Always At Your Side

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by Genly

Summary

Ignis prides himself on his extensive knowledge and abilities, but there is one problem he finds himself unable to solve: his extreme reaction to being touched by others.

As a child, it hadn't really been an issue.

He had already learned how to wash and dress himself by the age of six, so the palace officials in charge of his education and housing had decided he didn't need to be placed in a nursery or under supervision of a nanny, like some of the other orphans in service of the Crown.

Both his uncle and King Regis kept an eye on him, of course, but more as distant benefactors interested in his overall health and wellbeing, than as people involved in his day-to-day life. As his own duties and responsibilities increased, so did his understanding and acceptance that both men were far too burdened with their own work to concern themselves with someone such as him. They were kind, but most of the time, they weren't physically *present*.

The only person who was always near was Prince Noctis, and honestly, that never caused any issues. All the child asked for sometimes was to hold his hand if they were walking somewhere, and the occasional, brief hug before bedtime if he'd had a long or exhausting day. Those things, he gladly provided.

No, the problems began with the royal council.

He'd started attending meetings on Noctis' behalf when his tutors had deemed him ready. At first, he felt nothing but pride in his new role, even though he was not allowed to be an active participant yet. That clearance would be given when he was officially sworn in as a council member, at the age of majority. At age 15, he was just there to observe, learn, and take notes. Still, in his innermost thoughts, he felt it was only a matter of time before the other council members would see him as one of their own. He'd make himself useful and impress them with his skills and insights, despite his young age.

Instead, it was worse than he could ever have imagined.

The councillors who ignored his presence were the easiest to deal with. It wasn't pleasant to be disregarded in such a manner, but he nevertheless appreciated the opportunity to analyse their words and behaviours without interference or distraction.

The same was true for the councillors who mocked him, belittled him, or angrily questioned his right to be there at all. As he'd expected, those were quickly and decisively dealt with by the senior members of the court. On one memorable occasion, King Regis himself had chided an apoplectic Councillor Tertius for behaving more like a fifteen-year-old than the actual fifteen-year-old in the room, much to his secret delight.

Even the two or three council members who approached him with insincere smiles and even more dishonest intentions did not particularly faze him. He might be young, but he wasn't naive. People would try to use him in all sorts of ways, thanks to his proximity to the Prince, so being resistant to threats, flattery, and even blackmail had been part of his curriculum for years.

No, the biggest problem came from the people who actually meant well.

People like Councillor Fulvia, who kept grabbing his hands and pressing candy into them, no matter how often he tried to decline, as if he were one of her numerous grandsons.

Councillor Cilo, who was always ruffling his hair in passing with a fond smile, regardless of how quickly he tried to duck out of the way.

And worst of all, Councillor Antistius, who was seated next to him at council meetings. Every time he asked a question or offered a comment, she would smile encouragingly, reach out, and pat his shoulder, or his arm, or even his leg on a few occasions. Almost as if she couldn't think of ways to express her approval and support verbally, like a normal person would.

It was agony.

Every touch, no matter how well-meaning or friendly, made him want to crawl out of his skin with discomfort. It felt similar to the hypersensitivity he'd experienced once during a bout of fever, when any contact with even the softest of clothes or bedsheets had been too painful to bear. But this wasn't simply a brief illness, with a beginning and an end. People kept touching him, often when he least expected it, and the sensations lingered on his skin for hours afterwards, as if he'd been bitten by ants, or rolled around in a patch of nettles. Every touch seemed to build on the last, making him more and more nauseous with pain and overstimulation.

And he had no idea how to make it stop.

He couldn't afford to antagonise the council members who were supportive of him. He knew he'd need them as allies in the years to come, if he was to have any hope of doing his job properly. Even the few tutors he dared ask for advice had none to give him, other than to make sure that these touches did not cross the boundaries of impropriety. Their added reassurances that he could simply try to get used to it, and that it wasn't such a major issue as he made it out to be, provided no consolation whatsoever.

So he continued on, gritting his teeth against the pain, hoping against all odds that perhaps people would stop touching him once he became an adult.

That was not what happened.

Instead, Gladiolus Amicitia happened.

The oldest of the Amiticia siblings had started shadowing his father in much the same way as Ignis was shadowing the council proceedings, albeit in preparation for a different role. The Shield of the King was not a member of the council, but was expected to have the final say in matters concerning the King's safety, and in a slightly less official capacity, to remind him that he was just a man and should put the needs of the people first only when it didn't have direct, detrimental consequences to his own health. To protect the King from himself, to put it bluntly.

Even at sixteen, Gladio already cut an impressive figure. He had his father's tall build and broad shoulders, with a definition in his arms, chest, and legs that hinted at the muscular bulk

he was going to achieve in later years. All his movements signalled force and power, carefully contained and managed.

Yet his contributions to the discussions, rare as they were, were surprisingly insightful, even if they sometimes bordered on tactless.

Ignis often found himself wishing he had the courage, or rather the recklessness, to be equally tactless and blunt. But he knew he couldn't, not in his position. Gladio had the wealth and status of a famous noble family to back him up, and truth be told, looked far too intimidating for people to dare call him out on his occasional lack of manners. He himself had none of those things.

Thus, at first, nothing changed. His suffering continued. He cursed himself for his weakness, cursed his education for not having the answers to a ridiculous issue like this, cursed the council members for not noticing how averse he was to being touched, cursed the whole world for putting him in this situation, without the power to change things.

The latter, however, only on days that were truly bad. In general, he found ways to cope, even if they sometimes were a little unorthodox.

He had taken to hiding inside the small bathroom off to the side of the meeting room, whenever the council adjourned for a break. While the council members were in the antechambers taking refreshments, he'd be lying face down on the cool marble floor, more often than not with tears running down his face, frantically trying to calm down his breathing and soothe his frayed nerves before he was expected to return. It wasn't pretty, but it worked.

And that, to his immense mortification, was exactly how Gladio found him, on a day that was worse than most, his body screaming with the pain of ghostly touches that wouldn't leave him alone.

He only had a split second to hear the door open and realise he must have forgotten to lock it, before Gladio crashed onto his knees beside him.

"Ignis! Ignis, what's wrong? Can you get up? Should I get help?"

He tried to lift himself up, get out of the way before Gladio would try touching him. In his current state, he was sure he wouldn't be able to handle it, resulting in an even more embarrassing breakdown. He could not allow that to happen.

But his muscles were still too tense from his agony, stiff from lying on the cold floor, and wouldn't obey him. He weakly pushed against the marble tiles, but gave it up as hopeless within a handful of seconds.

"No, don't. Please don't," he managed to choke out, tensing himself for the inevitability of Gladio ignoring his words.

But Gladio's voice was soft. "It's okay. What do you need?"

It took a few moments for the words to register. Confused, he turned his face towards Gladio, trying to gauge his intent. What he saw was nothing but care and concern. No outstretched hand, about to haul him to his feet. No threat.

And, incongruously, a steaming mug of coffee on the floor beside him.

Inhaling the familiar aroma, his muscles slowly relaxed, the tension fading away, his skin finally brushing off the memory of unwanted contact, as if his senses were resetting themselves by focusing on smell instead of touch.

Gladio apparently noticed the shift in his attention, because he looked down at the mug and, sitting back on his heels, gave it a small push in Ignis' direction. "Here. It's yours, if you want it. I didn't know how you usually take your coffee, so I hope it's okay."

He finally managed to leverage himself into an upright position, copying Gladio's pose. His throat felt scratchy and dry, and he tried swallowing a couple of times, almost automatically reaching for the coffee before he realised what he was doing.

"Wait. Why are you here?"

Gladio shrugged, a move somehow expressive and eloquent despite his bulk. "I just notice things. It's what I'm trained to do. Watch people, watch their body language. I was paying more attention to you, because we're going to be working together pretty closely if Noctis becomes King. So... yeah, I don't know exactly what's going on, but I know that you're avoiding the rest of the council members for a reason, so I came to check up on you. And well, you're a pretty prickly guy, so I figured it was best not to show up empty handed."

Trying not to let his surprise show, he picked up the mug and narrowed his eyes at Gladio over the rim. "It seems I have failed in hiding my emotions as well as I'd hoped. *Prickly*. Not the epithet I would have chosen for myself."

He took a sip and exhaled in relief. Slightly sweeter and more milky than he preferred, but it would do. "Thank you for the coffee. I appreciate it."

Gladio grinned at him and shifted a bit out of the way, until he could rest his back against the wall and stretch out his long legs in front of him without intruding into Ignis' personal space.

"Glad I could help. Also glad you didn't take my head off with one of those wickedly sharp daggers I've seen you practising with. Once you're out of basic training, I'd be happy to spar with you some time."

Ignis took a long, deep breath. Taking stock of his physical and mental state, he was almost shocked to find that his anguish had all but disappeared. He felt safe. Safe with someone he barely knew. On the floor of a bathroom in the Citadel. Drinking coffee.

He managed to suppress the snort of laughter that threatened to escape him.

Instead, he moved over, and sat with his back against the wall next to Gladio. "I think I'd like some extra training. Perhaps looking a bit more muscular, like you, would help me with my

current predicament as well."

Gladio let out a huff of amusement. "Do you always talk like that? Or only when you're stressed?"

He turned his head slightly to catch Gladio's eye, and gave him a small smile. "I can't remember the last time I wasn't feeling stressed, so I assume that is a sufficient answer to your question."

He raised his mug in salute. "Although this is helping immensely, I must say. Thank you, Gladiolus. I have no idea what I did to deserve such kindness and consideration from you, but I'm glad of it. And if there's any way I can repay the favour..."

Gladio's smile softened into a more thoughtful look as he answered. "It's no big deal, and I won't push you. But I would like to know what's going on. Maybe there's a way I can help. You and I, we've got to be able to rely on each other. And it would mean a lot to me if you trusted me."

He nodded. "I'll give it some thought. Not that I don't trust you," he added hurriedly. "It's just that..."

Gladio dusted off his hands on his trousers and moved to stand up. "It's okay. I get it. This place can be a minefield sometimes. Man, I really hate politics."

He looked up at Gladio, now towering over him like a giant, and felt a strange combination of emotions swirling in his gut. There was still a frisson of fear, of distrust, no matter how diligently he tried to tamp it down. One cup of coffee, after all, was not sufficient reason to forget a lifetime of constantly suspecting people to have hidden motives, of always preparing for the worst possible outcome.

But at the same time, Gladio was right. He needed someone he could rely on, someone to guard his back as he performed his duty to the Crown.

Someone who, in just a short span of time, had already shown more respect for his needs and boundaries than any other person he'd worked or interacted with. Someone who actually paid attention and listened. Someone who didn't touch him when it was not welcomed.

Someone he could allow to come closer.

A friend, perhaps.

Gladio looked down at him, a contemplative expression on his face, as if he was again trying to analyse his body language, seeking to hear the words he wasn't speaking. Then he slowly, hesitantly, stretched out a hand towards him to help him up from the floor.

Ignis made his decision.

When their hands met, he felt no pain.