor grabs him by the arm to haul him up. After spending so long kneeling on the cold tile, his legs do not want to work, making him completely reliant on the other man for his balance, an additional humiliation on top of the countless others. But even as he is pushed towards the exit, he cannot help but take one last look back at the others, as Izunia says, “It was a pleasure to meet you, Prince Noctis. I do hope you’ll enjoy your stay in our fair country, and all the wonders it has to offer.”

The gag is scarcely removed when he asks, “What are you doing?”

Izunia blinks, seemingly stunned that he has the presence of mind to say anything at all. He is not the only one who is taken aback because how long has it been since he has said anything that wasn’t meaningless, pitiful sounds? It would be so easy to fall back to that state of being, far easier than trying to understand why these terrible things keep happening, but it is too late for him to take back the question (although certainly not too late to regret asking it).

The chancellor recovers quickly from his surprise though, replying with no little condescension, “That is no concern of yours, boy. The fates have decreed what they will, and you can only accept what happens.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

Izunia laughs, “It’s certainly what they hoped I would do.” Then the man is looking him over, no longer smiling but almost curiously. “You’re quite an interesting creature. I can see why Drautos is so fond of you.”

Just the name of his rapist sends him careening into that dark, hateful place of terror, making it easy for Izunia to shove him backwards onto the bed. The chancellor wrenches his hands up so that they can be cuffed to the headboard, to await Drautos’s return and whatever the man will do to him. Given that, can he be blamed then for the way his mind starts to slip and his entire body trembles in anticipation of that which he cannot control (yes, yes, unquestionably he can because Drautos will blame him for anything, no matter how baseless it is)?

He flinches wildly when Izunia pats him with a patronizing fondness, like the pet that the man has labeled him.

“You really shouldn’t be so tense,” the chancellor says. “Not when there is still so much to come.”

He does not take Izunia’s advice, if one could call it that. He doubts the man expected him to. Instead, as the seconds stretch into minutes then hours, the shock he had felt at seeing the others begins to wear off, leaving him to bear the full brunt of what has happened. What they have seen. There are no words to describe that awfulness, of having his suffering flaunted to the people he cares most for in the world. Although there was still a part of him that had wanted to see them so
badly, he had never wanted them to see him like this, not as some broken, frightened creature who
barely resembles the person he once was to them.

And what if that is the last they ever see of him? Because surely Drautos will act now, just as he
had to stop Noct from getting any closer to him. But what will he do? Whatever it is, it will hurt
and he will not be able to stop it from happening, so maybe he should not think about it at all
except he cannot help himself. He cannot stop himself from thinking about every hideous way
Drautos will make him suffer, just as he cannot stop himself from being so scared even though he
should be resigned at this point for what is the point of fear if he can do nothing about it anyway?

But fear is hardly rational, and neither is he when the door opens. He closes his eyes, not wanting
to see how angry the captain surely is, especially when there is no one to direct his anger at except
for him, and-

“Ignis. Oh gods. Ignis.”

It takes him too long to realize that the voice is not Drautos’s, and longer still to remember that is
his name. And then he is looking at Noct, not quite able to believe what he is seeing until his
prince throws himself at him.

“I’m sorry,” Noct says, over and over again as he clings to him. The touch of anyone should make
him shudder, but this is different because it is Noct, the boy he has spent nearly all of his life caring
for. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know, I didn’t… if I had known, I wouldn’t have let him.”

He is saved the need to respond when his wrists are released from their bonds, and he stares up at
Gladio, still not sure what is happening because he had stopped letting himself dream of this
possibility, to spare himself the hurt when it failed to materialize. “How?” he asks dazedly, not
sure he can manage anything more than that one word.

Gladio’s eyes flicker towards Prompto, who stands awkwardly behind Noct with one hand clasped
around his other wrist. The blond shakes his head wordlessly, but then the only thing that matters is
Noct, who finally releases him enough to face him properly. “We can talk about that later. Right
now, we’re getting you out of here.”

“You can’t,” he replies automatically. Astrals, they have trained him well, that even now his first
instinct is to put duty above his own well-being when he owes Lucis nothing. “The treaty-”

“We are,” Noct cuts off flatly, taking his hand. “I don’t care what the Council agreed to. I don’t
care what my dad agreed to. You’re not staying here. I’m not-” The words catch in his throat as he
looks at the cuffs still hanging from the bed. The bruises could have been written off as something
– anything – else, but there is no mistaking this, even if Izunia had been generous enough not to
strip him bare again before departing. “I’m not leaving you to this.”

He knows he should not allow it, as he lets himself be pulled up. He knows there will be
consequences to Lucis if Noct succeeds here, that there will be consequences to Noct. But then,
what choice does he have to begin with? The treaty has rendered him into property, and in doing
so, it created no obligations on his part. It never required that he promise to stay because it was
never up to him, so why should he try to do so now when the simple reality is that he cannot. Not
when Noct and Gladio and Prompto are here. Not when he doesn’t want to be. He’s lost too much
of himself already and he’ll continue doing so because he cannot fight Drautos anymore, and-

He freezes, causing Noct to pause in confusion.

Drautos.
He’s shaking so badly that Noct lets go of his hand to approach him cautiously, but he barely notices it because if he thought he had been scared before, it is nothing compared to what he feels now.

“I can’t,” he whispers, the same words he had said to Drautos after the soldiers had raped him, before the captain had done the same. He cannot go through that again, not even if it means never escaping Drautos himself. “I can’t. Drautos, he-”

“Drautos?” Noct asks, utterly bewildered. “We didn’t tell him anything.”

“No, you don’t understand,” he says urgently because he needs them to understand. “Drautos, he… Glauc. They’re the same, they always have been.”

“What are you saying?” Gladio says, breaking the stunned silence that follows. “Ignis, are you telling us that Drautos-”

“He’s Glauc,” he repeats and why aren’t they listening, why aren’t they seeing how hard this is for him to have to ask to be left behind because- “He’ll find out. He’ll find out and then….”

He can’t say any more than that because he doesn’t want them to know. They already know too much but he doesn’t want them to know that too, how easily the soldiers had held him down and fucked him while he screamed and begged and wept to no avail. While the marks on him now are all Drautos’s, he doesn’t need the physical wounds to remember what they did to him, and if the others look at him now with pity, what will they think when they discover that too?

Of course they think is nothing compared to what Drautos will do, and he staggers back, gasping. “No. No, not again, I can’t, please-”

He couldn’t stop them before and he won’t be able to stop them now if Drautos gives him to them again, and the thought of them touching him while they ignore his pleas for them to stop is too much. It was bad enough with Izunia making him leave but at least it was clear that it was not his choice, even if it was unlikely to stop the captain from hurting him. But Drautos will never believe that he didn’t choose this if his friends take him away now because he does want to go, he wants to go so desperately because he cannot stand being here for a second longer, and he doesn’t know what to do. He doesn’t know which is more important, the need to escape or the need not to give Drautos any more reason to hand him over to the soldiers again, and he cannot think through it clearly, can barely think at all because he doesn’t know what to do and since when was it his choice anyway, since when-

He screams when heavy arms wrap around him to hold him still, a high, thin sound that does not come close to conveying all of the fear and anguish he feels. It is all he can manage before he blacks out completely.

“Oh Noctis. What have you done?”

Chapter End Notes

11/6/18 Note: Sorry again, but this chapter is fighting me so much I can't even predict when it will be up. I swear I am working on it though (I'm on my fourth rewrite), but I know better than to promise anything in terms of timing by this point.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay with this chapter; unfortunately, it took me about five drafts before I could finally get this chapter right, even though I knew what was supposed to happen with it. Hopefully it was worth the wait (although admittedly I was working on this at 6 in the morning the past two days, so I could be deluding myself as to whether it is finally ready), but again, I apologize!

I have also decided to deanon the story, mostly because I have learned that subscription alerts don't work with anonymous stories, and because I don't really have the ability to do regular updates for this story (I think I managed it... twice since I tried). I always intended to deanon the story, but I was waiting to do it a few chapters down the road. I suppose by now, if you're still reading the story, you know what you're getting into, so there's not much point in hiding it.

But again, I'm very sorry for the delay in this chapter. Even though I cannot promise regular updates, I will still be trying for it because a schedule does tend to help me focus (also because I'm a masochist).

His immediate thought is that he is tired of waking up like this. Whether it is to being taken from his home or serving as a pawn in the chancellor’s games or choking on his own sobs while someone fucks him, he is tired of opening his eyes to a reality that somehow always manages to be worse than the last time he was conscious, which is why he doesn’t bother opening his eyes at all.

Except he knows by now that pretending does not change what will happen to him. Drautos may not be here (for once), but he does not need to be to hurt him, as Regis asks again, “What have you done?”

He is unable to stop the way his breath hitches at that, the question that is equal parts command and despair, but it is lost beneath the scrape of the chair as Noct stands to face his father. “What did I do? What did you do? Don’t tell me you didn’t know about this!”

“Of course I knew.”

The admission is not surprising; the king can hardly afford to be dishonest when the facts are so clear, yet Noct was obviously not expecting it if his stunned silence is anything to judge by. That just makes his next question all the more wrenching. “How? How could you agree to this?”

“Because it was necessary,” Regis replies quietly. “We are losing this war, son. This treaty is our only-”

“I don’t care about the treaty,” Noct snaps, even though it’s far from the truth. After all, how many late nights had they spent together, poring over the latest reports about the Empire’s steady progress, its destructive sweep across the lands and the human toll it extracted? But his prince cannot remember that right now, not when he is faced with the very real suffering that he has never been good at ignoring. “I care about Ignis. And-”
It is the king’s turn to interrupt. “You think I do not know that? You think I do not care as well?” I love you as my own son, the man had claimed right before handing him over to the Empire, but while his voice wavers ever so slightly, his resolve does not. “But he is still only one person, and there is too much at stake for any one person.”

“No.” Noct is stubborn as well, unwilling to accept what everyone else did blindly. “We’re supposed to be protecting our people. What’s the point of any of this if we can’t even save the people we love?”

“But at what cost?” The king’s tone is mild, even gentle. It would have been easier for him to simply order his son to step aside, rather than trying to make him see sense, but this is his weakness, this desperate need to keep Noct’s love even in the face of such betrayal. “Would you have me give up someone else instead? Someone less important to you? Or would you let the Empire destroy us all, and protect no one at all?”

He can picture the stricken look on Noct’s face as his father’s words sink in. No one is worth sacrificing an entire country for, yet still his prince says, “You should have found another way.”

“There was no other way,” the king replies, the barest hint of frustration in his words because Noct should understand this already. “And Ignis would tell you the same thing if-”

That turns out to be a mistake, using him against Noct because it only reminds his friend of why he had stolen him in the first place. “Don’t,” Noct practically snarls. “Don’t you fucking dare pretend that he would have agreed to this. Do you even hear yourself…?”

Noct continues speaking, but his words are fading, like the music on the car radio when entering a dead zone. They know each other so well, having spent most of their lives at each other’s side, but either Noct is lying or he does not know him at all if his friend actually believes that he would have said no to this.

They never gave you the choice, Drautos had said, and that is true. He will forever resent them for that, but it does not change what he would have done if they had only trusted him enough. In the Council chambers, the king had silently asked his understanding and forgiveness, and while he had not been able to offer the latter, he had never lacked the former. He had never needed his uncle or the king or anyone else to point it out to him, the cold calculation of weighing one life against so many, because he had already known. That was why he had not tried to defend himself during the Council meeting, had not even considered challenging what they would do. To protect a kingdom, to protect Noct, this was not just the only decision that could have been made, but the right one.

Knowing that then, he should speak up. He should fulfill the role he had been raised for, to stand by Noct’s side and guide him through the difficult decisions that a ruler must face. Not that he is delusional enough to think that he can stand now, but he still has his voice, the ability to remind Noct of his duty to all his people, not just one. To remind Noct that his suffering, as terrible as it is, is nothing compared to the welfare of an entire nation.

He should, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t because he is too weak and damaged and scared to do what is right because it means giving himself back to Drautos, and he can’t. He can’t, not when he knows every terrible thing the man can and will do to him, not when he has already endured more than he can bear. Between Lucis and Drautos, they have taken so much from him, and for once he just wants to be selfish and think of himself because he does not want to go back to that, to being nothing more than a possession. It is no wonder that he spends most of his waking hours screaming and crying when all that he knows is the man holding him down to violate him, as if that was all he was ever meant for.
Perhaps that is the real reason why he does not open his eyes, knowing how quickly he will shatter if he does. But for all his efforts to blind himself to his own fate, he cannot help the desperate whimper that escapes him, which echoes loudly in the dead silence that follows.

“Ignis?” Noct asks softly, and he immediately regrets his weakness because he can hear the footsteps of his prince coming closer, no doubt reaching out to him because Noct is still determined to fight for him. But this time the thought of Noct or anyone else treating him as something human seems unbearable because he knows it is only temporary. Noct may have him now, but he was never going to be able to keep him, not when the treaty and Lucis’s fate are at stake. His friend should have known that and maybe he had, but Noct has always been too kind, and now that kindness is a cruel reminder of everything he has lost and what he will lose now.

“Noct.” He hates that he is grateful for the king’s intervention, forcing his friend to turn away to face the man. “I know you meant well, but you must know what I have to do now.”

“You can’t.” It is less a denial and more a plea, as now it is Noct who tries to make his father understand. “You don’t know what he’s been through. If you had any idea, you wouldn’t-”

“I do know,” Regis says, and the thought that the king – that everyone, no doubt – knows just what he has been through makes him want to vomit, but not as much as when the man continues, “But it does not change anything. There simply is no other way.”

“What of Drautos?” Gladio speaks up before Noct can start yelling, and although he tries to keep his voice steady, there is no denying the desperate need for there to be some other solution. “He’s a traitor, and still subject to Lucian law. We’re within our rights to arrest him, and then maybe the Empire would be willing to negotiate. And if Drautos was the only reason the Niffs wanted him in the first place-”

“You don’t think we already thought of that?” Lord Amicitia interrupts, but it is too tired to be a rebuke. “As soon as you returned and we learned of his treachery, we sent the Crownguard to take him into custody. They searched the entire airship, but he had already vanished.”

“He knew you were coming for him.”

“So it seems. We’ve already received word that he has returned to the Keep, and is under the protection of the Emperor.”

“How?” Noct demands. “He didn’t have any reason to run. None of us knew he was Glaucus until Ignis told us. How would he have known you were going to arrest him unless….” His voice trails off, as it slowly dawns on him. “He knew. Oh gods, he knew because we took Ignis.”

He’ll find out, he had tried warning them, although he had never meant it this way. He had never considered what might happen if Lucis found out because he’d long ago stopped letting himself hope for a way to this end. But now he can see nothing else, the fact that the captain had learned of his disappearance, realizing that they would learn from him the truth of the general’s identity. He would have known better than to go back to the people he had long ago betrayed, whereas if they had left him behind, then maybe Drautos would not have known that he had been revealed. Maybe there would have been a chance to arrest the captain then, whereas now there is no chance for him at all.

“We don’t know that,” the Marshal says evenly, but while the man has never been known to offer false comfort, there is still something about his words that rings hollow. “Nobody remembers seeing him recently, so it’s possible he never returned after your meeting with the chancellor. He may have known that as soon as Scientia was revealed to you, it was only a matter of time before
his betrayal was discovered.”

“But you don’t know that either,” Noct says, his voice hoarse, and the silence that follows is answer enough. And where reason and appeals to logic had failed, that is finally what makes his friend’s anger slip away entirely, as he realizes that his desperate attempt to save him has only condemned him for good. “Astrals, I… this is my fault.”

Regis’s love for his son may be his weakness, but even he cannot deny this. “What’s done is done. We can only-”

“No,” Noct protests, for all the good it will do any of them to try to deny the inevitable. “I did this. Why should he suffer because of what I did?”

“Because this has never been about you.”

He feels the whisper of movement then, the steady thrum of the Crystal’s magic as it gathers. He has always been more attuned to its magic, although not to the same extent as the Kingsglaive, and he recognizes the spell before the king says, “Sleep, son.”

Noct must have realized it too, but whether he is slowed by despair or the unconscious desire not to have to face what he has done any longer, he does not react quickly enough to avoid it. There is a soft sigh as the spell takes hold, but while his friend must fall, there is no sound of the body hitting the ground as Regis no doubt catches him in time.

“Marshal,” the king says. “Please take my son back to his room. I’ll speak to him later.” (Not that there is much else for either of them to say.)

He hears the slight shuffle, as the king hands Noct over to the other man. Another pair of footsteps join them, so light that it can only be Prompto, coming to assist Leonis. His help is hardly necessary, but it is a useful excuse to leave as well, although it quickly becomes clear that no excuse is needed at all.

“Gladiolus,” Lord Amicitia says. “You as well.”

The Shield does not go, not immediately. More so than anyone, Gladio was raised to put duty to the crown before all else, but now his loyalties are being tested between the prince he is sworn to and the king who commands them all, putting him in this impossible situation. It’s incredible that Noct had been able to convince him to help him at all in the first place, when he must have known he would be disobeying the king.

But he does not disobey now, and it is revealing of just how much Drautos has taken from him that he begrudges his once-lover this, when he would never have hesitated to do the same if their roles were reversed.

“Clarus.” The words are heavy, as if each must be dragged from the king’s throat. “I need you to pass on a message to Niflheim that we desire an audience with the emperor. Tell them that we understand our obligations under the treaty, and that we intend to fulfill its terms.”

“Your majesty,” Lord Amicitia acknowledges, his voice impressively neutral even when he asks, “Is that really necessary? Now that Drautos has been revealed for what he is, the Empire-”

“The Empire still has far more leverage than we do. They have no reason to compromise on any term, especially now that my son has embarrassed them like this. You know as well as I that they will be even more determined to ensure that we satisfy our end of the bargain, if only to save face.”
“But still-” He does not know for whose sake the king’s Shield still tries, whether it is his or Gladio’s or for anyone else who will one day be demanded for. It could be Iris one day, and he would not be able to say no, not with this precedent.

The king says nothing, but he can almost see the look on the man’s face, the desperate plea to not make this any harder as well, not when it is hard enough as it is. It must be enough because Lord Amicitia says nothing else, only the sound of his heavy footsteps marking his departure. He waits for Regis to follow because that would be the easiest thing for him to do now, when there is no reason for him to stay. A king pushes onward always, accepting the consequences and never looking back. He has never appreciated the entirety of that counsel until now; a king cannot look back, after all, without seeing the trail of broken bodies he leaves in his wake.

But Regis does not leave. Instead, he allows his weakness to betray him once again as he says, “Ignis.”

He hears the unspoken plea there, but does not know why he listens. He owes Regis nothing, not even acknowledgment, when the man has made clear what he will do. Yet somehow, almost unwillingly, he opens his eyes, the intensity of the lights making him wince. It takes a moment for his vision to clear, to see that they are in the medical bay of the Lucian flagship, and several moments more to recognize the man that now sits in his side, in the very chair that Noct must have occupied not so long ago.

It may seem like a lifetime, with everything that he has endured, but it has not been that long since they had last faced each other, not really. Yet he finds himself staring at not a king but a man turned old by magic and sorrow. It is as if all the regality that Regis had cloaked himself in has faded away, and has he always had those lines, those streaks of white in his hair?

Those questions quickly fall to the wayside when Regis reaches out to him, and a gasping sob escapes him, although even he does not know if it is out of fear that he will next be waking up to Drautos, or frantic relief for the fleeting reprieve of a sleep spell. But instead of the gentle touch against his forehead, destined to take just one more thing from him, the man takes his hand.

He should recoil back from that. Regis is not Noct, not someone who he can allow this from. But there is an unspeakable sadness in the way the Lucian king holds him, even though he should not have to spare any feelings for the man who made this his fate.

“Ignis,” Regis says again. “I cannot expect you to understand, or to ever forgive me. But to make sure he is prepared for what is to come, we need more time. The treaty terms must be fulfilled, to give this world any chance. I would not do this for any other reason, I swear to you. But there is a darkness coming, and we need the time.”

He does not understand what the man is trying to say, but this time his understanding is not being asked for. The hands around his are shaking, barely able to hold on. It would be so easy to pull away while he still has the right to do so but he does not, instead continuing to stare as the man who was once his king trembles before him, whispering, “If there was any other way….”

There isn’t.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

So many apologies for how long this chapter has taken me to write. It took me about six tries to even figure out how the chapter would start, and then four drafts once I finally did. Hopefully it works out in the end, and even more hopefully, the next chapter will not take as long to write.

The grip on his arm is like steel, as Drautos drags him through the Keep.

He does not know how he manages to keep up when he lacks the strength (the will) to stand on his own feet, but it does not matter because it was never his choice to begin with. Indeed, if there is anything he has learned by now, it is that what he thinks himself capable of is irrelevant because they will prove him wrong, over and over again, until he stops trying at all.

That is why he does not bother memorizing his surrounding; he knows he will never be leaving this place again. That was made clear when Regis had presented him to the Empire mere moments ago, along with his apologies and his assurances. It will not happen again, the king had informed them all, and who is he to protest when he is nothing more than chattel, something to be bartered away for a peace that holds no meaning to him? Even Drautos, who risked that peace for the sake of having him, does not spare him a backward glance when he stumbles, yanking him up harshly and forcing him to move because the man must know that if he falls now, he will never be getting up again.

He still nearly ends up falling when they stop before a door that he does not recognize from this side, but knows all too well from the other. After all, how many hours has he spent staring at it, hating it for locking him in and fearing it every time it did open? Yet that terror is positively trivial compared to what he feels now, as Drautos slams the door open and pulls him in.

Everything is the same as he remembers, from the practical furnishings to the padded restraints that still hang from the bedframe to the overwhelming feeling that he cannot breathe because the general is forcing him towards the bed and he does not want this, he never did. But when he tries to speak up, he has nothing to say. Years of diplomacy and elocution lessons gone to waste because he cannot find any words, not to apologize for actions that he was not responsible for or to plea for a mercy that the man has never displayed. Instead, all that comes out is a pathetic, keening whine that he would be ashamed of if pride was one of the few things still permitted to him.

“Calm down,” Drautos says coolly even as he pushes him onto the bed. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

All of the evidence is to the contrary because the only thing the man has ever offered him is hurt, but there can be no doubt that Drautos believes it when the general informs him gravely, “I never wanted to hurt you. That was your doing.”

He nearly feels hatred for this man who will always find a way to make this his fault when the general controls every aspect of his life, but it is quickly swallowed up by the fear. If Drautos thinks this is his fault, if he thinks that he made the choice to run, then surely he intends to give him to the soldiers again because that is always an option for the man, whether as a means of
forcing his compliance or as a punishment for whatever perceived sin he commits or simply because he can. And the thought of how easy it is for Drautos to destroy him so completely makes a not insignificant part of him want to lay down and cry until he does not have to feel anything ever again, except the man will not even give him that as he grasps him by the chin so that he cannot look away.

“But that is in the past,” Drautos continues, as if it is that easy to brush away all the pain he has caused. “I do believe that we can come to an understanding now.”

He stares, unable to comprehend what is being said. An understanding? He understands things perfectly; he gives and the man takes, even if it will leave him so damaged that he does not remember what it is like to be a person anymore, and he has no way of stopping him. What more is there to understand than that?

Yet still the general looks at him expectantly, and while it is so tempting to keep his silence and try to pretend that this is not happening, suddenly he does not want to. He is just so tired of this, of trying to defy the man when he cannot succeed anyway. So as impossible as it should be, he swallows hard and speaks to Drautos for the first time since he had begged him to stop, only to be ignored. “What do you want?”

“I want you.”

For a moment, he thinks that this must be a joke, whether by the general or his own fraying mind because he cannot mean it. He cannot possibly… “You already have that,” he bursts out before he can stop himself because how can he not see that already? How can Drautos not be satisfied when he has taken so much from him?

“Not in the way that matters.”

It is so tempting to start screaming again, to drown out Drautos’s words rather than face them because he cannot fathom what else the man could possibly expect from him now. “I can’t,” he tries to explain desperately, not for the first time and certainly not for the last. “I can’t give you anything else.”

“Yes, you can.” Rather than being patronizing, there is a gentleness to the words that is at such odds with everything that the man does to him. “You know what I want.”

He automatically starts to deny it, but the protest sticks in his throat because the man is right. He does know, perhaps even more clearly than the general himself, who looks at him with what might almost be a desperation of his own. Did you really think that I would ever want you? he had asked, and although Drautos could not bear to admit that weakness, the answer to that question had always been yes even though the one thing the man was never entitled to is his consent.

Of course, that is why he wants it most of all. Only then can he truly feel justified in what he does, only then would he have actually succeeded. It is not enough to have his body when he needs his soul as well, his agreement that this was the right thing to do. And the general is so desperate for this that he is willing to ignore the sheer hypocrisy of his demand, of pretending that he freely chooses this when the man has made it so that there are no other alternatives available to him at all.

When he fails to respond, Drautos sighs, releasing his chin. But still the general cannot let go of him completely, cold hands resting on his face so that callused thumbs can trace the lines of his cheekbones. “Why do you hesitate?” he asks, as if he is requesting little more than a trinket. “They certainly did not when they sold you again. Can’t you see that we are nothing to them, you and
me? We gave them our loyalty and were expected to give up our lives, but because we were not their people, we were always expendable to them. You served them so faithfully and look at where you are. Look at what they did to you."

The general speaks as if he has nothing to do with this, as if he is not the one who hurts him the most. “But you are not expendable to me,” Drautos says softly, and while it is presumably meant to be praise, all he hears is the warning that he will never be free of the man. “If you were loyal to me, if you were mine, your loyalties would not go unrewarded.”

The fact that Drautos dangles that promise before him as if it is some sort of incentive shows just how little the man understands of him. He has no interest in any reward; he simply wants this to stop, to not have to suffer any longer. But that is the one thing that the general will never give him, even if he was to offer the man the illusion of choice that he so craves. He will never want Drautos, not in the way the man wants him. The best he can manage is to stop resisting, to accept that he will never be more than this, a whore or a pet or a justification by which the general will rationalize every act of cruelty he commits. If he can do that, if he can bring himself not to care that his entire life has been ruined, then perhaps he will no longer care what Drautos does to him either.

It is not precisely what the general wants, and it is certainly not what he wants. It is, however, more than what either of them has now, and may even be enough to satisfy the man so that he hurts him less. But to have even that small prize would require him to betray his loyalties and beliefs and everything he has ever stood for, and how can he ever consider that?

But what is he giving up really, that insidious voice of reason asks, although the question should be patently absurd. Yet as much as he does not want to admit it, Drautos is right about that at least, that the allegiances he now seeks to cling to have been met only by Lucis’s own betrayals. Whatever remorse Regis might have felt had not stopped the king from giving him to the Empire not just once, but twice, and this time with full knowledge of what horrors awaited him. Even Noct had not been able to save him, had perhaps even doomed him with his efforts, and that is when he finally understands just how little he has left.

Even at his worst, there had always been a part of him that believed there was still a place for him outside of this bedroom, a place at Noct’s side. Any dream of escape inevitably led to the same place – to Noct and Prompto and Gladio, people he cared for and would do anything for. And while he loves them and always will, he also knows now that he can never go back to them. They will give him up too, not because they want to but because it is not their decision either. This is where he belongs now, so it is writ on a piece of paper, tucked away between terms regarding tariffs and shipping routes. Two countries have agreed to this, and how can any of them fight that, even the son of a king?

That is why the decision should be easy. He owes nothing to the country that has cast him away, and he has no hope of a future with those who are not allowed to keep him. And it is not as if he has not compromised himself before, when he held his hand out to take the drugged water all those weeks ago. Compared to that, compared to what will be done to him if he continues to hold out when there is nothing to hold out for, what other option does he have?

None, of course. This is the most logical choice he can make, yet it feels like the only thing he is agreeing to is destroying himself when he looks Drautos in the eyes and says, “Yes.”

He barely knows what he is saying, whether it is agreeing to cooperate or simply acknowledging that there is little else left to him. But it must be enough for Drautos for he has never seen the man smile like this, pleased by his surrender. It should sicken him, except it feels like everything has drained from him, leaving him numb and empty even when Drautos leans down to kiss him. He
does not reciprocate, but he does not fight back or even flinch away, not even when he is carefully eased down onto his back. And that too is enough for the general, it seems, whose every action is careful, although whether it is because he is finally his or because the man does not want to mar his skin, he has no idea.

He does not care.
Drautos gives him orders, and he obeys.

The orders are never anything difficult, to the point that they could almost be deemed insulting when he is capable of so much more. For years he was taught how to negotiate with ambassadors and political leaders on all matters of state, to craft battle tactics that could bring down daemons and armies alike, and to put everything on the line for king and country, no matter the personal cost. He has achieved the last of those now, and finds himself barely able to do anything at all, to the point that he sometimes wonders if he should be grateful that the general has limited himself to the most basic of commands (get up, eat, bathe, sit, lie down).

He is not grateful though. While the orders make it harder for him to fail (and therefore to be punished if he does), it does not change what he is actually agreeing to. With each act of compliance, as small and meaningless as they may seem, he is giving Drautos what he wants: his willing obedience. That may not seem like much either, but most of his life has been defined by an unwavering obedience to ideals greater than himself. Now his only obedience is to a man who has no loyalty to anyone, and why should he be grateful for that?

But gratitude is beside the point; it is not why he acts. He acts only because he cannot stop the general from taking whatever he wants anyway. At least this way, he can spare himself some of the pain (but not all of it, not even close), and even pretend that he has some choice in this. He may be selling himself cheaply, but it is arguably better than being tied to a bed and used all the time.

 Granted, there are times when he is not sure of that. For every moment he thinks he has learned to tolerate this, there are countless others when he remembers just how much he despises what he has become. Drautos, whether purposefully or not, seems determined to remind him of that, kissing his neck and telling him how pleased he is by him now that he has finally accepted his place. There are times he wants to ask how that can possibly be, when the man has to order him to perform the most basic functions because he does not care enough to take care of himself. After all, hadn’t the general once claimed to be interested in his potential, which surely must mean something more than his ability to spread his legs on command? He asks nothing, of course, because he does not want to know the answer; the only thing more terrifying than the man being satisfied by this is the prospect of the day when Drautos finally decides he is entitled to more, and when he cannot (or perhaps worse, can) give him that.

For now though, the general has the time to be patient, to even pretend to be kind. He certainly makes a point of being gentle when he rapes him (and it is still that, no matter how obligingly he lays down when commanded), as if to emphasize his promise that obedience will be rewarded. But such attempts at kindness ring hollow against a backdrop of rape and abuse, as well as the ever-present threat that Drautos can still hurt him in the way he fears most, should he ever try to resist again.

He knows better than to point that out, instead choosing to compromise himself further by accepting the man’s favors. Not that he is quite capable of appreciating them, when the finer foods taste like ash and he is not able to concentrate long enough to read the books that the general gifts him. He does occasionally try, occupying those periods when Drautos is off plotting with the Empire by reading entire chapters, only to realize that he did not take any of it in. Most of the time, he prefers to advantage of his additional freedom by sitting at the window with a book in his lap, staring not at the text or even the outside world but at the glass, calculating just how much force it would take to shatter it.
So no, his life is not satisfying. He barely remembers what that feels like, let alone bothers to expect it for himself. All he can do is live with this, even if he does not particularly want to, but so long as that is not an option that is available to him, he will learn to settle for this. At least he can bear it, until he works out a way to not have to anymore.

Naturally, it does not take very long for him to learn how very wrong he is.

“No,” he says. And then, in case they did not hear him, he says again, “No.”

But hearing him has never been the issue; the problem is that no one has ever cared enough to listen. Because they certainly do not listen now, cold hands grabbing his wrists and pulling him up, causing the book he has never once opened to fall to the ground. It lands with a heavy crash, but the sound on impact is nowhere near loud enough to drown out the jeering laughter or his own useless protestations, as he repeats again and again, “No, no, no. What are you doing, what-?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” a soldier asks, reaching out to caress his hips.

He immediately recoils back, but only ends up stepping into another man’s grasp as an arm snakes around his waist and crushes him back against an armored body. He tries to pull away but there is no breaking free, and even if there was, what then? There are too many men surrounding him, and he stares at them wildly, unable to understand what is happening except that is a lie because he knows exactly what is happening. He just doesn’t know why. “But Drautos, he...” he stammers, “I did what he wanted, and he promised-”

“Promised?” the man holding him mocks, and he remembers that voice, telling the others to hurry because they all deserved a turn with him. But he had not hurried when it was his turn, drawing out the violation one agonizing second after another, punctuating each push forward with vicious whispers of how this was all he was good for now. “You would trust the words of a traitor? How stupid can you be?”

Stupid yes, but trust, never. It had never been about trust, only desperation, and he had been desperate indeed. He would have and indeed had agreed to anything, including this farce of an existence, because he would do anything to avoid the possibility of being given to the soldiers again. So even though it had sickened him, when Drautos had praised him only moments ago before leaving for an audience with the emperor, at least he had been able to tell himself that as long as the general was content, he would have saved himself from this one thing.

Except Drautos had never promised to spare him this. He had only assumed, when the man had said he would be rewarded for his loyalty, but how could he assume anything when it comes to Drautos? Logic means nothing to the general, and if the man is delusional enough to think of his rape as a form of deliverance, why wouldn’t he also think that the mere act of being his is sufficient reward, such that he is entitled to nothing else? Or worse, what if he was wrong about what Drautos wanted from him, that maybe obedience was never his aim but abject humiliation was? What if this is all some twisted game, making him give in before reminding him in the cruelest possible way that he never had any hope of saving himself?

If he had any rationality left, he would know that makes no sense. Drautos, for all his cruelties, is not stupid, and he would not risk losing the only leverage he has. And as accomplished a liar as he is, the general’s anger with revealing his true desires seems too honest to be another deception, especially one that has little purpose because Drautos does not need to lie to him when the truth is
already so painful. But then, what is rationality when they are pushing him towards the door, and how is it that he has spent so many weeks wanting to be anywhere but this room, only to now be absolutely terrified of leaving it? He knows what will happen once they go through that door though, the soldiers making no attempt at subtlety as they debate who will have him first, and in an act of pure desperation, he digs his heels in. It is a pathetic display to be sure, but to his surprise they stop, likely because they are just as surprised as he is that he is bothering.

He is not sure why he bothers with this either, as he tries one last time to deny what is happening. “No. This has to be a mistake.”

“A mistake?” someone says, derision dripping from every syllable. “The only mistake is you thinking that Glauca could actually protect you.”

“Don’t fight it,” another soldier advises before he can even begin to understand what that means. “It’ll be over soon enough if you’re good.”

The man’s tone is almost tender, like a mother soothing a child who has scraped his knees, but there is no comfort to be had here. A pain like that is fleeting, but this is not. Even if the soldier is right and they finish with him quickly, there will always be a next time and all the times after that, and there is nothing he can do to stop it.

He knows this because he has tried. For so long he had struggled and resisted in the foolish hope that he could escape this, whether by his own means or because someone would finally save him. When that hope had been so ruthlessly extinguished, he had tried to do as the general wanted, to limit the damage done. He did not want to but he had done it anyway, and now he is realizing that he need not have bothered because nothing he does will ever make a difference. No matter what he does, no matter how he tries to give in, he cannot stop any of this from happening, so what is the point of anything?

That is when he knows he can’t. Everyone has a breaking point, and he has been pushed past his more times than he can remember. Each time he tried to hold out, but he is tired of trying because all he ever ends up doing is failing. So he does not fight when the men pull him forward again, and he does not beg, and when he starts to cry, he honestly wonders why he bothers. Because he can’t do this anymore, he just can’t. He can’t live like this, he can’t live at all, and most importantly he does not want to because he hates this and he always has.

He had tried to convince himself otherwise, telling himself that he was too tired or scared or apathetic to hate, but that was always a lie because he hates everything about his life. He hates Drautos for taking him, and he hates Lucis for giving him away. He hates this bedroom and the doors and windows that will not give. He hates that he cannot decide anything for himself, that he does not matter enough to anyone to be heard. He hates that whether awake or unconscious, the only thing he knows is Drautos’s touch as the man rapes him, and he hates that there is not a single moment when he does not want to scream until his lungs give out. Sometimes he might even hate Noct for failing to save him, and Prompto and Gladio for standing aside, and sometimes he actually does hate them for being so selfish as to try to save him because all they did was remind him of everything he has lost. Then he hates himself for being so weak because this is what Drautos wants, this is what he was never supposed to become. But even that self-loathing is nothing compared to how much he hates living and how much he hates breathing, to the point that he wants this to stop, he wants to die, he wants this to end in any way possible because he cannot live with this any longer.

But no one cares. What he wants is so utterly meaningless because no one cares, and why is that so hard for him to accept? Why does he still bother yearning for things he cannot have when he
knows it will be easier to have no expectations or desires to be disappointed by?

Yet he cannot help himself. Even if it useless, even if it will only hurt him more, he cannot stop wanting this to end because he cannot bear this for a second longer, and he does not understand why he should have to. It should be easy to give him this because death is something that everyone is supposed to be able to do, so why can’t he manage that too? Why can’t he have that one thing, so that he no longer has to endure this life that he does not want anymore?

He has never wanted something so badly, but they will not give him that, of course. It is as if the entire world is conspiring against him, determined to keep him here in this horrific nightmare that he cannot wake up from. It is why he is aware of when they drag him down metal hallways and into a soldier’s quarters, where he is pushed onto a musty bunk. He feels the hands on him, pushing his legs apart, but he does not try to stop them. It won’t work anyway, so it is better to let them do what they want because maybe it will be enough this time, maybe they will finally go too far.

One can only hope, although he certainly does not try, instead closing his eyes as he waits for the world to fade, knowing all too well that he cannot even control that.
“You did this.”

He does not have the strength to flinch at the fury in the words, let alone to offer a meaningless protest, but for once the accusation is not directed at him. The chancellor only laughs at the anger though, before asking unnecessarily, “And why would you think that?”

“Do you take me for a fool?” Drautos snaps.

“Of course not,” Izunia replies, not even trying to feign sincerity. “I assure you, I do not think any lesser of you regardless of how foolishly you may act. Although I cannot guarantee the emperor would be so understanding, what with all the soldiers you killed in a fit of pique.”

There is something important in that, he thinks, remembering the sharp pain of a person being ripped away from him, of screams and pleas and the heavy stench of blood. He remembers thinking it strange because those things had not been his (except for the pain, so constant and incessant that he has forgotten what it feels like to be without), but the thought had not gone much further than that, too abstract for him to process completely and too distant from him to be relevant. As long as the blood is not his, as long as that means he must live, then nothing matters at all.

Even the general’s anger is meaningless as he says, “As if you care about that. Besides, what use are men who do not know their place?”

“What use indeed?” Izunia agrees amiably. “Still, you do not think they had a reason to be a tad irate? After all, it was the discovery of your treachery that caused the Lucians to delay the treaty signing for so long. Why, some might suggest that if not for you and your pet, this war would already be over, and those men would have been home with their families by now.”

“You’re being ridiculous.”

“Perhaps,” the chancellor says, but even he is not so far gone as to believe that the man actually agrees with Drautos. “But I am not the one who just slaughtered a half-dozen soldiers over his whore.”

“That was the least that they deserved, after what they did,” is the cold justification, the twisted logic of a man who believes everything he does is right.

“What they did? How fascinating. Did you really think that your men would have no doubts after discovering that you were a double-agent? Did you believe they would be loyal to you when you betrayed your own homeland so easily?” Disdain seeps from every word, but Izunia is not finished yet, not even close. “And as for him, what exactly did those men do that you have not already done yourself? Just what were you expecting from this?”

If the general had a response, they will never know because the chancellor continues on without giving Drautos any chance to speak. “You thought you could betray him too, and gain his loyalty in return? You thought you could take everything from him, and expect him to remain whole and unbroken? You thought you could treat him as nothing, and still expect him to be anything at all?” There is no mockery now, not even the chancellor’s usual contempt, the condemnation made all the more brutal by the lack of emotion behind it. “Did you honestly think you could have him after everything you have done? No wonder the men lost respect for you, when you understand nothing.”
“And who encouraged them?” Drautos snarls, still determined to blame anyone except himself, even if there is no mistaking the defensiveness beneath the rage.

“You accuse me falsely, general,” Izunia replies airily, instantly returning to his role of the blithe courtier, unconcerned about anything happening around him. “Why would I do such a thing after obtaining for you what you wanted when negotiating the treaty? It is not my fault that you did not know how to keep him.”

Once that would have meant something to him, the revelation that the chancellor has manipulated this from the very beginning. Drautos may have coveted him, but that is of no importance to Izunia, who makes no secret of his scorn for the general. The man had no reason to demand him from Lucis and yet he had, and that should mean something except then he would have to care, and he is too far gone to be capable of that anymore. The only thing that matters is that he is here, and the reasons for that are unimportant when he does not want to be here in the first place.

Already his mind is drifting, unable to concentrate even on the yelling. Drautos is so angry but he does not care about that either because there is nothing he can do about it, just as there is nothing he can do to help himself when the anger is inevitably directed at him. And that happens quickly enough, when suddenly he feels the dull agony of armored fingers grabbing hold of his arm, pulling him up so harshly that it is not clear why his shoulder is not dislocated by this display of force.

“Get up,” the general demands because he will always demand more from him, even though he must know by now that it is a lost cause when he has nothing left. “Now, Scientia.”

He does not move, and he does not respond. He barely hears him as he stares at the room, unable to remember when he had opened his eyes in the first place. The chancellor is already gone but the corpses are not, the soldiers who had raped him looking back at him with their empty, unseeing eyes. Perhaps he should be glad that they are dead, perhaps he should be grateful, but all he can think is that he has never been so envious of anyone in his life.

He stops.

There is a subtle distinction that he has never appreciated, the difference between giving in and giving up entirely, and now it is the only thing that defines his life. He had tried giving in because he’d made the mistake of still caring, and now he has given up because he cannot bring himself to care any longer. Whenever he finds himself being aware, he just waits until he isn’t, until he does not have to be anything. The world may have refused to stop for him, but that does not mean he cannot stop himself, and that is what he does even though there is probably no point in doing so.

Drautos certainly seems to think so, unable to comprehend why he is like this now when he has been through so much already. The general thinks he is just being stubborn, if the man’s increasing anger and frustration is anything to judge by, but he isn’t. He gave up on that too, accepting his fate and more importantly, his inability to do anything to affect it. That is why he does nothing, although even that seems to give himself too much credit because it implies that he is making a conscious decision.

He is not. He does not refuse to eat or get up or obey, so much as he simply lacks the will to do anything at all. He stops the useless screaming and pleading and crying, he stops trying, he stops everything that he can. Even something as basic as reacting to pain is beyond him now because it is all the time, and he cannot handle it any longer. He would stop breathing too if he could, but tragically that is the one thing he has yet to figure out how to stop doing.
Sometimes Drautos threatens him or worse, tries to reason with him. It is an exercise in futility though; he listens but processes nothing because he does not remember how. Fear might have once compelled him to at least try, but what does he have to fear now when there is nothing else that the general can do to him that he has not already done, short of killing him. And if Drautos wants to do that, he would only welcome it because anything is better than living like this. They both know it, so eventually the man stops talking to him altogether.

In those increasingly rare (and regrettable) moments when he is lucid enough to think about anything, he wonders if the chancellor’s words affect Drautos more than the man cares to admit. Maybe Drautos really had believed that it was possible, to break him down completely and build him back up into something else entirely. The general had done it himself, after all, destroying every part of him that used to believe in something and creating a monster in his place, but that had at least been his choice. Applying that to someone unwilling was never going to work, not when so many pieces would go missing in the process. And while his tears and begging had been unable to convince the man of the folly of his actions, perhaps Izunia’s pointed remarks had, although it is far too late to reverse course.

It may be why Drautos also no longer tries, not truly. The general does not even bother with chaining him, although that could be because he has nowhere to run to, because he is no longer interested enough in anything to try running. For the most part he simply lies there, staring at nothing, even when the general rapes him. It is the one thing that the man still does to him because it is the one thing he can still have, now that he is unable to do anything. Not that it seems particularly satisfying to Drautos either, as each time his movements become harsher, as if trying to fuck a reaction out of him. But he just continues to look blankly at whatever direction he happens to be facing, feeling but not really comprehending anymore, even though he cannot help but know what is happening. He is just so beyond the point of caring that even when it becomes excruciating (and it always does), he still cannot react, accepting it with silent resignation. His mind, which had always been so active, jumping six steps ahead to plot the most efficient course forward, is completely empty because as far as he is concerned, there is nothing worth trying for. And with nothing to try for, his mind simply shuts down, a coping mechanism he had not known himself capable of but is the only thing that keeps him alive.

Not that he wants to live. Not like this. Not if this is all he has.

But that is still not his choice, so he does not waste his time on considering what else there may be for him. He does not think about his past life, of his stolen future, or even of a quiet cell to rot in. He does not think about anything because it is too painful to think about all the things that he cannot have. Instead, he simply waits for Drautos to accept that too, that the man will never have what he wants either.

Maybe then, he will finally be left alone for good.

“It wasn’t supposed to be this way,” he hears Drautos say one day, the words somehow piercing through the haze of apathy he usually clings to. It is not clear who the man is speaking to, nor is it clear who he blames for this. Not that it matters when there is only one thing here for the general to hurt.

But Drautos does not hurt him. He does not even touch him. He does not know if Drautos knows he is awake or not, as the man says again, frustrated and angry and almost desperate, “It wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

But it is, he nearly says except even that requires too much of him, the thought slipping away so quickly that perhaps he did not actually think anything at all.
“Ignis.”

There is something he may remember as concern in the word, and for one moment, he lets himself believe it. He lets himself believe that there is someone who still cares for him, a hand taking his and a smile that could light up the world, and that moment of weakness is all that it takes for him to remember exactly why he stopped thinking that way in the first place.

“Don’t,” he whispers, his voice cracked and broken. It hurts to speak, although still not as much as it hurts to breathe (to live), but he finds himself saying frantically, “Don’t. This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.”

He has no idea who he is trying to convince, whether it is the delusions that haunt him or the gods who must hate him so much or his own broken mind that still, still is foolish enough to think that he could ever be entitled to something other than this wretched existence. He should know better – he does know better – so then why does he find himself shrinking away from a touch that is far too gentle to be real? It is a lie, it has to be, just like the familiar voice that keeps saying, “Ignis, please. We’re here, we’re… I promise this is real, I… just open your eyes, please.”

“No,” he moans, unable to comply with this simplest of commands because he does not know what would be worse, them being there or not. The line that separates reality from his nightmares is fair non-existent now, such that the results are always the same. Even if this is a hallucination, and surely it must be, it is too painful to face because he does not need to be reminded of everything he has lost. “Please, just stop this. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.”

Even as he says it, he knows it is not true because if he has proven anything, it is that he can. When it comes to his hurt, nothing is impossible except for making it end because suffering is all he knows how to do, is all that he is good for now.

“It’s no use,” he thinks he hears Gladio say, and on that they agree because there is no helping him. “He won’t listen.”

“We’ll deal with that later,” Noct replies, steady and determined although even in the throes of despair, he knows how much of a lie that is too. “First we have to get out of here.”

The hands on him are painfully familiar, a reminder of a time when intimacy was not forced but sincere, and gods it hurts, an emotional wound ripped open. He should try to escape it but he would never succeed, which is why he grabs hold of the apparition of the man he thinks he loved once. And when Gladio looks down at him, he begs, “Tell him I didn’t want to leave. Tell him you made me. Tell him-”

“He’ll never touch you again,” Gladio cuts off quietly. “I swear it.”

He hears the words, but that just makes him all the more certain that this must be some sort of fever dream. Gladio isn’t capable of making that promise, and he most certainly is not capable of keeping it; had that not been proven when Noct had stolen him the last time, when the Shield had done nothing to stop Lucis from returning him? But on the off-chance that this is real, then he knows he will be punished once again for their inevitable failure, and it will hurt so much but he will survive it because he always does.

Which isn’t fair. Of course he knows that a concept as childish as fairness has no place in his life, but it really is not because he shouldn’t have to do this anymore. How is it that he cannot even be permitted to give up, but instead must be forced to suffer this even though he should not be able to feel like this, should not have to feel anything anymore. He should be beyond anything as uselessly
human as caring if nobody is willing to treat him like a person, but that is the cruelty of this, of giving him back these three because it is the only way to hurt him more at this point. Where Drautos’s calculated ruthlessness fails to elicit a reaction from him, it is the kindness of the people he loved once that breaks him apart with such ease, especially when he knows their actions will only hurt him more as they, like the general, tell themselves it is for his own good.

He cannot change their minds, cannot be permitted to decide anything, so all he does is repeat desperately, “Tell him. Please, just tell him—”

“We will,” Prompto says. “Promise.”

Promises are meaningless, he knows that better than anyone. But he accepts it anyway because it all he can do, to accept what everyone else has decided for him. And mercifully, it is that acceptance that is too much for him for once, as he lets go of both Gladio and his fleeting consciousness.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I am very sorry for the delay in updating (unfortunately, work and other circumstances got in the way); hopefully there won’t be such long gaps between chapters in the future.

He hates the train.

It is such an unreasonable thing for him to hate when there is so much else to loathe, but that is the least of his concerns. Rationality has meant little to him since the day they gave him away, after all, and likely long before that too if he is to be honest with himself. Granted, honesty has even less of a role to play now than logic, which is why he lies on the narrow bunk, staring at the fake wood paneling and despising it with an intensity that is no doubt unwarranted.

He knows what he is doing, of course. *Displacement*, they would call it if he was back in Insomnia, being poked and prodded and taken apart by the palace psychiatrists who had little else to do (because who had time for such weaknesses in a time of war?). An unconscious defense mechanism, redirecting one’s anger and frustrations to an easier, less threatening target. They would explain to him in painstaking detail that he hates the train not because of what it has done to him but because of what it cannot, that his scattered mind fixates on it so that he does not have to think about all the things that can hurt him.

Which is precisely why it does not work. How can it, when he recognizes it for what it is, a mere distraction from what truly torments him? But that has always been his problem, being too clever by far, or so the elder councilmembers had constantly complained both behind his back and to his face. He had never flaunted it or been deliberate in causing offense, but that not stopped them from resenting him, which is why they had been so willing to sell him to the other person who had noticed.

*You deserve better than them*, Drautos had told him over and over again, and maybe the general was right, but he hadn’t deserved *him* either. He hadn’t deserved those long months of rape and abuse, of being twisted and shaped into something he could never be. Drautos had refused to stop though, pushing him further and further until he simply fell apart, and now he has no idea what to do with all the broken pieces.

It was not so long ago that it would not have mattered, back when he was incapable of caring. He misses that time more than he can stand. He does not even understand why he is like this because shouldn’t he better than this, now that he is away from the man? There is no reason for him to be this way any longer when Drautos is no longer a constant threat, except that even now, he cannot quite convince himself of that. He may no longer be chained to a bed or locked in that room, but he has not managed to leave it either because still he finds himself expecting to open his eyes to the general above him, callused fingers bruising his hips as a body presses against him, the mouth on his swallowing those useless, useless pleas. He cannot stop himself from thinking that maybe this isn’t real, that this is but a dream he created for himself because he needed some form of escape, no matter how illusory.

He is certain there is a term for that too, although he has to wonder why he could not think of
something better than this. Real or not (and it is truly impossible to tell at times), this is not a particularly pleasant escape, and it is not because it is only a matter of time before they are all caught, whether by the Empire or Lucis. It is only a matter of time before he is sent back. But in the meantime he must face this, the relentless feeling that everything about him is wrong. He has lost so much of himself, and the others’ presence only drives in the point.

They do not do it on purpose, he tries to tell himself. They are not trying to hurt him, except that does not change that they are. Where once he would have been content to drown in his own apathy, now they do not give him a choice. You have to eat, is the persistent refrain when they bring him food, although he knows what they really mean is, You have to live. He has yet to find a reason to agree, but he knows that it is not worth fighting them on. He knows he would never succeed. Like Drautos, they believe they know what is best for him. Unlike Drautos, they will never give up on him, which means he will never be able to dissuade them from their good intentions.

That should make it impossible to resent them, knowing that they do this because they care. It does not. Good intentions or not, the result is the same, and besides, hadn’t Drautos cared as well? Hadn’t the man justified his cruelty because he had truly believed, in his own mad way, that this was for the best? Maybe the comparison is not fair when Drautos’s intentions had been so twisted by his own perverse desires, but that does not mean it is not apt when both of them are forcing him to do things that he does not want to do. And doesn’t he deserve better than that now? Hasn’t he suffered enough already?

He keeps those questions to himself, if only because he does not want to see the looks on their faces if he was to ask. He may resent them for doing this to him, but he would never want to hurt them like that. They hurt enough already to see him like this, their pain as clear as his own. Noctis with his guilt, Gladiolus with his shame, Prompto with his helpless concern, and all of them with their terror that whatever they do will just make him worse.

Sometimes he wants to tell them to stop trying, if not for his own sake than for their own because they must know that he is irreparably broken. The train is an unavoidable reminder of that because he does not know how long they have been here or where they are going or how they even ended up here in the first place, but he knows he should. That was supposed to be his role, after all, the strategist and the tactician, the person who always knows what comes next. He is supposed to have the answers, rather than spending his time barely conscious of what is happening around him. Except he doesn’t anymore and they should know that already, rather than waiting for him to slip back into that role he had been raised for, as if he could suddenly forget that it had all been taken away from him already.

He will not. He cannot. And he does not understand how they could ever expect that of him.

It is possible that he is overreacting, that they think none of those things. But even if that is the case, he still cannot stand the grief in their expressions when they are forced to interact with him. He would escape them all if he could, but the train makes that impossible. He cannot leave without them knowing, and even when he is left in this room by himself, he knows that they are always out there in the hallway, trying to figure out how to help him despite knowing that they cannot, a feeling that is oppressive in its despair. He cannot even escape into sleep, the feel of the train too much like the quiet hum of the airship that had stolen him away, although is it theft when it was agreed to (although not by him, never by him, but since when did his opinion matter)?

It seems he is mistaken, in believing that the train cannot hurt him too.

“Your father is dead.”
Even in this state, he immediately understands the significance of what is being said: Regis Lucis Caelum, the man he once looked to as his king, is dead. For years, he had prepared for this day, a morbid necessity borne from the king’s increasing frailty from maintaining the Wall. The news would be devastating, but there would not be time to dwell on it for long, not when there was work to be done to prepare for the transition of power. He would need to be there for his prince, to lend him his support in this time of need. It would not be until later, in the privacy of his quarters, that he would finally permit himself to grieve, not just for Noct’s loss but for his own as well.

But all that had changed the day he had been sold to the Empire. He can easily imagine Drautos’s vicious satisfaction from the death of the king he had simultaneously served and scorned, satisfaction that the general no doubt expects him to share. Regis, after all, had been complicit in his undoing, so why shouldn’t he be pleased that the man is dead?

He is not. Maybe he should, but as with the soldiers that Drautos had murdered, he is simply too tired to feel anything that petty. He does not even feel relief over the king’s death, that he no longer has to fear being given back to the general because Noct would never permit it. He feels nothing, and that is something that he had not thought possible of the man who raised him up in more ways than one, only to bring him down so low.

Regis may have claimed to love him as a son, but in the end, they were not blood, and it is not his father who has died. But Noct has remained silent all this time, and it is not until Gladio speaks that he understands why.

“So it’s true,” the king’s Shield says quietly, and there is no attempt to deny the truth, no demand for explanation. There is only resignation because they already knew, except they had not told him. Something this important and they had not told him, and whose fault is that but his own when he is barely functional? “Who else?”

Who else indeed, for what else have they been keeping from him? But he has no opportunity to ask, as the Marshal replies, “That depends. What have you heard since you were sent away?”

“Um,” Prompto starts to say, not sure where to begin, before he is interrupted.

“Just tell us everything,” Noct says harshly from where he leans against the wall of the abandoned train that serves as Cartanica Station’s rest stop. It is the farthest he can be from him while still being in the same room, but his anger is clear. He still does not trust the Marshal, had seriously considered running away when they saw Leonis waiting for them at the platform because they did not know why the man was there. Gladio had ultimately convinced him to stay, but Noct is still suspicious, and he’s making no effort to hide it. In another life, he would have tried to calm him, to remind him of the need for appearances, but what right does he have to say anything when he could not even be trusted with this information in the first place?

If Leonis is offended, he does not show it, calmly acknowledging the third king he has served. “Understood, your majesty.”

(It is probably not meant as a rebuke, but he can practically feel Noct’s flinch at the title he never wanted.)

“Most of what you’ve heard is true,” the Marshal continues, to the point as always. “King Regis fell during the so-called treaty signing when the Empire attacked, as did his Shield and many of the Crownsguard. The Council did not survive either. Most of the Kingsglaive died as well, both those who turned traitor and the ones who remained loyal. I heard a few escaped, and may even be accompanying the Oracle.”
“She’s alive?” Prompto asks, desperate to cling to any piece of good news that they can get.

“So it seems. Rumor has it that she is heading to Altissia, but it’s been hard to confirm anything with the Empire spreading so much false information.” Leonis shakes his head, his own frustration finally breaking through. Even for the Immortal, it is finally becoming too much, outliving so many he had fought alongside.

“And Insomnia?” Noct sounds both impatient and reluctant, needing to but not wanting to know what had happened.

“They took the Crystal and destroyed most of the city. Niflheim claims to now be occupying it for peacekeeping purposes, but the reality is that most of the people have fled, and for good reason.”

Each word is like a physical blow, the realization that their home (because it is still his home, it is still his, and neither Regis, the Empire, Drautos, nor anyone else can ever take that away from him) is gone. Noct goes silent again, a familiar, crushing weight that he should be helping him through. But if he cannot help himself, he certainly cannot help his prince – his king – through this, which means Gladio must step in once again. “How could this have happened?”

“It was a trap,” Leonis replies simply. “The Empire never meant to sign the treaty. It was just a means of bringing the king here, and leaving the Crystal unprotected in the city.” A pause, before the Marshal continues tiredly, “That’s why he told you to leave, you realize. You were supposed to head for safety, not go back to the Keep.”

Despite himself, he nearly starts at that. Regis had told them to leave? Why? Why would the king have done that, unless-?

“You really thought we wouldn’t go back? That we would just abandon him again?” Noct demands, breaking his train of thought as he frantically tries to comprehend why his heart has started racing, why there is something so very wrong with what Leonis is saying. “He really thought that?”

“Arrangements were made,” the Marshal replies. “I know you’re angry with him, and I don’t blame you, but know that he had no intention of leaving Ignis behind. Your father personally tasked me with getting him out, away from Drautos.”

“Drautos,” Gladio says, no longer able to maintain the pretense of calm as he practically spits out the name. “What of Drautos?”

“He’s dead.” The words are flat, beyond the point of anger for the man Leonis had once trusted to keep his king safe. “I made sure of that myself.”

“Good.” Noct says, and he has more to say than that but he isn’t listening any longer because suddenly he understands what the others are unable to see.

It would almost be easy to ignore, to fixate on the fact that Drautos is dead, that he no longer has anything to fear from the man who tormented him so. Except that information is almost meaningless because whether the general is alive or dead, he will never truly be free of him, to the point that it almost does not matter who has him. Except that they have trained him well, his country did, teaching him to see the truth and accept it, even if it would be his undoing.

Except.

“He knew,” he says hoarsely, and the others turn to stare at him, as if they are seeing a ghost. They are not completely wrong, but he has eyes only for Leonis as he continues, “He knew the treaty
was a sham.”

Because why else. Why else would he have told Noct to leave, why else would he have made arrangements. If he believed the treaty signing would go forward, that peace was on the horizon, then there would be no need for any of that, which means only one thing.

Leonis knows it too, knows he understands the truth of this entire situation, which is why he hesitates. Just for a second, barely even more than a breath, but that hesitation is more damning than anything that follows. “Yes. He knew.”

“Then why?” If the treaty was always doomed to fail, why agree to it in the first place? Why sell him to Niflheim not just once, but twice? Why give him back when he knew what Drautos would do to him? If he knew what was to happen, if he knew that the Empire would betray them, then why make him go through all that misery if it was never going to matter.

We need the time, Regis had claimed, but clearly that was a lie. All of it was a lie. This was never his choice because they never let him choose, but at least he was able to tell himself that his sacrifice was for a greater purpose. For a kingdom, for its citizens, for Noct, at least there was a reason for it, one he could understand. At least there was meaning to it, except now he knows that it wasn’t true. They did not intend to buy peace with his pain, yet they sold him all the same, and how is he supposed to accept that? How is he supposed to accept that his life was so insignificant that they let him suffer for nothing at all?

But the Marshal does not respond, for there are no words he can say that would not be a lie as well.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes an eternity to process what is happening, although even that is not enough. He is still not ready for it, the moment when reality snaps back into place and he finds himself staring at the others. Barely a second has passed yet everything has changed, now that he knows the truth that has been kept from him for so long.

In hindsight, he should not be surprised by it. You’re nothing, Drautos had informed him that very first night, but he had dismissed those words as an insult, a cruel reminder of how powerless he was to stop the general from taking whatever he wanted. And while it was that, it was also a warning that there was no point in fighting this, no point in pretending that he had any choice except to surrender to this.

He had not listened, of course. Why would he, when he was still operating under the delusion that he mattered? No one had told him the truth, neither the people who claimed to care for him nor those who delighted in being rid of him. They had all kept their silence, condemning him to his ignorance, and why? Were they trying to offer him false comfort by letting him believe that his suffering was necessary to spare countless others? Were they trying to make him complacent because they knew he would acquiesce to anything if it meant protecting Noct?

Or was he simply so unimportant that they could not be bothered with honesty, even if it could have changed everything?

Perhaps it would not have made a difference. Perhaps he would have defied Drautos anyway, out of sheer stubbornness and spite. But maybe, just maybe, he would have given in if he had known that there was never any reason to hold out. Maybe then, the general would not have resorted to breaking him in order to make him realize the futility of his resistance.

He will never know what he would have done because they would not give him the choice to save himself, to spare himself all the hurt that he now knows was unnecessary. He is not stupid enough to think he would ever have been happy in that scenario, not as long as he was Drautos’s, but at least he would not be this, this wretched, terrified thing that should never have existed in the first place.

He does not realize he is standing until he is falling, and he certainly has no idea what he is aiming for until he fails. The pain on impact is agonizing, but not nearly as much as when he tries to get back up, only to fall again. And then he can no longer try because he should never have bothered to run in the first place, for what has he ever accomplished by trying except for his own hurt, his own destruction? Except he couldn’t even manage that, something as simple as shutting down and letting himself waste away beyond his abilities. That is why he is still here, lying on the ground and too pathetic to move, and is it any surprise that they gave him away for nothing when he is so incapable?

But he is not so incapable that he does not know what is happening around him, as hands reach down to grab him and-

“No, no,” he gasps out, before he remembers that it is futile to try to deny this. “Please, gods, I… I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to run, I didn’t….”
He’s not sure it is true, but he does know that he means it. That he will mean it, when they punish him for it. But for a moment, it is as if they hear him, the hold on his useless limbs loosening ever so slightly. It is just enough to fill him with hope (of what, of what, he has no idea), but that fantasy is quickly shattered as the grip tightens and he is pulled back towards the bed, and then he is screaming.

But even that is not enough to drown out the general’s disdain, the contempt for his weaknesses. What is the point of that? Drautos asks, and what is the point indeed. Did he ever think that they would stop, that they would listen? He knows the answer to that, has known it for as long as the man has had him, so why is he still unable to accept it? He should be used to this by now, of being hurt and having no way to stop it. Yet still he tries to ask for this small mercy of understanding, despite knowing that he will be denied, with each refusal to stop hurting him as painful as a mortal wound. Or worse, really, because it won’t kill him. Not yet anyway. Not as long as Drautos wants him.

Except that Drautos is dead, I made sure of that myself. That is what Leonis had said, wasn’t it? Or had he imagined that too, imagined the train and the others and the empty, lonely silence that seemed to stretch on forever? He’d thought it a terrible dream, yet he had still let himself be carried away by it, exposing himself once again to the pain that inevitably comes with believing that he could ever have anything more than this.

He cannot deceive himself any longer though, now that he knows the truth. He has no value, no purpose, so why would anyone care enough to risk themselves for him? Drautos is the only one who wanted him, so does it not make more sense that he is there, locked in a room and screaming because he was stupid enough to imagine a life away from the man? It’s his own fault that he is going through this, really. He knows better, yet he keeps putting himself through this, and for what? Because he doesn’t want to accept that this is his life now? Because he once believed that he deserved better? Those are the thoughts of a child, and he has been through too much to indulge in them now, so he continues to shriek even when they let him go because it is a lie, it has to be because everything in his life is a lie now.

“It’s not,” a voice says so gently that he is certain it is only in his mind. “I swear it.”

He’s made that promise before though, hadn’t he? Or was that also a part of his delusion? It is becoming so hard to distinguish between what is real and what is not that he has no idea what to do when callused fingers tilt his head up, the gesture both intimately familiar and painfully foreign. There was a time when he’d closed his eyes and leaned into that touch at the end of a long day, although he had done his very best to forget that time because remembering it hurt more than he could stand. But try as he might, he cannot ignore it now, especially when Gladio says, “Ignis, look at me.”

Look at me, Drautos had once demanded, determined to make him a willing participant in his suffering. But this is not a command and this is not Drautos, as impossible as it is to believe that he could ever be free of the man. Because there can be no mistaking this touch, the soft warmth that he had not thought possible ever again, and the realization that this could actually be real is so startling that he opens his eyes despite all common sense telling him not to.

He doesn’t know how long he stares at the person in front of him, not sure if what he is seeing is real, before he finally says, “Gladio.”

His voice is barely more than a rasp, but it is enough because Gladio actually listens. He cannot begin to know what he is asking for, but somehow it doesn’t matter, the man hearing the unspoken plea as he looks at him – truly looks at him, as if he has some value apart from what people want
from him. It should not feel so extraordinary when it was not so long ago that they had been in this
precise position, with Gladio watching him with such concern. But whereas the last time he had
recoiled at the compassion being offered to him, now he cannot help but throw himself towards it,
no longer fearing the dangers of accepting such empathy when he is so raw and vulnerable.

“I won’t leave you,” Gladio whispers as he holds his trembling form close. “I won’t ever leave you
again.”

He wakes up alone.

So that was a lie too, he thinks dully. Of course it was. But it is a lie he cannot begrudge when he
had never expected otherwise. Gladio had said those things as an empty comfort, and they both
knew he could never mean it. They have always known it, their entire relationship having been
built on the understanding that they could love one another but never put each other first, no matter
the consequences.

Some might have thought their ready acceptance of that harsh reality strange, perhaps even
heartless. Others had taken it as a symptom of everything that was wrong with them, the
willingness to sacrifice themselves for a greater cause. He wonders if they (if Drautos) have a
point, if that willingness had made them so invaluable as to reduce their worth to nothing. It had
certainly made it easier to throw them away, the knowledge that whatever consequences there
were, at least Lucis would not be paying the cost.

Odd that he accepts that so easily too, the realization that his entire life has never amounted to
anything. He has never been so arrogant as to believe himself irreplaceable, but he had also never
thought his efforts would be so inconsequential. Most of his life has been defined by the part he
was to play, and to realize that he was not even needed for that makes him feel more adrift than
when Drautos had him because at least the general had wanted him for something, as awful as it
was.

The thought that Drautos is the only one who wanted him for himself is appalling, although not as
appalling as how long it takes to remember that it is not true. Because long before the general
had ever taken him, there had been Gladio, the first person other than Noct to see him as more than
the role that Lucis had dictated for him. He had always had difficulty opening himself to others,
and even more so in the Citadel where most people treated him with outright suspicion. To them,
he was little more than the outsider who had ingratiated himself to the royal family for political
gain, never mind the fact that he was all of six years old and still reeling from the death of his
parents. Gladio could so easily have been the same, and a part of him had expected it when they
first met, to be viewed as a rival for their prince’s affections. But the future Shield had always been
the type who wanted to bring others up with him, rather than taking them down, and he’d extended
a hand of friendship and shown him the library and where all the best books were, even if at that
young age, their taste in reading had already diverged.

There were times when their lives had diverged as well, when the very duties that brought them
together had kept them apart, but it was never for long. Gladio had quickly become an essential
part of his life, the person he turned to in those few times he let himself need support, having
finally given too much of himself. That must be why he wants Gladio now, instinctively seeking
out the comfort the man had always offered him even though he no longer deserves it, not when
the Shield has a king to look out for now, and cannot afford to waste his time on someone so
damaged as to be even more worthless than he already was. No wonder they left him here with all
the other broken things, a fitting place for him to finally waste away, and that clearly that is for the
best because-
“Hey.”

He turns before he has even processed the greeting, already looking for Gladio before the realization catches up to him. And then all he feels is disappointment, followed by the shame, and he can only hope that Prompto does not sense either as the blond approaches him nervously, as if expecting him to start screaming all over again.

It’s not entirely unfair.

He’s too tired for such histrionics though, after his previous display. He would have been ashamed of that once, but that was before Drautos had taught him that there is no room in his life for pride. It is not the lesson that the general has intended, but it is the reason why he feels nothing when Prompto continues carefully, “The others went with Cor. Something about some ancient tomb that he wants Noct to see, one of his ancestors? Not sure when they’ll be back, but I said I’d stay here with you while we wait.”

He doubts that. Prompto does a decent enough job of pretending he had volunteered for this, but there’s no pretending that they don’t both know why he was the one stuck taking care of him. Noct is the king while Cor is the only one who knows why they’re here, leaving Gladio and Prompto. And between the two of them, it’s really no choice at all. The blond will do his best, of course, but no matter how hard he tries, he will never compare to the Shield. He will always be the one left behind. He will always be the most disposable of them all.

That is why Prompto understands him the best. He has lived with this feeling of inadequacy longer than any of them, which means he knows how to handle it. So rather than sink into self-pity, he asks tentatively, “You alright?”

“No.” It’s hard to tell who is more surprised by the fact that he bothered answering, and honestly at that.

Prompto recovers more quickly though, shifting nervously before he blurts out, “That’s okay, you know. I mean… no one expects you to just be okay. That’s what we’re here for, to help you.”

He means it as a kindness, and that may be the only reason why he does not immediately snap that it is not true. Because there is nothing okay about this, about being so weak and useless, nothing more than a burden and a hindrance to others. There is nothing okay about what has been done to him, those months where the only things he had known were the terror and pain as they raped him. And as for that utterly ridiculous lie that they are here to help him, how can he even say that? Hadn’t he stood aside too, when Regis had made clear of his intention to whore him out to the general? He was complicit in this, and claiming now that it is okay does not absolve him of his guilt. He does not absolve him of his guilt, and he nearly says all of this because there is a part of him that wants to hurt him, that wants to make anyone else hurt as much as he does because at least then he wouldn’t be the only one. He wouldn’t be the only one who has to live with this festering inside him, turning him into something he is not.

Except that is precisely why he cannot say anything. Because even when plagued by fatigue and frustration, he had never been capable of that level of cruelty before, and Drautos has already poisoned him enough with his madness. To sink to the general’s level would be unbearable, even though by this point, there doesn’t seem to be much of anything that he cannot bear.

So he swallows the fury, which is far easier than it should be, even after all his years facing those who would (and eventually did) tear him down. He cannot quite stop himself from shaking though, a physical manifestation of the stress of keeping such dreadful thoughts inside. He has to concentrate so hard on staying quiet that he almost does not hear when Prompto says, “Um. I… I
can go if you want?”

For a split second, he is scared that Prompto knows what he is thinking, knows what he nearly said. But he quickly realizes that it has nothing to do with that. After all, there was a reason they had kept their distance on the train, a reason that had become all too clear when they made the mistake of touching him. They had not meant to hurt him, but they had regardless, and the blond is terrified of setting him off again. It is understandable then that Prompto would be looking for any reason to escape, if he isn’t already wishing that he was with the others because facing daemons is far more preferable to being trapped with him and his personal demons.

He knows he should tell Prompto to go except he can’t, and it is not just because of what he might say. Because even though isolation is safer, especially now, there is a part of him that wants the blond to stay. It makes little sense given how close he had been to lashing out mere moments ago, and besides, Prompto isn’t even the person he wants right now. He’s just the one who got left behind, but that somehow makes it all the more important that he stay, to show him that he has value despite what his king and country had decided. It is such a selfish thing to want, but he cannot help himself because apparently he has made a habit of wanting everything that he cannot have, and this is no exception.

But just because he wants things doesn’t mean he expects them anymore. So he waits for Prompto to leave, to take his silence as permission to flee. He is sure it would be better that way anyway, although he is having trouble convincing himself of that. He does continue to try, at least, which may be why he is so surprised when the blond draws closer. He is even more surprised when, after a brief hesitation, Prompto gently takes his hand, careful to avoid his wrists or act in any way that could be mistaken for restraint.

“We’re here for you,” Prompto says softly, and although that is patently untrue, he somehow cannot doubt the sincerity in the words. “Whatever you need.”

“I don’t know what I need.”

The hand on his tightens just the slightest as Prompto swallows. But he tries to cover for his sadness at that painful truth, saying with far more confidence than either of them feels, “That’s okay. We’ll just have to figure that out together.”

He doubts that too, but he keeps that thought to himself. It doesn’t seem very important right now anyway, as long as Prompto stays by his side.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I am incredibly sorry for how long this chapter has taken. To be honest, I’m not particularly confident with how it turned out, but I also knew that it wasn’t going to get much better the longer I worked on it. That said, my goal is to update this chapter every two weeks, in the hope that putting it on a schedule will result in more timely updates. In the meantime though, my apologies again for the delay and the awkwardness of this chapter.
“Imperials above us!”

Next to him, Gladio tenses, although the reaction has little to do with the Shield instinctively readying himself for battle. They are all preparing for it, the bitterly sarcastic ‘thanks’ followed by the increasingly sharp U-turns as once again, they are forced to flee the oncoming magitek assault. Given that this is the third dropship that has found them today, it does not seem completely fair to blame Noct for his mounting frustrations even if his driving is as likely to get them killed as the Empire is.

But instead of the usual screech of tires of their inevitable retreat, Noct spits out, “I am so sick of this shit,” before he slams on the brakes so hard that it is a miracle that none of them go flying out of the Regalia.

“Noct, what the hell-?!” Gladio roars, but the words are lost in the shimmer of the blade that the king summons from the Armiger as he stands.

At first, they can only stare in disbelief before the vehicle erupts into chaos. Prompto tries to persuade his friend to sit back down while Gladio is far more direct, practically lunging from his seat as he snarls, “Don’t you dare-”

His hand clamps down on empty air as Noct warps away.

“Fuck!” Gladio yells before turning on him, accusation in those amber eyes. How could you let this happen? the Shield silently rages because they both know that once, he would have. He would have seen that Noct was close to snapping, and acted accordingly to keep things from escalating this far. He would have talked him down, appealing to the need for caution when being hunted by an entire nation. And if worse came to worst, if Noct had insisted on taking such unnecessary risks, then at least he would have been the one driving, allowing him to take the decision out of the king’s hands altogether.

But all of that was before, before Drautos and the relentless degradation and the shattering of every naïve misconception he had once had about his existence. And they both know that, which is why Gladio will not mean it later. He may not even remember this later, and if he does, he will be ashamed of his anger because how could he have expected him to act after everything he has been through?

But now is not that time. Because now, in this moment, the Shield will blame him for doing nothing because he was once better than this, and there is still a part of Gladio that has yet to accept otherwise.

Gladio is not one to waste his time with blame though, especially when he is needed. With one hand he summons his greatsword, and with the other he slams the door open so hard that it is only the best Lucian craftsmanship that keeps it attached to the Regalia. “I’m going after him. Prompto, you say here and watch over Ignis.”

“But I can-”

“Stay here!” Gladio takes off before the blond can offer any more protests. He has no intention of arguing about this, not even sparing a glance back to make sure that Prompto listened and is staying put.
He does not need to look back to make sure he is not following either.

That should bother him, not because of the lack of faith but because he was trained for this too. They were all trained to fight together, to watch each other’s backs in the heat of a battle where anything could go wrong, the slightest misstep an invitation to catastrophe. He was never supposed to be sitting back as Noct and Gladio threw themselves into danger; he was supposed to be by their side, except now he is nothing more than a liability on the field, too weak to lift a lance or wield his daggers effectively.

Worse still, he is a liability off the field too. Because of him, Prompto has been forced to stay behind as well, further jeopardizing their king when Noct is already much too vulnerable. That is why the blond not only watches the battle so intently for the tell-tale blue flashes – the only sign that Noct is still fighting, still alive – but him as well, as if waiting for him to do his duty and grant him permission to join the fight so that he can protect his friend.

He does not. He is tempted to, and perhaps if he was more selfish, he would.

Granted, Prompto may already think he is being selfish by not telling him to go to Noct’s side. Maybe the blond thinks he is looking out for himself, rather than their king. That would be his own fault, he supposes, for becoming that much better at not letting the others see just how little he cares for living still, for not making them beg him to live. He hardly had a choice in the matter, not when he could see just how much it hurt them – hurt Noct – to make such a demand.

It is also why he cannot tell Prompto what he wants to hear. He may have no particular concern for his well-being, but he knows if something was to happen to him, their king would never forgive any of them. And he cannot risk that, not when Noct needs Gladio and Prompto by his side, now more than ever.

Sometimes he wishes he did not care about that either, and perhaps that is his right. He has spent so much of his life putting the needs of others before his, and what did that get him? Only Drautos, who saw that tendency of his both as a curse and something to have for himself. Only months of needless suffering, thanks to his inability to let go of his loyalty to a country who never wanted him in the first place. Only this increasingly unbearable feeling that everything about him is so, so wrong because he does not know what to do with himself anymore. Yet despite all of that, he forces himself to stay, unable to stop himself from caring about Noct even though there are times that he does not want to because it hurts so much to be a part of this world that he no longer fits into.

Frustration wells inside him, and with it the overwhelming need to vomit. That is normal, he knows, a physical manifestation of the need to rid himself of the trauma that has been crushing him all this time, but he cannot let it out. The mess would be revolting, and they will not even allow him to clean it up, unwilling to ask him to do anything in fear that he will revert back to that shell of a person he had been on the train. And how can he deny that when they are right, when any unexpected touch threatens to pull him under even though Drautos is dead and why is that still not enough to fix anything? Why is that not enough to fix him? Why must he still be like this when-

—when Noct warps back, staggering under the weight of his Shield.

“Oh gods,” he hears Prompto say in horror, although it is nothing compared to the horror of the gore that is Gladio’s side, the blood seeping onto the leather seats from a gaping wound.

*That will never come out,* he thinks with a touch of hysteria.

“Can’t you give him a potion?” Prompto asks, sounding more than a little hysterical himself
because there is *so much* blood. “Just to-”

“I gave him one already,” Noct replies, gesturing uselessly at the wound. “I gave him… I can’t… we don’t have another one, we couldn’t….”

*Afford anymore,* he cannot bring himself to say, even though they all know that is what he means. How could they not, when each day is a reminder of how little the king of Lucis has to his name? They can barely afford to eat anything more than cup noodles these days, the precious few gil that Leonis could spare them going to gas for the Regalia because without her, they would truly be lost. It would have been different if they could hunt, but the beasts this side of Lestallum are far stronger than anything they had trained for, the hunts offered to them at the Ravatogh market impossible even if they were at full strength. And they are not at full strength, not even close, too many days spent running from the dropships and nights passed huddled in the havens, and that was before accounting for the dead weight that-

“Ignis. *Ignis!*” He turns to stare at Noct, who clearly has been calling his name for quite some time. “You have to help him, *please.*”

He sounds so desperate, as he well should be. If not for his running into a battle that he should never have engaged in to begin with, Gladio would not be bleeding like this. Gladio would not be *dying.* Because there is no question that he will die if he does not do something, and the thought of losing him finally pushes him to reach into the Armiger, only to slam into the invisible wall that keeps him from the king’s magic because he can’t. He *can’t* because Noct has not returned his connection to it, has still not trusted him with it, and the need to throw up nearly takes hold of him again.

But then he looks down at Gladio dying and swallows it back, the bile burning his throat as he says hoarsely, “The first aid kit, please.”

He tries not to feel anything as Prompto reaches easily into the Armiger that he has been barred from, fumbling for the medical supplies. He cannot afford to feel right now, not when Gladio’s life (and Noct’s *sanity*) is on the line, as he takes the kit from the blond’s trembling hands. His own hands do not shake as he pulls out needle, thread, and antiseptic, letting his mind default to his training and lessons in first aid. *You must always be prepared for anything,* Leonis had warned, although he doubts the Marshal had meant a situation like this, his access to the Armiger cut off by his own people. But it is better than nothing, even if it is not nearly as effective as he could have managed if he still had a connection to the Crystal (and whose fault is that, honestly).

It is messy work, cleaning the wound before stitching it shut. His hands are covered in blood by the time he is finished, and he remembers the last time they were like this, the soldier staring at him with wide, terrified eyes because he did not want to die. Had he tried to plead, the words escaping through the slash across his throat that he had placed there? Would he have been satisfied knowing how he was punished for his death, his own pleas being ignored by the man’s fellow soldiers as they pushed him down and fucked him until he ran out of voice to scream with? Would it be enough for him, knowing that he was allowed to die while he has to live like this, every moment an agony that will not cease because they won’t allow it no matter how much he begs for it all to stop, to end, to finally be left alone-

The needle falls from his numb fingers, landing on the Regalia’s carpeted floor with barely a sound. He does not know the sound he makes when he follows.

The tent looks like it is about to fall over when he wakes up.
There can be no real doubt as to why that is, when he can hear Noct and Prompto arguing from where they have left him lying on one of the sleeping bags on the far side of the campfire. The fierce debate over when the stakes should go in and the proper placement of the poles and seriously, what the hell are all these extra cords for anyway are easily ignored, until a voice interrupts, “What are we going to do now?”

“… hey buddy,” Prompto says with a cheeriness that fools no one. “Should you really be up? We’re really close to figuring this out, so maybe you should-”

Just like before, Gladio simply ignores him. Through the flames, he can see the Shield staring at his king as he repeats, “What are we going to do now?”

To his credit, Noct does not try to pretend that Gladio is referring to the sad state of their tent, pitiful as it is. But he is not quite willing to face the man either, keeping his gaze on the ground as he mutters, “You heard Cor. We’re supposed to be finding the rest of the Royal Arms before-”

“No,” Gladio cuts him off. “This isn’t working. At the rate things are going, we’re just going to end up dead.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Noct replies defensively, but they all know the anger is just a cover for his guilt. He cannot hide it completely though, his eyes flickering towards Gladio’s wound. The Shield may be up, but he is far from fine, one hand clutching his side and face far paler than it should be.

But hurt or not, Gladio will never permit the pain to get in the way of his duty, not when it comes to their survival. “Then why aren’t you doing anything about it? You too busy trying to get yourself killed to remember that we have other problems?”

“Don’t,” Noct snaps because he clearly knows where this is going, as this is not the first time they have had this conversation.

Gladio, however, is determined that this will be the last time, as he continues determinedly, “We can’t pretend anymore, you know that. You know we have to leave Ignis behind.”
Chapter 18

In the wake of Gladio’s statement, there is only silence.

Silence, he is used to now. There was, once, the comfortable silence of companionship, where words were not necessary when they understood each other so intimately. That had been replaced by the silence of fear, months spent suffocating in its eager grasp as he waited for the general to break the silence by pinning him down and raping him, all while telling him that it was for his own good. And then there was the silence he had retreated to, the white noise in his own mind as he tried desperately to keep out a life he had long ago stopped wanting, had stopped trying to have.

But this silence is different, the complete absence of sound as if the very world is holding its breath. Even the daemons have stopped their prowling, perhaps because they know that there is nothing that they can do that will come close to the amount of harm that Gladio has just inflicted.

Yet there are some people that no silence can withstand, and Noct is one of them. As easily as the king had reached him through the muted apathy he had wrapped himself in as meager protection, he does so now again, rising to his full height to face his Shield. He is nowhere near as tall as Gladio or even himself, but when he is like this, the king cuts an imposing figure indeed, outlined by the glow of the campfire as he asks, “What are you saying?”

Not that there is any reason to ask. Scarce on details as it was, there is no mistaking what Gladio had said. But this was never a question so much as an opportunity, a chance for the Shield to take it back, to stand down while saving face and, more importantly, what little trust remains between them.

So of course, he does not.

“You heard me,” Gladio replies brusquely. “We have to leave Ignis. Iris and Jared should have reached Lestallum by now, so we should head there, meet up with—”

“No,” Noct snarls. “No. I am not my dad, and I am not going to toss him aside just because you think it’s easier, just because… how can you even say that? How can you—?!"

“Because we don’t have a choice!” Gladio cuts off, his own voice rising to overwhelm Noct’s anger because someone needs to make him listen. Someone needs to make him see sense. “This isn’t about making things easier, this is about doing what needs to be done! You heard Cor, we have a job to do. We need to find these other tombs and the Royal Arms, and we can’t do that as long as we have to look after Ignis too.”

Noct shakes his head, as if he cannot believe what Gladio is saying. “Seriously? Since when were some weapons more important than a person? Since when were they more important than Ignis?”

The Shield stares at Noct, equally incredulous. “You’re kidding, right? Weren’t you listening to Cor at all? You need those weapons if you’re going to defeat the Empire! You’re the king now, and you have a responsibility to all of your people, not just—”

“That’s exactly what got us here in the first place!” Noct yells. “One person versus the many – that’s how he justified what he did to Ignis. And for what? A treaty that was never going to get signed anyway? He gave Ignis to the Empire to stop the war, and look what happened! We’re on the run, they’re all dead, and Insomnia is gone. And now you want to do it all over again?”

“Iris is not the Empire,” Gladio snaps, hiding himself behind his indignation at any perceived
insult to his sister to avoid having to respond to the ugly truths being laid bare. “She and Jared can take better care of him than we can.”

The accusation is swift. “Because you won’t.”

“But because we can’t.” And there it is, the truth that the Shield has not wanted to admit. He has never done well with failure, even if it is not his fault (not completely, anyway), but he will use it if that is the only way to get through to his king. “We can’t go on like this. Scraping by with no supplies and barely any gil, unable to hunt because one of us always has to stay behind to look after him. How long do you expect us to keep this up?”

“As long as it takes,” is the stubborn response.

He hears the sharp inhalation, Gladio visibly struggling to control himself. It is not an unfamiliar sight; how many times has he seen the Shield like this, driven to anger and frustration by Noct’s mulishness? They used to get into arguments over it, each blaming the other for being too hard or too soft on the prince, but it did not take them long to realize how unproductive that was. They had to work together, to not only present a unified front but to be there for each other when it became too much, and perhaps that is why, just like before, Gladio instinctively turns to him for that support, only to find nothing.

There is no time to pretend that he is still unconscious, that he has not been listening to them talk about him this entire time. He doubts he would have fooled the man anyway, but maybe then he would not have had to see the look on Gladio’s face. The disappointment is expected, if not completely understandable given that he should have more sense than to expect anything from him, especially now. But that is not all that is there, the loss of hope nearly making him cringe because Gladio had wanted to be wrong. He had wanted to believe that there was still something left of him, something that would make this choice unnecessary.

But he has nothing to offer, forcing the Shield to carry out his duty once more.

“Do you even know what that means?” Gladio asks, but there is no anger. There is no room for anger, not when this is already the hardest thing for him to do because he still loves him, perhaps more than he should when his life is bound to another. It must always be the king who comes first, although it quickly becomes clear that that is not the only reason Gladio is doing this. “How are we supposed to help him, when we can barely fend for ourselves? You know what that bastard did to him, and that probably isn’t the half of it. He needs time to recover, and we can’t give him that when we’re constantly running for our lives. How do you expect us to help him after everything he’s been through?”

For his part, the king still has plenty of anger, but even he cannot pretend to hear the raw anguish in his Shield’s voice. That is probably why he does not raise his voice again, although it does not stop him from insisting, “We have to try,” except there is a waver of uncertainty that was not there before.

But to everyone’s surprise, it is not Gladio who replies, but Prompto. “He’s not getting better, Noct,” the blond says quietly. “Maybe it would be better if Iris looks after him, rather than being dragged along with us. For all of us.”

And how would you know that, he almost asks because irrationally, this feels more like a betrayal than anything Gladio has said. At least he knew to understand the Shield’s promises as aspirations at best, empty sentiment that would immediately fall to the wayside when need be. But Prompto had been different, so sincere, letting him believe that he had a chance. We’ll figure this out together, he had said, but what had they actually done for him? Keeping their distance, not asking
for anything, not giving him any opportunity to prove himself? How was that fair to him?

Except it is those thoughts which are truly irrational because how could he ever expect that of them? It is as Gladio said; there are so many problems facing them, and he is one more burden to add, one that they simply cannot afford. He might have managed to save the Shield, but would he have needed to if Prompto had been allowed to join the fray? And besides, even though he had managed to save Gladio, that had not been without its own problems, what with his passing out from memories that had nothing to do with what was actually happening. The trauma is too deep, too engrained in him now, tainting everything that he tries to do. So how can he blame them for not helping him, when it was never possible to begin with?

As it turns out though, he is not the only one who is willing to cast blame on others.

“No,” Noct says again, and it reminds him of himself, trying to deny what the entire world was telling him. That is how he recognizes the cracks that are starting to form, the breaking down of the resistance that has always been futile. “This is our fault. We let this happen. We have to do something, we have to.”

Prompto starts to respond but Gladio cuts him off, no doubt to draw the king’s anger away from the blond to himself because they cannot have him hating the both of them. “Godsdamnit, Noct! If you would stop being a fucking martyr for one second and listen to us!”

(Or maybe it has nothing to do with being an easy target, the rage too intense to simply be a distraction. Because that should have been enough, appealing to Noct not through his kingly responsibilities but to his concern for his well-being, for what is best for him, and Gladio cannot understand why it did not work. Why he was not enough for Noct.)

“Listen? Listen to what?!” Noct shouts back. “You just want to abandon him again, you-”

“He’s a liability!”

“That’s not his fault!”

“I never said it was,” Gladio snaps. “It’s yours.”

Silence falls upon them again, Noct too shocked to immediately respond. It does not last for long though, before he demands, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean,” the Shield replies. “You’re so wrapped up in your own guilt that you’re throwing everything away. You think getting yourself killed is going to change what happened to Ignis? You think that is going to help him?”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Noct denies furiously, but there is the barest hint of fear, fear of a truth that no one else was supposed to see. He should have known better though, when it came to Gladio. So many people made the mistake of thinking that the Shield was all muscle and no brain, but Noct should not have been one of them, knowing him as long as he had.

If it was him, he might have stopped at that, rather than rubbing salt into the wounds that had been scored. But it is not him, and Gladio has never been one to stop pushing, even if some might think it cruel. “Then why did you run into a battle you should have avoided? What were you trying to prove, putting yourself into danger like that?”

Noct is silent, but the answer is obvious from the way he glances in his direction. And he sees it in that quick look, what Gladio is referring to.
Gladio may have called him a liability, but the man was being kind because he is more than that, more than simply a burden on them. He is nothing less than a danger because every time Noct looks at him, he is reminded of everything that has happened, of the lies and betrayals that have shattered his world. His country, his father, had sold his friend, and although that was never his choice, all he sees is the fact that he did not – could not – stop it. Noct no longer sees him as a person, but as the very embodiment of his failures and the consequences of his weaknesses, failures and weaknesses that no king can afford. He may react out of anger now, but underlying all of that is his guilt, and that guilt is liable to destroy them all as he lashes out at the Empire and monsters and daemons alike trying to prove himself competent because there is so much that is outside of his control. He knows that he cannot protect those he cares about most, so he will throw himself into harm’s way in the hope that he can one day prove himself worthy, all while convinced that he is not.

And that is not all there is to it as the king flinches when his Shield rests a hand on his shoulder, the gesture surprisingly gentle despite the earlier harshness of his words. “You’re not being rational, Noct,” Gladio says softly. “If you would just give yourself a chance to mourn-”

Noct jerks away, whipping around to glare at the other man. “What do I have to mourn?” he demands, and the level of his grief would have been overwhelming if only he had permitted himself sorrow instead of anger. If only he could remember Regis as his father, not just the man who betrayed one of his closest friends. “He gave Ignis away, like he didn’t mean anything! How the hell could he have done that? How can I ever forgive him for that?”

“You know he had a reason,” Gladio replies, although it is difficult to tell if he believes what he is saying.

Noct lets out a sharp, almost hysterical laugh. “Oh yeah? You already forget what Cor said? You know there wasn’t a reason for it.”

“You don’t actually believe that.”

“I don’t know what to believe anymore, except that you’re insane if you think I’m going to let you leave him behind again just because you can’t stand to see him like this.”

“And you can?” Gladio retorts, as if Noct is not the one who has avoided him the most, the sight of him so unbearable that he would rather go on a suicide run than face the guilt. And when he does not respond, Gladio adds, as if trying to soften the blow, “You can’t deny he’d be safer there.”

“Like he’d be safe anywhere,” Noct mutters, but from the slump of his shoulders, it is clear he has finally run out of reasons (excuses) to disagree. But it does not stop the king from looking his way again, and he can see what can only be a plea, a plea that he speak up and make a case for himself, to give Noct a reason not to have to set him aside again.

There was a time he might have done so because the only thing that mattered was making Noct happy. Then there was a time he would have obeyed any command, just to save himself from the hurt.

But this is not any of those times, and he has nothing to say, no arguments to make. There is no denying what Gladio and Prompto have said; he cannot pretend that they are not right. The best thing they can do is be rid of him, and they can even call it a kindness. And eventually Noct has to accept that too as they all fall into silence, one that no person dares bring themselves to break.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They never make it to Lestallum.

It is three days later, when Gladio gets the call.

(Later, he will wonder if it was deliberate, the timing. It seems too coincidental, that this was the first evening they had spent together since the king and his Shield had argued, the first time Noct had not immediately stormed away as soon as they reached a haven. And while the few words they had exchanged when setting up camp were stilted, and the silence they lapsed into after dinner far from companionable, at least he was there, staying with them rather than walking off because he could not stand to be near them any longer.

Later, he will know for certain.)

The phone’s ringing is unnaturally shrill in the wilds, compared to the crackle of the fire or the quiet snarls of the daemons roaming about. It does not last long though, Gladio quickly reaching for his phone and answering before he is even fully standing. “Iris? Yeah, I know we’re taking too long but… Iris, wait, slow down. What’s going on?!”

Noct is on his feet as well, and Prompto is looking pale, but not nearly as pale as Gladio is. And clearly for good reason because even from the farthest corner he has isolated himself to, he can hear the hysteria on the other end of the line. It does not help that Gladio is absolutely silent, never interrupting, until he says quietly, “We’re not too much farther. We’ll come get you and Talcott and-”

“No!” Iris yells loud enough for them all to hear, before her voice softens. They cannot hear what she says next, but they do not need to as Gladio’s expression abruptly shifts from a tense anxiety to outright fear, something he had never expected (or wanted) to see from the man.

But that is a weakness that the Shield cannot afford, so he quickly conceals it behind anger. “I get it,” he says, his voice flat. “We’ll figure something out. And you… you stay low and take care of yourselves, you hear me? You stay safe.”

It is not difficult to recognize the anger for what it is, a frustration borne not just from whatever has happened, but his inability to do anything about it. Iris is his sister, and he loves her dearly, but she is just one more person that he can never put first. But knowing that does not stop him from wanting to be at her side, which puts her in the peculiar position of having to remind him that his duties must come first. Whatever she says must work though because he nods reluctantly, before hanging up without saying good-bye.

For a long time, no one speaks. No one dares to speak. But whether it is out of concern or because the tension is simply unbearable, Prompto asks, “Is… is everything…?”

His voice trails off because there is no point in asking if things are okay, but he also cannot bring himself to ask what is wrong (because what isn’t, at this point). But Gladio spares him that, although he still does not face them as he replies tonelessly, “Jared’s dead. The Empire found them in Lestallum. They wanted information, and when he wouldn’t give it to them, they killed him.”
“Shit.” And for the first time since their fight, since escaping Gralea, and perhaps even since he had learned the truth of what his father had done, Noct looks at Gladio not as his enemy or his Shield, but as his friend. “I’m… I’m so sorry. Is Iris alright?”

“She’s okay. So’s Talcott. The Niffs didn’t hurt them.” No more than they already did, goes unsaid because even if the Empire had not harmed them physically, the losses they have suffered are more than enough. And Gladio knows that better than most because this is his loss as well, the man who helped raise him and his sister when his father was constrained by his own duties.

There is little that can be said, the usual platitudes seeming too empty already. But Prompto is at least willing to try, as he says, “We should go there. Maybe we can help-”

“We can’t,” Gladio cuts him off. “They were looking for us. For you,” he corrects, glancing at Noct. “And-”

He stops suddenly, looking as if he regrets having said even that, but it is too late. It is only one word, one that could mean anything, if not be overlooked altogether. But just like before, he cannot overlook this, and Noct will not overlook this as the king says in open horror, “Ignis. They were looking for Ignis?”

Gladio’s silence is confirmation enough.

“Why?!?” Noct demands before he can say anything himself. Not that he would have, not that he can, when he can barely breathe because all he knows is the inescapable weight of the man pressing him down. Because there can only be one reason why Niflheim would be looking for him, only one person who would want him, except- “He’s dead. Drautos is dead, that’s what Cor said. Or did he lie about that too?”

“Cor wouldn’t lie to you about that,” Gladio replies, but he does not sound nearly as certain of that as he once would have.

“Sure he would,” Noct snaps. “He did it before, didn’t he?” Because the Marshal had been at that Council meeting, watching them decide how much he was worth (not much, as it turned out). Leonis had been one of his few defenders, but it is no surprise that he would not have revealed the truth of what had transpired to the few people who might have been able to stop it before it was too late to save anyone.

It would not have been his choice, of course. And Gladio could point that out, that Leonis was bound by his duties, to do what others believed was best for Lucis. But whether it is because he knows it will only make Noct angrier or because the excuse sounds hollow even to someone who was raised to follow commands, Gladio does not, instead trying to change the subject to what they themselves must now do for the sake of their broken country. “We need to decide what to do next.”

Unfortunately for the Shield, his king’s sympathy for his losses only goes so far, as the anger is quickly turned towards a new, much more immediate target. “You mean where to dump him next.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Gladio says, although he cannot quite hide his flinch as the accusation cuts deep. “You know that’s not what I’m-”

“No,” Noct interrupts, except this time, he will leave no room for debate. “No. We tried it your way already, and I never should have agreed to it. What would have happened if he’d been there when the Niffs had….”

It is now Noct’s turn to trail off, unable to continue that thought, but he hardly needs to. He knows
exactly what will happen then, can already feel the cold steel of the armored hand on his wrist as he is dragged back to that room. And maybe he will fight it this time, maybe he will scream and plead, but he will do so knowing with absolute certainty that he will not stop him. He will not stop the general from raping him, from breaking him down in an effort to make him his, never once realizing that he had *already succeeded*.

Because being with the others should have made him better. For them, he would have done anything, except that was before he had realized that trying was useless. Because he had tried, had spent his entire life *trying*, enduring long hours and sleepless nights learning every detail about his adopted country, suffering countless bruises and broken bones to protect it. And for his efforts he had ended up in the general’s bed, begging through his tears for everything to stop because he had accepted it. He had accepted that his life was nothing more than what Drautos dictated it to be, that every breath he loathed taking would be dictated by the man he spent each of those breaths hating. He had accepted that he would never be anything more than that, and learning that that Lucis had sold him for nothing had only reinforced that certainty, the overwhelming belief that he had no value beyond what Drautos wanted from him.

He accepts all of it, but not everyone else has, which is why Prompto can still ask, “So what do you think we should do?”

It should be obvious that there is nothing they can do, that they should do as Gladio had said and leave him behind. But instead, the king says without hesitation, “Altissia. We should go to Altissia.”

Noct may be certain, but he is the only one. Even he is startled by that while Prompto looks baffled, and Gladio practically explodes, “Are you insane?! Why would you want to go there? You know that place has been crawling with the Empire ever since the Oracle… fuck, are you *serious*? Tell me you’re not serious.”

For all the fury in his words, it is the closest to pleading that Gladio has come to. But it is not enough to stop Noct from replying, “She can help him.”

It is not until the Shield responds that he even understands what is being suggested. “You have to be kidding. This isn’t… we’re not talking about a broken bone or even the Starscourge! The way the bastard hurt him, you don’t just come back from that. You can’t just *magic* it away!”

“At least I’m trying to do something!” Noct yells back, although he does not deny what Gladio is saying.

“Your something is liable to get us all killed!”

“Then leave!”

Gladio staggers back, looking like he has been physically struck. Prompto tries to intervene, desperation making his voice higher than usual, “Noct, come on. You don’t actually mean that.”

“Yeah, I do.” The king does not spare him even a glance, his attention solely on his Shield, who says not a word. “I’m not arguing about this anymore. I’m going to Altissia, and I’m taking him with me. And if you don’t want to be a part of that, then….”

Noct closes his eyes, taking in a deep breath, but when he continues it is not out of anger but with understanding. “I’m not going to force you to follow me if you don’t believe in me. Like I said before, I’m not my father. And you’ve lost enough already, with your dad and now Jared and… and you still have Iris. You still have other people to protect, and you shouldn’t feel like you have to
give them up for me because you deserve better. You both do,” he adds, looking at Prompto now.

Of course, he only does so to avoid looking at Gladio, who in turn continues to stare at him with an indecipherable expression. It is not, however, difficult to know that he is thinking back to every argument they have ever had, every fight that has ended badly. He is thinking of every time Noct drove him into a rant about his whining, his laziness, his failure to accept his obligations to his kingdom. He is remembering every moment that he believed the prince did not deserve his loyalty, that his life could and perhaps should belong to another.

And now Noct offers him that possibility freely, the ability to put his family above his duty. But while Prompto looks like he is too scared to breathe, and Noct braces himself for the worst, he knows exactly what the Shield will say. Because despite everything, Gladio has always embraced his own duties. He has always taken pride in it. He will never abandon his king or his country, and that is made clear when he says, “You know I won’t do that.”

“Maybe you should,” Noct replies, but there is the slightest waver in his voice that betrays him.

“No,” the Shield counters, and now he is the one who will permit no debate on this. “Where you go, I go. Someone has to keep you focused, and it might as well be me.”

Noct could point out that there is a reason for that, that they have seen for themselves the irreparable damage that comes from the very same loyalty that Gladio shows him now. But he does not, nodding and quietly saying, “Alright,” because that is the closest that a king can come to thanking someone for promising to give up everything to protect the interests of the crown.

“Ignis.”

His tension is almost reflexive, if not entirely understandable. Drautos, after all, had never deigned to call him by his given name, relying instead on the surname that Lucis had deemed more worthy of his new home. He had always found that ironic, given the general’s determination to strip away any reminder of his adopted country, but he supposes that it was more important to Drautos to destroy his individuality, to make it that much easier to mold him into whatever it is that the man had wanted of him.

Perhaps it had worked then, if this is his reaction to being addressed by name. Or perhaps it is being addressed at all that startles him, when the others rarely speak to him these days, too afraid of how he will respond. But this is a conversation that has long been coming, given the way Gladio has been watching him during the long drives, so perhaps what he dreads is what the Shield has to say.

It will be warranted, of course. Gladio may have chosen to stay at his king’s side, but that does not change the underlying problem. That does not change the fact that he cannot stay too. Choosing to go to Altissia may not be the worst decision, when the Oracle would be a powerful ally against the Empire, but that is not why Noct is doing this. He is doing this because he still believes that he can make him better, and there is only one person who can convince him otherwise.

He does not know if he can though. He does not know if he can explain to his friend that he must leave him behind, especially now that he knows the Empire is looking for him as well. But he also does not know how to admit that he could be so selfish, so the only thing he can do is brace himself for what Gladio has to say, to-

“Are you okay?”
He stares.

At first, he is not sure if Gladio has misspoken, or if he has simply misunderstood. But when the man looks at him expectantly, he realizes that this is in fact happening, except he has no idea what to say.

“Stupid question, I know,” Gladio mutters, apparently recognizing that this conversation will go nowhere if he waits for him to answer. Although he still cannot believe that they are having this conversation in the first place, even if it is getting harder to deny as the Shield continues, “It’s just that… I never really asked you. How you are doing.”

Probably because it is so obvious. Probably because it does not matter. He may have had this conversation before with Prompto, but Gladio is different. The Shield has never lacked for compassion, but unlike Prompto and even Noct, he should know better than to let his concern get in the way of what has to be done. That is why Gladio was supposed to tell him to leave, not to look at him with such worry as he repeats, “Ignis. Are you-?”

“I’m fine,” he says numbly, operating more on instinct than rational thought. Because if he had thought things through, he would have known better than to bother with such a blatant lie, especially when Gladio is one of the only people who will call him out on it.

“We both know that’s not true.”

But his once lover is not the only one who can be direct about this. “Then why did you ask?”

The question is not asked out of anger, if only because he has no anger left in him. Gladio still looks uncomfortably guilty though, and there is something almost pathetic in the way he asks, “Isn’t talking about it supposed to help? I’m not trying to push you but… it can’t be good for you to keep it all in.”

It is not. It is the worst thing that can be done when dealing with trauma, but while he understands that on an objective level, he is finding it impossible to apply to his own situation. And being confronted with this by the king’s Shield seems to make it even more incomprehensible, especially when he asks, “What happened to you?”

He almost considers it. He almost considers telling Gladio everything, how Drautos had promised to turn him into ‘something more’ before shoving him onto that bed and raping him. How he had chosen to drug himself rather than be touched by the other soldiers, only to end up being given to them anyway. How weeks trapped in a room by both chains and a mind broken by despair had gone by before they had found him, freeing him for just long enough to remember everything that he had lost. And when they had given him back, he had finally agreed to give the general everything, and ended up with nothing, just like he had always deserved.

But he cannot. He cannot, and it is not just because there are no words that exist to explain the way he had felt, the loss of any control over his life, the constant terror, the feeling that nothing he did would ever make a difference. Because in the end, the only thing he will be admitting is how weak he was, surrendering to the enemy for the sake of a life he did not want to have. He would have to explain how he spent most of the past few months wishing he was dead to a man who had nearly died in service to his king.

His eyes wander to the wound on Gladio’s side. He’s seen how the Shield favors his uninjured side still, even after they had managed to pick up a few more potions. Gladio had nearly died, and had suffered unimaginable losses besides, yet still he maintains his loyalty. And all of that serves to underscore how pathetic he is when Drautos had avoided harming him physically, had in fact
taken great pains to leave no scars across his skin because the general had not wanted to ruin that. But Drautos had exposed him nevertheless, stripping him down and revealing all of his weaknesses because that was the only thing the man had been willing to keep of him. And it was those weaknesses that had led to him betraying everything he had ever believed him, just as the man had hoped for.

And maybe it was justifiable. Even now, he cannot forget the lingering feel of the callused hands pulling him close, the laughter of the men as they had their way with him, the clench of his heart every time Drautos so much as looked at him. If that was the only thing he had to look forward to, was it not his right to try to make it more bearable? Yet just the thought of articulating this to Gladio makes him feel so selfish, as if he is choosing to hold onto his trauma rather than trying to move past it.

On a clinical, logical level, he knows that he is being ridiculous, to think that getting past this could be so simple. Of course the trauma was significant, and if this was happening to anyone else, he would never downplay the effects on them. He would tell them that their feelings were legitimate and that they should not feel guilty because what had happened was horrible. And no doubt that is what Gladio would tell him too, if he was to try to explain, but it still does not justify how useless he is. It still does not justify how much of a threat he is to them. Noct may be throwing himself into danger yet again, but this time Gladio is allowing him to do so because of his own guilt that he has not done enough to help him.

He cannot blame Gladio for that. It had been hard enough before to try to convince Noct to see sense, and that was before he had lost Jared, before the possibility of losing Iris became so much more likely. It is no wonder he hides behind Noct’s decision because at least this way he can protect someone he cares for, even if it not the right thing to do.

And it is not. More importantly, it needs to stop. Because Gladio is right about him, that he is a danger to them all. Noct will do anything to help him, and even Gladio will not get in his way now. He is the only one who can do something about this now, and as difficult as it may be to walk away from them, the possibility of losing them because of his weaknesses is even worse. Because Drautos has taken enough – destroyed enough – already, and he cannot allow this too.

So he does not tell Gladio what happened. He can barely look at the man he once loved so much, turning away as he says, “I can’t.”

He has said that so many times before, but this time he is not trying to deny what others will do to him. He is not lying, not even to himself. He can and must keep this to himself if he is to do what must be done, now that he knows the others are not strong enough to do it for him.

Yet for a moment, he thinks Gladio will try to stop him. He can hear the intake of breath as the man prepares himself to console him, fell the slight movement of a hand reaching out for him. Because if anyone could know what he is thinking, it is Gladio, the person who understands him all too well.

Except that was before Drautos had turned him into a complete stranger. He barely knows himself now, so of course Gladio cannot either. That is why he is not surprised when the hand falls away, when nothing more is said. He is not surprised when he hears the footsteps walking away, leaving him to himself.

He is not surprised, not in the least, although he cannot help but feel like he has been abandoned yet again.
I cannot even begin to say how sorry I am that it took me this long to finish the chapter. I also cannot even claim that I am satisfied by it, but after struggling with it for over two months, this is the best I can manage. Thank you to everyone for your patience; I can only hope that the rest of the story will come on a more timely manner, although I finally do know better than to promise anything.
Altissia is beautiful.

At least, that is what he can only assume from the little they see of it, what with the armed guards waiting for their ship at the dock. “I hope you will forgive the heavy-handedness,” Camelia Claustra says from where she is seated behind her desk, “but it was a necessary precaution, given the circumstances.”

The secretary sounds decidedly unapologetic though, which may explain the brusqueness of Gladio’s reply. “And what circumstances are that?” he demands, his arms loosely crossed but his stance tense, clearly ready to act at the slightest sign of danger. Judging from his current behavior, one would never have guessed that he had been the one to earlier stop Noct from doing something rash, such as trying to fight their way past the soldiers.

(Not that they would have succeeded.)

Claustra barely spares him a glance before she turns her attention back to the king. “War,” she says simply, and if there was any doubt that the word is less an answer and entirely an accusation, they are quickly dashed when she continues, “or did you not notice Niflheim’s forces gathering as you came into my city? They are here for you, after all.”

“We’re not here to fight,” Noct replies, although he cannot quite hide his flinch at the aspersion. It is a sign of weakness that he can hardly afford, but he is not used to such bluntness, not after having been raised on the underhanded manipulations that the Council favored. But then, that is precisely why Claustra is being so direct, pushing him in order to observe his reactions and judge him accordingly.

And she is judging him quite harshly, as she says with no little sharpness, “That hardly matters to the Empire. Still, if you are not here to fight, then why come here at all?”

At this point, the proper diplomatic move would be vagueness, to buy time in order to figure out what is the secretary’s aim. After all, despite her candor, it is not clear whose side she is on… or, perhaps more accurately, whose side serves her purposes best. One wrong word could very well bring Niflheim’s soldiers upon them if she decides the Empire will make the better ally, so it is important for the king to tread lightly.

But Noct is tired of the half-lies and the equivocations, the very things that, in his mind, landed them in this position to begin with. So while the proper diplomatic move would indeed be vagueness, that is not what the king does. Instead, he simply decides to be honest. “We’re here to see the Oracle.”

“… I see,” Claustra says after a long silence, although she is able to recover just quickly enough to avoid being labeled stunned. “Lady Lunafreya expressed something similar when questioned about her presence here.”

“So she is here.”

“She is in our custody,” Claustra corrects.
The secretary exudes calm, a quality that Noct does not share as he demands, “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“That depends wholly upon you.”

She may be choosing this moment not to be quite as pointedly direct, but she hardly needs to be when they all understand what she is saying. “You think we’re a threat?”

“Wouldn’t you, if you were in my position?” is the reply, and it is not as if she does not have a point. As strategies go, it would not be the worst one, bringing the war to Altissia and forcing them to either take a stand against the Empire or suffer the tragedies that less fortunate cities had befallen. It is certainly what others would have done, especially if in Noct’s position, bereft of his kingdom and with little left to lose.

Except Noct is not like that. He may push others away out of fear and frustration, but that has never meant that he does not care. If anything, his problem has always been that he cares too much, which is why he looks so stricken as he finally realizes just how much of a mistake this is, coming to Altissia. Because while his intentions were good, desperate as he was to help his friend (to make up for his past errors, the whispered this is my fault still haunting him), he has put an entire city at risk of being turned into a battleground, and all for a decision he had been warned not to make.

In fairness, Gladio had not foreseen this either. Nobody had, although he should have because that had been his role once, to anticipate what the others could not (even if that did not change how superfluous he is). And perhaps he had, perhaps a part of him had realized the danger, but had simply been too incapable to say anything. Which would be worse, he wonders, his ignorance or his failure to act? Either way, it is just another sign that he has to go, that he cannot be a part of this any longer. He should have left before they even reached Altissia, but it is too late for that now; his inaction has already placed the king in this position, and now Noct is left to deal with the consequences.

But for once, the fates choose to show a little mercy, the secretary’s expression losing some of its harshness as she looks over the king. She has no reason to believe him, and years of political wrangling would certainly caution against it, but whether it is because of his vulnerability or because she too is deathly afraid of what will happen to her city, she sighs and leans back in her chair.

“Perhaps you, like the Oracle, did not intend to bring harm to this city,” she says quietly. “Nevertheless, you and Lady Lunafreya have placed us in a difficult position. I am afraid that whatever your original reasons for coming here, war is now inevitable. I do not wish to see my citizens come to harm, so let us talk terms.”

“No.”

This time, Claustra is not able to hide her shock, and she is not the only one. Gladio has that familiar expression, the one he gets when Noct is digging himself into a hole and there is no way of stopping him. As for Prompto, he is now looking at him in open panic, as if he actually expects him to intervene.

It is strange that Prompto thinks him capable of that. It is even stranger that the blond thinks it would be right for him to do so. To speak up now would be to undercut the king when he could least afford it (Were you never told not to show any weaknesses when bargaining?, the chancellor mocks as fingers dig into his skin), but more than that, he knows he does not need to.

He already knows that Noct will do the right thing.
“No,” Noct repeats. “This isn’t a negotiation. This isn’t a choice. I’m not…” *my father*, he is sure he was about to say, but somehow he swallows it down. “I’m not going to bargain with people’s lives. I’m *not* going to stand aside and let people suffer because of my mistakes, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

Although he had always understood – sympathized with, really – Noct’s detest for the usual convolutions of politics, the person he once was would likely have been aghast at this breach of diplomatic protocols and negotiating tactics. It is the worst thing he could possibly do, exposing himself like this, but for a woman who wants nothing more than to protect her people, it is somehow the right approach.

“How refreshing,” the secretary murmurs, and it is her turn to be open about what she wants. “What are you proposing?”

“What do you want us to do?”

Thrown off as she is by this turn of events, Claustra is nothing if not adaptable. “Your men will help evacuate the city. As for you, you will meet with the Oracle at the Hydraean’s shrine. My understanding is that Lady Lunafreya seeks to summon Leviathan, for the purposes of forming a covenant with the goddess. And if you succeed at summoning her—” her tone leaves no question that this is very much in doubt, “—then you will do whatever it takes to obtain her assistance in striking back against the Empire.”

“You think Leviathan will be so inclined?” Noct asks.

“I think at this point, risking her wrath is a better alternative to being under Niflheim’s yoke. Albeit by a slim margin,” she admits. “The gods can be quite fickle, but then, so has the Empire as of late.”


She is ready for that, having expected nothing less, “I must warn you, Accordo has no troops that can aid you. You will be on your own, and—”

“I want your men to keep Ignis safe.”

In that instant, he cannot tell if the silence is real or if it is only in his mind, all sound drowned out by the sudden, unmistakable *resentment* he feels. He did not even know that it was possible still, to feel something so visceral that was not the usual fear, but he does. He does because for once, watching these negotiations, those fears and his inadequacies did not matter as much. Not when he had something else to focus on, something else to consider except for himself. Even if he was not participating in the discussions himself, watching the back and forth while trying to understand what was driving its participants… it was the closest he has come to feeling like himself again. To feeling like he could be defined by something other than what other people had done to him, to be something other than a victim of circumstances beyond his control. But with that one demand, Noct has effectively taken that from him, has rendered him back to being that useless, wounded creature who can do nothing for himself. And while the king is not wrong to do that, is not wrong because that is *precisely* what he is, it still feels like something has been taken away from him, and he already has so little left to himself.

It is easier than it should be to keep that to himself, when self-control is one of the first things Drautos had taken from him. Besides, this is what he wants, is it not? To be separated from the others, as that is the only way he will finally do what needs to be done. Gladio and Prompto will
have their hands full with the evacuation, and Noct will be busy with both the rite and fighting off the Empire. It may be cowardly, leaving them to fight Niflheim’s armies by themselves, but at least they will have one less thing to worry about once the day is done.

(Assuming they survive, but he refuses to entertain any other possibility.)

“I heard what happened,” Claustra says, pulling him back into the present. Somehow her sympathy is far worse than it would be from anyone else, not just because she knows what happened to him (does everyone?) but because she has other things to worry about. Yet somehow he is so pitiful that even she offers some condolences, although at least she recognizes that such sympathy can only go so far. “The Empire will be looking for him.”

“Then you better take care of him.”

He can practically see her calculating this newest risk. She is already risking so much, going against Niflheim like this, but she knows this may be her only chance to free her country from an increasingly unstable Empire. After all, if Niflheim is willing to wage war in Altissia’s streets to go after two individuals, what else would they be willing to do once they had complete control over the world? When placed in such stark terms, it is clear that she needs Noct now, especially if he can bring the Hydraean to their side. Against a goddess, even the Empire could falter, and at the very least they would be distracted long enough for the populace to evacuate.

And anyways, even if she was not to uphold her end of this particular bargain, it would be too late: Noct would already have succeeded or failed.

“He can stay here,” she agrees finally. “If you do your job, their forces will not get near enough for it to be a problem.”

It is difficult to know what should be said then, so Noct wisely chooses to say nothing at all. He nods tightly and turns away, heading for the doors before he is stopped by Claustra saying, “I did not have the pleasure of knowing him well, but I must say. You’re just like your father.”

She does not mean it as an insult, but that does not stop Noct from visibly bristling. “I’m really not,” he replies harshly, and storms out of the secretary’s office without another word.

The room they escort him to is elegantly furnished, and it makes him want to scream. If it was not for the fact that Prompto had accompanied him here, maybe he would have, making yet another spectacle of himself. But the blond is gone now, and while he has (so far) managed to keep his wits, he is not sure how much longer he can stand it. Granted, he is not even sure why he associates any of this with back then, except that it is a room and it is unfamiliar, a place to be kept locked away until someone (Drautos, Drautos, Drautos) decides they have need for him.

He is aware that he is being entirely irrational, and that he is only making life difficult for himself if he reacts like this to every new place. But this is the first time he has been left alone in a room like this, and he would be lying if he pretended that he is still not waiting for it, the sound of the lock clicking into place. It hardly matters that it has been hours since the door had first closed, that Prompto had been able to leave freely; he still finds himself waiting for that sound because in the past, it had always come. It had always come, trapping him in an existence he wants nothing to do with.

He tries to distract himself by taking in the views from the windows that surround him, but that quickly proves to be a mistake. The view from the Secretary’s estate may be breathtaking, and the
city that sprawls around it even more so, but it only reminds him of the last time he had a view like this. It only reminds him of the complete isolation he had felt every time he had actually managed to look at Gralea, a city that was so close yet so utterly out of reach for him. He’d had no interest in the Empire’s capital, of course, but anywhere would have been better than that room, where he could do nothing but wait for the general to return, to order him to come over or worse, to go to him, draping metal arms around his shoulders and pulling him close enough that surely the man must have felt him struggling to breathe without sobbing, must have felt him choking down his terror and despair. He just hadn’t cared, but then, not many people did. If it was up to them, he would have died in that room, and-

-and then there is a knock at the door.

Immediately, all he knows is panic, even though he should be remembering that Drautos never knocked, that he only took. He turns to the windows, and the fact that they are not barred, so perhaps they will give this time, perhaps he will find his escape the only way he knows how. Except what is the point of trying when he knows what the outcome will be? Best to just give up, best not to care either, to remember that he is nothing and entitled to even less.

But then the door opens, and he finds himself staring at Noct.

It takes him far too long to comprehend what is happening, and by the time he does the king has already stepped into the room. This is the first time they have been alone together since Lucis sold him off, and he finds himself at a complete loss for words. Noct, at least, has come somewhat more prepared, despite not having spoken directly to him since he had begged him to save Gladio. “We’re heading out now. I just… I thought you should know.”

Except he already did know. Gladio had said as much when he had come to collect Prompto. But maybe Noct didn’t know about that, although that possibility is quickly dispensed with when Noct suddenly blurts out, “You’re planning something, aren’t you?”

Planning seems to be a vast overstatement, he thinks numbly, but it easier to focus on that little detail rather than the fact that Noct knows what he intends to do. He has no idea how the king could know, but that is beside the point as Noct continues desperately, “I know we haven’t been doing enough, I know we should have… but Luna can help you. Once this is over, she can help you with this, so you don’t have to-”

“Yes, I do.”

He has never been more certain of anything in his life. Because even now, Noct looks at him like he is a person, like he is actually worth putting an entire country in danger for. He has watched his friend try to give up everything for him, including his duties, his kingdom, his companions. It is a burden that is suffocating in its own right, for he cannot be the reason for the death of innocents, for those he loves.

He cannot be the death of Noct.

 Probably, he should have acted a long time ago. But maybe a part of him had always known that Noct would not have let him go so easily. The king would have tried to follow him, to bring him back, but now he is finally being confronted with the consequences of his decisions. And if that is not enough, then at least he will have the Oracle. Surely she will be enough to make Noct remember that he cannot give up everything for his sake, that he has other duties and responsibilities. Surely she will be enough to show him that he needs to let him go like he should have all those weeks ago.
If he tries to explain any of that though, Noct will only deny it, so he cannot say anything at all. And eventually Noct has to accept that, letting out a long breath before asking, “Is this what you want?”

He has no idea. He has no idea what he wants, or maybe it is not that so much as he has been trying very hard not to want anything for himself. If he does not want anything, he cannot be denied. He cannot be hurt. So it is surprisingly easy to fall back into old habits, to put duty above all else so that he does not have to worry about what he wants or cares about.

Although he supposes that may not be entirely true. He does care about Noct still, far more than he cares about himself. Perhaps that is why he says, “The Armiger.”

He thinks he means it as a peace offering, a suggestion that he will not be completely helpless when he leaves. But, quite fairly, Noct looks wary because there is a reason why he never offered it back to him. “Why?”

“Because,” he says before he can think better of it, “you owe me that at least.”

It is odd to think that he is owed anything at this point, especially the royal magic. But that is almost irrelevant because it is not so much about the magic than the choice. Noct could try to fight him on this, could choose to make the decision for him. But he needs this, the right to ask for things for himself instead of being subject to the whims of others, and Noct knows it.

The king still hesitates though, before putting his hand out. “Promise me. Promise me that if I give you this, you won’t use it to hurt yourself.”

That is a promise he cannot make though, so he says nothing at all.

Noct stares at him, the same helplessness in his eyes as when Izunia had brought him to the greeting hall, chained and broken. One of those things is still at play, but that does not stop Noct from reaching out, clasping his hand and closing his eyes before he lets the kings’ powers flow through him.

He regrets it almost immediately. The magic feels so familiar, yet different all the same. Where once it seemed a natural part of him, now it is an unpleasant awareness, as if he is revealing too much of himself to people who will never understand him again. He wants to pull himself away, to hide because they already know far too much, and his impulsive request is only tying himself closer to the others when he is supposed to be leaving them behind.

But he does not run. He cannot, especially when Noct whispers, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what he did. I’m sorry I couldn’t help you more.”

You’re just like your father, Claustra had said, and while Noct had denied it vehemently, he cannot help but remember the last time he had felt a king tremble against him, whispering apologies that were nothing compared to the overwhelming grief that accompanies it. Regis had not stopped him from being sacrificed, and Noct had not been able to save him. They have both failed, in their own ways, and Noct’s words now are a recognition of that inescapable comparison.

Once, he would have known what to say to that, but how to deny that truth? Except denial is not what Noct is looking for. Despite everything that has happened, despite how much they had both changed, there are still so many things that they will never have to say to understand each other. So when he feels the arms around him, holding him tight, he does not flinch or try to step away. Instead, he lets his friend hold him like this, and it is impossible to tell who is comforting whom.
He had thought he had felt more like himself when watching the negotiations. He had believed that he could be more like himself with the return of the Crystal’s magic. But none of those is comparable to Noct’s embrace, which finally makes him remember the person he actually was. It is so easy to sink into, a sensation that he has never truly forgotten, like the weight of the pendant that once hung from his neck. The general may have taken that from him along with so much else, but this, at least, will always remain the same, the fierce, protective love of the man who will always be so much more than his liege.

And for his part, even if he now knows that he is not worth anything, Noct will always be his everything, which is why he must do this. As gently as he can, as hard as it is, he forces himself to back away from the one person he would have given up everything for, as he does now.

“Ignis,” Noct says, his voice cracking ever so slightly. For a moment, it looks like he wants to reach out, to never let him go again. But reality inevitably sinks in, and he lets his arms fall to his side, stepping back himself as he whispers, “Please. Take care of yourself.”

But that is one more promise he cannot make, so again, he says nothing.

Chapter End Notes

As always I can only apologize again for how long this has taken (and also for its... rambling nature). I really do hope that the next updates will be a little more timely, especially as it makes its way towards the end. Thank you to everyone for sticking around in the meantime, and apologies again for the delay.
Chapter 21

A silence falls after the first explosions rock the city, and then the screaming begins.

It takes him a moment to realize that the screams are not his. By the time he does, he is already on his feet, although where he was heading, he has no idea. He does know where he is supposed to go, having planned for this exact scenario: taking advantage of the chaos to slip out of the secretary’s estate before disappearing into the panicked crowds (and what happens next, he cannot say, if only because he knows what will be easiest).

Yet like so many of his plans as of late, it is poorly devised indeed, falling apart before he can take a single step. He knows where he must go, but he cannot move. He knows what he must do, but instead his hands clench as if they are trying to grab hold of something (someone) and never let go, even when all he can think is, You cannot help him.

He closes his eyes, which only heightens the frightened screams of the people below as they flee the Empire’s attack. Another thing that he has caused, even if it was inadvertent and not by his own choosing, but neither guilt nor the cries of the suffering below are enough to block out the relentless, inescapable fact that you cannot help him.

That was not always the case, he wants to believe. But was there ever really any doubt once they had sold him off? Of course there was no need to question the terms when Regis knew that Niflheim would not honor the treaty. And once the Empire invaded and took over Lucis, the services he had to offer were rather pointless indeed, what with no kingdom to rule, no role for him to play. There is only a battle to be waged and a war to be won, and what good will he be at any of that when he has spent the past few months on his back, helpless to stop Drautos from taking everything from him?

But this is not about him. It is about Noct, the one person who is not disposable. Noct, who is out there alone and unprotected as he faces the strongest military force in all of Eos. And while he had taken on that challenge willingly, he did so not because he believed himself capable of winning, but for all the wrong reasons. Wracked by guilt over the destruction his choice would bring upon Altissia, terrified of losing Gladio and Prompto in a battle he had been warned against starting, shamed by his inability to prevent what had happened to him, Noct is more vulnerable than ever, outmatched both physically and emotionally.

Knowing that, how could he even think of abandoning him to his fate? He should… no, needs to be by Noct’s side, a pull as overpowering as when the general had yanked on the chain of his necklace like a leash, although perhaps it would be more aptly described a noose.

But it was the noose he had chosen freely not when he had gotten on his knees and sworn fealty, but when he had reached out a hand for a young boy to take. Noct had not hesitated then, and he should not hesitate now, except that neither of them are children anymore. He sees the world much more clearly now, thanks to a brutal education instilled by betrayal and violation. That is how he knows that a kingdom will always put itself before its people, that every person is easily thrown away, and that even a prince is helpless to change that.

And he knows, most of all, that nothing he does will ever matter, which is why he must leave. He could not save himself from a single man, so how can he possibly expect to protect Noct from the entire Niflheim army? Besides, Gladio is right; time and time again, his presence has only made things worse, so why is he not walking away like he had planned? To take his troubles and inadequacies away from Noct, from everyone, because isn’t that what he would do if he loved
them at all?

Except loving them has never been the problem; the problem is how much he does. He has always
loved too much, too fiercely. It’s in your name, Gladio had drunkenly told him once, and while the
Shield had been more maudlin than sage by that point, perhaps he’d had a point. The name that his
parents had given him, that Lucis had permitted him to keep, that Drautos had tried to steal from
him; it defined him in more ways than one, and in this way in particular.

Of course, it was not the only thing that Drautos had tried to take away from him. The question,
then, is how much more of himself he is willing to let the general have.

As if in response, he feels the tug of the Armiger, a reminder that as he wavers, Noct is in danger.
It is not the only reminder though, the connection to the others now agonizing in its unfamiliarity.
But that pain is nothing compared to what will haunt him if he leaves, lingering as surely as the
general’s touch until he finally withers away to nothing.

At least this way, it will be his choice. At least this way, he can end things on his own terms. Noct
will not like it, having asked him to prioritize his own safety, but he made no promises. He owes
him nothing, and therefore he can give him everything.

Still, he thinks as the daggers are summoned, his fingers curling around the hilts, “I must ask your
forgiveness.”

He goes to his king.

There is someone following him.

There are several possibilities of who it could be. An Altissian soldier, perhaps, sent to fulfill the
secretary’s promise of keeping him safe. It seems unlikely though, as they had not taken great
pains to prevent him from leaving in the first place. A few of them had called out to him as he
passed, but nobody had tried to stop him. They had been too overwhelmed taking care of their own
people to bother with him, but he expected nothing less.

More likely it is one of the Empire’s soldiers then, drawn by the prospect of easy prey or worse,
sent by Drautos to drag him back. Not so long ago, the possibility would have made him turn that
dagger on himself, and maybe he still should, except that he needs to find Noct. It is the closest
thing he has to having a purpose, to having something that is still his because otherwise, he does
not matter. He never did. But he can do this one thing for Noct, as long as he survives long enough
to do so.

Whoever is following him is not attempting to be subtle, which could be a sign of non-hostile
intent. Not that he is naïve enough to take solace in that, not when intent hardly matters compared
to action (I’m trying to help you, Drautos explains with such sincerity). So he thinks he can be
excused for the fact that when he finally confronts his shadow, it is with a blade pressed against
the throat.

“Really?” is all Nyx Ulric says, even as he holds his hands up.

It is less than reassuring though; he has seen the Glaive disarm others when in far more precarious
positions. A few times, he has even been on the receiving end. But he allows neither his weapon
nor his voice to waver as he asks, “What are you doing here?”

“Same as you, I assume,” Ulric answers with the barest of shrugs, seeing how there is still a blade
to contend with. “Heading for the Altar.”
“Why?”

“Because,” he says with exaggerated patience, “that’s where the Oracle is. Right in the middle of this shit storm because she doesn’t know how to leave well enough alone, but I guess that’s what we get for throwing our lot in with her. So yeah, somebody has to look after her since obviously she’s not going to.”

He does not lower the blade as he considers this. As new loyalties go, the Oracle is not the worst, although loyalty is not a word easily associated with the Glaives when so many of them had turned traitor. It does track with what Leonis had said, but honesty is not a word easily associated with the Marshal either.

More convincing is Ulric’s casual certainty, the lack of doubt that contrasts starkly with the way every other person has treated him as of late. The Glaive had always been straightforward, a tendency many of his superiors had interpreted as insubordination or plain arrogance, but one he personally found refreshing when compared to the Council. Still, he has to ask, “Why should I trust you?”

“Who says you should?” is the immediate response. “I doubt you’re in a trusting mood after what they did to you. But whatever you decide, I’m heading to the Altar because that’s where she is. And chances are that your king is too.”

*Your king as well,* he would have reminded him once, but the words cannot seem to form now. Because as much as he would like to forget everything about the day they sold him, he remembers it in perfect detail, including the discussion of the treaty term that would have sold off the homes of every Glaive who risked their lives to protect a country that never saw them as being equal.

No wonder they had turned traitor. Could it even be called that, when Lucis had betrayed them first? And what of him then, when he had agreed to give everything to Drautos just to make the pain stop?

(Although that is not entirely true, he supposes. He would never have given up Noct, not for anything.)

Those are questions that have no good answers, and they will have to remain unanswered when the Glaive abruptly warps away from the dagger’s edge. Surprisingly, he does not go far, reappearing just out of reach of his lance if he was to summon it. He supposes it is a peace offering of sort because Ulric could have simply left him behind, but then he finds himself wishing that the man had just gone when Ulric says quietly, “Look, I’m… I’m sorry for what you’ve been through. For not figuring out earlier about Drautos being a traitor. If I could have stopped it, I-.”

“It’s not about you,” he cuts off.

His tone is not sharp. There is no reason for it to be because he is not angry. But he suddenly realizes that he is so damn tired of this, of people not only pitying him but apologizing to him. Did they really think that it would make him feel better, knowing that they were sorry for not doing more? Or were they just asking him to absolve them of their failures, to forgive them because they felt regret?

He should not have to do that. In this one thing, at least, he should be allowed to put himself before the rest of the world, to remember that it is his pain, his suffering, that he would have to minimize for their sake. Because in the end, they hadn’t stopped it. They hadn’t prevented this from happening to him. And no amount of useless sentiment or personal regret will ever change that, so how could they ask him to pretend otherwise?
He cannot say any of this out loud, of course, but for once, he does not have to. Because Ulric, thankfully, actually listens to him.

“You’re right,” the Glaive says, and just like before, there is no doubt, only that unquestioning acceptance. Yet Ulric is the only one who could give him this vindication because he would never have been able to say this to the others. With them, he would always suppress his needs by pushing everything down and reminding himself just how little he mattered in the grand scheme of things. They had more pressing matters to worry about, and he was causing so much trouble already, so how could he ask for anything more from them?

But it is different with Ulric because he does not owe him anything. With him, he can be honest about what he thinks, which is the only way anyone could ever have validated what he is feeling. And that is something he has needed so desperately, to the point that the simple acknowledgment seems to knock the breath out of him, leaving him unable to respond in kind.

Luckily, Ulric is not looking for a response, and just nods towards the direction of the Altar. “Come on then. Let’s go find our troublesome wards and keep them safe.”

The streets are deserted as they make their way to the Altar.

It had already been unsettling before he had met up with Ulric, but at least more explainable. Back then, they were far enough from the secretary’s estate to have left behind the people moving towards safety, but close enough that even Niflheim would be reluctant to attack the area, lest be accused of slaughtering fleeing innocents (not that it had prevented them from attacking in the first place, but still, one hoped there were some actions that were outside the bounds of civilized society).

There is no explaining this now though, the absence of the Empire on the ground. They have met no soldiers, no magitek, nothing to stand in their way. A few airships had flown overhead, forcing them to duck into alleyways, but they need not have bothered; the airships had not even slowed down, despite how much they must have stood out in the empty streets. In fact, the airships did not even seem to be heading towards the Altar, which is where they would have been expected to converge with both the Oracle and Lucian king there.

He is not the only one bothered by Niflheim’s complete and utter lack of resistance. Ulric is uncharacteristically quiet, focusing on getting them to their destination, but even he cannot hold himself back when they reach the entrance to the Altar, as eerily devoid of life as the rest of the city had been.

“They want us here,” he mutters. He appreciates that the Glaive does not bother explaining further, either expecting him to be intelligent enough to have realized that for himself or practical enough not to question the assessment. It is the closest anyone has come to treating him as an equal, even if he does not deserve it. But with that comes the consequences, as Ulric continues, “We should split up. You go on ahead, and I’ll scout the area.”

It is not a suggestion but an order, one that could very well be the death of him. By sending him ahead, Ulric is only baiting the obvious trap, but what other option is there? He cannot be expected to protect the Glaive’s back, so at least he can be of some service by drawing the enemy to him while Ulric looks for a better way in.

But judging by his grimace, Ulric must feel like he is doing to him what Lucis had done not so long ago, so he quickly says, “I agree,” before Ulric feels compelled to explain himself. Or, Astrals forbid, try to apologize again.
The Glaive’s expression tightens, but there is no time to debate his own plan. He cannot bring himself to simply leave though, standing there awkwardly before he finally offers, “Don’t do anything rash.”

He warps away before anything more can be said.

It is sound advice, of course, the sort he would normally be offering. But he forgets it completely when he actually reaches the Altar, and finds himself staring at—“Noct.”

They must be watching, whoever had done this. They must still be here, waiting to attack. But none of that matters because it is Noct lying on the cold concrete in front of the Altar, and he scrambles towards him, no other thought in his mind except that he needs to get to him, he needs to help him. That is why he doesn’t notice until it is too late, the whimper from the body he has stepped on finally causing him to stop.

He stares at the Oracle’s messenger, her white fur matted and stained with blood. He cannot remember her name, can barely comprehend the meaning of this, but then he is reaching down to her even though he needs to get to Noct, he needs to—

He gasps, his fingers barely grazing her fur before he is swept away, his mind torn apart. And then he sees Noct, except it is not him, not this man who is so old and so weary, ascending the steps to a broken throne as the dead watch from where they hang on the ruined ceiling. He sits himself down with all the heaviness of a corpse being laid in a grave, and then he holds up his hand, the blackened ring of the Lucii stark against his pale skin. It is the proof of his legitimacy and his legacy, but there is no pride there, only resignation as he looks up at the ghostly figures that now surround him.

*What are you doing,* he tries to ask, but the darkness swallows the words whole. Which means that no one hears him scream for them to *stop* when the kings of yore lunge forward one by one, their weapons piercing their chosen descendent. With each blow, he jerks and shudders, his face a grimace of agony, but he does not fall. He does not fall even though he cannot take it anymore, until there is only one figure left, one more. But he does not run, looking up slowly to face his fate, to face his own father, before he opens himself up to one final blow.

*The blood price must be paid,* the voices whisper around him, and he tries to throw himself before the blade but it is too late.

He watches Noct fall.

He watches Noct *die.*

“No,” he says. “No, Astrals, no.”

*Many sacrificed all for the King,* they respond, merciless and cold. *So must the King sacrifice himself for all.*

Lies, lies, *lies,* he wants to tell them, but they do not care for his denials. The last thing he sees is Noct’s slumped body pinned to the throne by his own father’s sword, the ring slipping off his finger and disintegrating. And then he is thrown back to the now, to the cold and the blood and the dying. The messenger lets out a soft whine before fading into light, leaving in her wake the ring that will bring only death to his king.

One blade clatters to the ground as he grabs hold of it, as if he is trying to forestall what has been prophesized by taking it. The ring feels like ice in his palm, so cold that it burns, but that pain is
nothing compared to the sight of Noct lying motionless in the pouring rain (it is raining, when did it start raining?).

“No,” he whispers again, trying to push the rising panic away by forcing himself to look, to really look. Because Noct is there, still young, still breathing, still very much alive, and he is not the only one. Lady Lunafreya is also sprawled on the ground next to him, somehow so beautiful despite how ungainly her limbs are spread. Two Glaives are at her side, also still hanging on judging from the slight rise and fall of their chests. He should recognize them except his fractured mind is still reeling from what he has seen, making it impossible to think.

Especially when he looks up and sees who is standing above them all.

“It’s about time,” Titus Drautos says.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! There will be no regular update schedule for this story, although I do try for weekly updates when possible.

For shorter ficlets, deleted scenes, and babbling about writing (or lack thereof), I can be found at http://pikachumaniac.tumblr.com/

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!