Lazy People’s Club for the Sleepy and Tired

Rules to join the Lazy People's Club for the Sleepy and Tired:
1) One must love sleep. Sleep is love. Sleep is life.
2) One must be tired. Physically or emotionally, both are acceptable.
3) One must love video games. Halfhearted interest in video games will result in immediate termination of membership.

Fortunately, Noctis falls into all three categories.

XIX: What kind of friend is he anyway? The shittiest, lowest kind. The kind that’d fuck your mouth with your head to the wall, that’s what. The kind that’d press his fingers over your ribs like a pianist over his keys, memorising the erotic way you shudder under him. The kind that wants to substitute your pillows just so you’d hold him instead. Exactly the shittiest, most fucked up kind of friend.
blooming: the ghost™

Chapter Notes

a chill fic about a protagonist who wants to sleep and play games all day long, ovo )

**Things to note:**

nameless protagonist ahead / following the JP version of FFXV’s speech pattern since Prompto’s speech pattern in JP is sooo cute / lots of sleeping (° ʃ°) (° ʃ°) (° ʃ°)
literally the / contains an inappropriate amount of references to video games, literary works, mythological references, classical music / ratings are subject to change in the future (° ʃ°) / plot thickens / will include link and references to music in every chapter ovo;;

**REFERENCE: Maria Callas - Ave Maria**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*blooming*

**THERE’S A ROOM IN THE** far northwest wing on the 56th floor, just segmented at the end of a hallway, flanked by two vases of romantic roses. Rumour has it that servants would occasionally glimpse a white entity traversing the corridors. Sometimes they’ll hear the fragile notes of a piano being played, or drawn-out groans of anguish. Classic spooky ghost stuffs, Noctis thinks. Misplaced sounds of footfalls, feet dragging across floor, broken thumps against the wall, followed by a long and shrill silence. There never used to be a royal haunting before this. So why now?

Noctis’ initial experience with the ‘royal haunting’—or so he aptly dubbed it—is a strange sound reverberating down the hallway. So odd is the sound that he stops in his tracks and looks over his shoulders to check if anyone’s around. He sees nothing. The hallway is as chilly and empty as ever, devoid of human presence, as the sun fails to penetrate the clusters of stained glasses dotting the walls. Save for the gloomy setting of the hallway, there isn’t much that catches his eyes. Noctis’ only response to the whole situation is a slight furrowing of his brows, ears intent on picking up the sound again.

Nothing.

The prince checks his fine wristwatch, examining the numbers on the face. It’s only a little past 2:00
p.m., and waaaay too early for ghost to come out and rattle their chains. Not that he believes in any of that hocus-pocus because there are simply no such things as ghosts. Absolutely nothing of the sort. He’s lived here for most of his life, and he supposes he knows better than some smarmy ghost trying to win his attention.

Finding nothing else warranting his concern, Noctis straightens his back and walks away.

“IT’S TRUE, YOUR HIGHNESS.”

In the middle of giving his pancakes a thorough surgery, Noctis looks up from his cream-laden knife. “What is?”

The maid who initially spoke up gives a squeak, hastily covering her face behind her serving tray. “A-About the ghost,” she speaks haltingly, studying his impassive expression with mild concern. “We all heard it… the piano, the footsteps, the thunks and the thuds. We hear creaking doors too but by the time that happens, we’re all too busy running away already,” she admits with a nervous laugh and a smile too wide. “S-So maybe you shouldn’t go there anymore, Your Highness…”

This again? The palace’s rumour mill changes weekly, but lately The Ghost™ has been constantly topping the charts. Not even Noctis’ glorious midterm marks from his university could shove it off from #1, so he had to settle with #2 this week. Spearing a piece of his caramel-swirled pancakes, Noctis takes a moment to savour the taste in between chewing as he mulls over her words.

Ghosts and the Citadel, how funny. But it’ll die down, sooner or later.

Thinking nothing of it, the prince dissects the second layer of his pancakes and gives it a proper burial between his teeth.

EXCEPT, IT DOESN’T DIE DOWN.

It grows with a vengeance like it’s trying to spite Noctis for all it’s worth.

Between their little breaks scattered across their arduous training sessions, Gladiolus—or as what Noctis likes to call him, Gladio—wipes his sweat with the hem of his shirt. “You heard about the ghost in the northwest wing yet, Noct?” he begins the conversation, and Noctis is already rolling his eyes at the thought. Gladio doesn’t seem to mind that. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Been hearing so much of this ghost thing until you gotta wonder if it’s real or it’s just,” he shrugs, “bullshit.”

A month and a half has gone by since his first haunting, and The Ghost™ is still a cult favourite among the ranks. Sure, the higher ups haven’t caught wind of it yet, but the manservants and staff members are exchanging fervent whispers in the hallways about The Ghost™ and its daily haunting like it’s the bane of their existence. As much as he’s tried to convince them that there are no ghosts in the palace, and certainly no ghosts inhibit the 56th floor, their retold experiences said otherwise.

“They really need to stop it,” Noctis replies dryly, dropping his training sword on the hardwood floor with a clatter. Gladio mimics his action and they both sit on the floor, drying their sweat. “They’re probably imagining things again.”

“So you think the whole servants imagined this stuff?” Gladio chortles, cocking a brow.

Now that it’s coming from Gladio himself, Noctis feels rather stupid for suggesting something like
mass hypnosis. Wholly impossible and entirely unimaginable. Instead, he looks away from his Shield and gets on his feet once more, picking up his practice sword. Gladio doesn’t answer his silence; he only throws his head back and laughs.

SUNSET KISSES THE APEX OF the Citadel, the crystal refracting scarlet shards all across Insomnia. 56th floor. A little past evening, yet all too soon for the blankets of nightfall. A perfect time to go on a little hunting trip by himself. He knows he shouldn’t be here lest he desires to stumble across an apparition of the ghost—but that’s exactly what he’s looking for: Trouble. It doesn’t take him much to ascertain the presence of something else with him, something unseen to his naked eye. Noctis’ sharp hearing picks up lilting soprano down the hallway, a haunting opera accompanied by fragile notes of piano. The rise and fall of the song lures him closer and closer, close enough until he sees the twin roses framing the doorway to a distant room.

He knows this song. Ave Maria. A classic, much like his Lucian lineage. The exact name of the composer escapes his mind like everything else his classical teacher taught him though. Not that it matters when he stands in front of the ornate door, hearing the voice of The Ghost™ and her choice of requiem. How quaint, really, befitting of The Ghost’s™ ancient age.

Placing a hand on the unpolished doorknob, Noctis expects resistance—it happens all the time in ghosts stories where the doors are mysteriously locked and barred from humankind. Instead, he is met with the yielding metal turning under the flick of his wrist, with nary a shriek or a jumpscare waiting for him around the corner. He lets the door fall away, revealing the entirety of the room to him.

What he expects is something out of a grisly horror movie like what Prompto always rented on their movie nights. Bloodied walls, shredded curtains, an acrid scent filling the air and bucketful of maggots wriggling all over the crusted flooring. A corpse or two decorating the corner, posing in that stereotypical murdered way, one with its head facing down, and the other, a hand on its stomach. Maybe an axe murderer will be waiting for him behind the door, ready to tackle him to the wall in an epic fight that he can pass down to his grandchildren as bedtime story.

Maybe not.

Noctis notes the sour disappointment on his tongue when he catches sight of a vast landscape stretched before his eyes, with not a trace of blood or innards—nothing of the sort. Insomnia, a sprawling cityscape of skyscrapers and veiny roads, stained scarlet from sunset. The grandeur of the image is framed by wide glass walls and a chiffon curtain too thin to block out the lights. Here, Ave Maria is heard loud and clear, carried by wall-mounted speakers in each corner of the room—and certainly not from The Ghost’s™ singing.

He doesn’t miss the wall-sized bookcase at the farthest end of the room, stacked with thick tomes and boring books. Most of them looked as though they’ve seen better years, worn down by hand after hand. Mounted on a wall, a television and its tangle of gaming consoles lounge about in a corner, with rows and rows of video game titles arranged underneath it.

The knowledge of this room’s existence makes Noctis lean against the doorway in deep contemplation, a hand on his chin. With the theory of ghosts being dispelled in an anticlimactic manner like this, it’s hard to say if he feels victorious from this sort of outcome. It doesn’t make for a thrilling retelling at all, nothing like the epic tales of King Regis’ adventures passed onto him. As much as he wants to—

“Hey.”
jump out of his skin, he doesn’t. Almost.

A soft-sounding thing stands in a corner unnoticed to Noctis’ eyes, just slightly visible in the right hand corner, almost mistakable as a pale blob. Holding a white blanket amongst a fort of pillows, he supposes that person—well—Ghost™ is the source of everyone’s nightmare. Though really, this isn’t the exact showdown he’s looking for, with blankets for shields and pillows for swords.

“Hey,” The Ghost™ says again, this time pointing at him. A monotone, devoid of any emotion whatsoever. “Will you please close the door. I want to get some sleep. Come inside if you wanna get some sleep too.”

It certainly isn’t a question. And definitely not an order. But Noctis closes the door behind him all the same, and blinks at The Ghost™.

THE CROWN PRINCE OF INSOMNIA looks baffled. You can’t blame him, really, when he’s obviously smitten by the sight of these goose-feather pillows and cottony goodness. Running your hands over the blanket, you spread it on the floor and smoothened out the wrinkles in the corners. For good measure, you trekked over towards an oaken cupboard by the side, withdrawing two more sets of comforters from its depths, ceremoniously dumping the contents all over your wall of pillows.

Carefully fashioning the pillows around your little island of blankets and comforters, you turn to look over your shoulder where you last saw Prince Noctis. True to your memory, he still stands there, silent, dark eyes taking in your hands petting the pillow, the blanket, the comforters—everything. It’s as if he hasn’t seen a pillow fort before, for goodness sake. You quell the urge to explain to him what a pillow fort is, in case his royalty prohibits him from learning such crude arts, and saved it in lieu of patting the place beside you.

“Don’t forget to take your shoes off and come here,” you say, ignoring how his eyes travel from your pillow to your face, and again, ignoring how he’s blinking rapidly like he doesn’t believe this is happening to him. “That is, if you really wanna nap. If you don’t want to, well,” you rub your nape, apologetic, “just lock the door behind you before you leave. I’m too tired to move right now. Please and thank you, Prince.”

With that, you promptly made the blanket your new home, lying on its glorious softness and resting your aching head on the pleasant support. You could practically hear the little cracks from your neck and your spine as you shifted about, trying to burrow your entire body underneath the heaps of comforters in little wriggles. After achieving the perfect position in your little nest of warmth, you closed your eyes, eagerly welcoming sleep’s embrace with arms wide open.

That is, until you hear clip clop clip clop all over the floor, making you stifle the urge to groan. Can’t exactly make faces at the prince unless you want to be tossed out for treason, even if he’s dirtying your floor. With a heavy heart and an even heavier body, you summon the last vestiges of your strength—much like how King Regis summons his grand weapons—and sat up once more. True to your suspicion, Prince Noctis has already made his way to your desk, curious eyes examining your arrangement of desktop computer, books, books, and more books, and a pen or two.

A name. He’s searching for something to identify you. But you know he’ll find none where he’s searching.

“Prince, please don’t walk all over my floors with your shoes,” you mumble, resting your chin on a pillow you hugged. His eyes briefly flit to meet yours as his hands are hard at work, generously sifting about your table’s contents in his search for a name, then he falls away, disinterested. You
almost wanted to chastise him—*almost*—if you aren’t sufficiently drained from energy. “Just… well, close the door behind you after you’re done. I’ll mop the floor tomorrow.”

He doesn’t answer your initial statement. Instead, he asks, “Who are you?”

Must he do this now? Even if he’s the prince and half of the rightful owner of the Citadel—with the other half belonging to King Regis, you aren’t sure if your muscles could support the drooping of your eyelids. It’s getting harder and harder to focus on Prince Noctis by now, on his furrowed brows and his jutting bottom lip, on his ceaseless hands and his casual shirt. The sunset paints his pale skin a watery red, making him look flushed to your eyes. Flushed or badly sunburnt, you couldn’t decide. But the room grows darker and darker with each passing minute of your observation, and sleep is gradually consuming you, starting from your eyeballs.

“I’m—” you pause to make way for a little yawn, which causes him to regard you with a cross look, one that you return with a shrug. Or at least, a sleepy attempt at a shrug. “I’m tired.”

“Ha-ha, very funny,” he quips, closing the last book shut as he puts it away. Leaning against your table, he crosses his arms over his chest and assumes every bit of regality a prince has, in his blood, under his skin, but definitely not on his tongue. “No, I’m serious. Who are you? What’re you doing here?” To his credit, he does look around again, this time in less confusion. “Is this your room?”

This again?

Unable to stifle your second yawn, you rub your watery eyes and lean your cheek against the sagging pillow. “Like I said, I’m tired, and I’m trying to sleep in my room.”

Despite having answered all of his questions, the prince appears inordinately displeased. “Do you know they’re calling you The Ghost around here?”

*The Ghost?* What an absurd name for one like you. While ghosts are certainly terrifying, spirit-like things manifesting out of unfulfilled vengeance or from having died a horrible, bloody death, you’re rather certain both your skin and flesh are still attached to one another. There are no pressing urges for you to consume brains for breakfast like zombies, nor the overwhelming urge to possess someone through their nightly dreams. How odd indeed.

“No?” you answer, though it sounds as though you returned his question with another question. At his vaguely exasperated expression, what with his brows tight and his lips pursed, you pursue a different approach to the answer. “No, not really. I just don’t care whatever they want to call me. As long as I get some sleep, I don’t really care.”

You half-expected the prince to reprimand you for tacking in ‘sleep’ on every sentence coming out from your mouth. Because, of course, fairytale princes are always haughty and snooty. Always mouthy, always cross. Always disapproving of everything in this world. Yet, Prince Noctis observes you with a startling amount of concern in his eyes—or whatever it is that you’re misinterpreting thanks to your lack of sleep—and scratches his cheek. “You’ve got permission to live here?”

“Temporarily,” you answer, not even bothering to straighten up because you’re pretty sure you’re tipping sideways on your pillows already. Your eyesight blurs with another yawn, and you’re already burying your face into the fluff. “Your father, King Regis, is very kind.” Muffled, but still audible between the high notes of *Ave Maria*. “I can’t exactly repay his kindness, but at the very least, I can return a fragment of it to his son.”
You’re pretty sure you’ve lost Prince Noctis by now, so you’re not even surprised when he meets your statement with recurring perplex. “What does that mean?”

This is silly. All you want is some sleep—or at least a quick thirty-minute nap before you resume waging a war on those papers. With the prince stumbling across your humble abode and his barrage of interrogation, sleep is naught. All is lost. You’re fighting a losing battle with your eyelids, and you’re only left with yawns to replace words for your ammo.

Your famous last words are but a few.

“You’re welcome to nap here for two hours, if you want.”

Then, your world darkens with the sunset.

mother presses a kiss on your forehead, tucking you into your cot. a silent amulet of protection for you, for all the years to come. father only watches, his eyes heavy, his mouth set in a thin, firm line. in the background, a servant plays the piano, her untrained fingers mangling the melody, unconcerned.

THE METALLIC SOUND OF A spoon clattering against ceramic startles you out of sleep. Heavy, throbbing headache pounds the back of your brain, announcing that it’s still there and it’ll soon riot into migraine if you don’t pop a few pills to take care of it. Pressing a hand to your forehead, you take a moment to let your eyes adjust from darkness to light. Dry throat. Excessively warm skin. The sky is dark and night is cool, but why are you burning up? It must be the work of a fever setting fire somewhere in your body, you think, as you draw yourself up from your cozy pile.

Past your table is a miniature kitchenette, where whitewashed cupboards deck the barren walls. It’s where you keep boxes of cereals and plastic plates, with the occasional ceramic and porcelain strewn in the mix. Milk in a small fridge fitted into a nook, saucepans and ladles lining up the bottom, mugs hanging off the hooks, a stove closest to the cutting board, and a little rug sitting by the sink. You find the prince already making himself at home, pouring a bowlful of cereal and some milk for himself. That explains the first noise.

The second noise comes from your television, where you belatedly realize he’s already set up your gaming console and even had the audacity to steal a few of your pillows to make himself comfortable. Not that you could fault him because one: You did permit him to stay; two: He is the prince after all; and three: Your pillow is a temptation few could resist. Consulting your wristwatch, its fine numbers tells you that it’s a little past 8.30, and the sun’s long gone by now. Your nap went a little too long, you supposed.

Dispossessed, you stretch from your burrow, languidly rising from your makeshift nest. “Good morning, Your Highness.”

Aloof, he barely turns to give you a once-over before returning to his cereal. “It’s night.”

“If I say good night, then it means I’m going back to sleep,” you reply. Though, after much consideration, you tacked on, “Not that anything’s bad with more sleep. Sleep is good for the body.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it, you love to sleep,” is all he says, already waving you off. He’s not wrong, but you’d like it more if he’d repeat the sentence with a little more enthusiasm in his flat drawl, just so
he’d reflect how much you love and adore sleep. Hands full with a bowl of cereal and a mug of drink, the prince makes his way to the television once again, sitting down cross-legged on the floor to make up for the lack of sofas in your room. The moment he sets aside his meal, he finally turns to you again. This time, his expression is serious.

“Who are you?”

Again?

He is really persistent, you note.

Untangling your limbs from the blanket and comforters, you remove yourself from the seductive temptation of your pillow fort and puttered over to your pantry. Seeing him helping himself to a bite of your cereal seemed unfair—not to mention, your stomach’s growling from the lack of dinner. On your tiptoes, you reach for a bowl from the overhead cupboard and paired it up with a spoon, its handle gleaming silver. Hands busy making a generous dosage of cereals and milk, you answer his question calmly.

“I’m the owner of the cereal you’re eating.”

“That stopped being funny two hours ago,” he points out, now with a frown. “I’m serious. Who are you and what are you doing here? Not many people are allowed to live here, you know. If you’re lying about what you said, the guards are gonna throw you out. Can’t smart-mouth your way out of that one.”

With all the fuss he’s throwing, you somewhat understand where he’s coming from. As much as you’d like to sustain this secrecy, the prince is making a dastardly good point. Even with the King’s blessing, it’s a little hard to stay out of trouble if his son is kicking up a storm over your existence, whether the rest of the Citadel cares or not. He is the son of King Regis, after all, and it’d be wise not to cross the man you’d end up serving—one way or another.

Retracing his footsteps, you plod your way towards the TV and settle down by his side, putting your meal on the floor. Within such close proximity, he doesn’t flinch or even edge away as his knee brushes yours. Stoic, cold, an unmoving presence. Up close and personal like this, the prince is wildly different from what the newspapers printed—dissociated from the silent pictures and brooding images, his pictures now own a voice.

A voice you know you’ll hear from years and years onwards.

His eyes search yours, and you allow him to ravage your thoughts. Not that there’s anything left in there anyway. All that’s left are the bones of a man; a family built on the tragedy of others.

He won’t know.

And he’ll never know your name either.

“I’m from the House of Andronicus,” you say, lowering your eyes. “Please call me The Architect, Your Highness.”

[tbc.]
Future chapter previews:

[2] If you were implying he practices poor hygiene and cultivated mushrooms between his toes, he’d sorely like to prove you wrong by subjecting his feet to your intense scrutiny, but that’s just wrong. And it feels weird too, just showing his toes to some girl he just met yesterday. But then again, you are weird—strange—whatever it is, and almost as obstinate as King Regis. Noctis somehow thinks you’d sooner make inappropriate comments about the shape of his feet and the length of his toes than being disgusted by it.

[3] Blatantly ignoring the fact that he stood there for a good ten minutes, you roll onto your stomach and sit up on your elbows, cradling your phone in your hands. You give the prince a levelheaded stare, one that definitely means business. ‘‘course I have to play King’s Knight. My MP refills at this hour so I’m going to finish it, then I’m gonna head back to sleep.’’

[4] Seeing how Noctis is already halfway removing his boots and toeing off his socks like it’s an unspoken agreement between you two, Prompto hastily unlaces his own boots and rolls off his own chocobo-dotted socks. He only utters a silent prayer that you don’t judge him by his socks, or worse, make fun of him for wearing them. They were on sale, damn it.

[5] Ignis sidesteps the strange behemoth-man, already having removed his shoes and socks as per custom before entering your room. In his arms are grocery bags spilling with vegetables, wrapped meat, and other condiments, settling them on your small kitchen counter. ‘‘I’ll make something quick for all of us. Would sandwiches be sufficient for tonight?’’

[6] You almost rolled your eyes at his command. ‘‘Prince, in case you haven’t noticed, the aggro’s already on me. Just that your Ray Jack’s in the way, so it looks like you’re tanking it since you’re absorbing all my hits.’’ The look on Noctis’ face is best described as the calm before a storm, so you quickly bit your tongue and remedied it with the press of a button. ‘‘Right—let me just go and get the wyverns from Prompto while you stay on the boss.’’

[7] Is this a newer version of a wet dream? With girls showing up in his bed, holding up a phone to his face? That’s impossible. Noctis is sure his toes are freezing and his fingernails are bluish bordering on purple and this really doesn’t feel like any of those hormonal teenage fantasy phases he outgrew—even if it’s too realistic to begin with.

[8] The lift takes them up to the 56th floor, where the maze-like twists and turns of many similar hallways would’ve complicated someone who doesn’t know what they’re searching for. Yet, Noctis knows. A practiced habit for him, Ignis realises, as he retraces the winding hallways to take him to your room. That much tells him of the prince’s whereabouts if he’s not with any of them.
blooming: the prince & the architect

Chapter Summary

in which Noctis learns that there are more similarities than he expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

blooming

“COME BACK WHEN YOU KNOW the answer, Prince,” you say, and with a little wave, you bury your face in the pillows once more, dead to the world.

“HEY, GLADIO? YOU KNOW WHO’S THE ARCHITECT?”

The burly man looks up from polishing his weapon, as Noctis mulls over the many scratches littered over his battered training sword. “The Architect?” he repeats, this time with an air of complete bewilderment because Noctis obviously knows what an architect is, but the architect? That’s an incredibly specific request. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Their training room is quiet, save for the droning of the central air conditioner. The prince ponders his choice of words, testing each and every one of it on his tongue, wondering if he should start with a solid ‘well’, or with a vague ‘you know’, but all he manages is, “Uh. Yesterday, I met The Ghost.” At Gladio’s bug-eyed stare, his ears grow hot and he turns away. “Shut up. That stupid rumour got to me, so I went to see it by myself. And no, it’s not a ghost.”

“…that’s what I thought,” the man muses, rubbing his scruff, but makes no mention of Noctis’ scowl. “So, what’s the ghost like? And what’s this got to do with an architect or somethin’?”

What’s The Ghost™ like? Or rather, what’s The Architect like?

In all honesty, all Noctis remembers is your insistent barrage of offers for a nap, piled pillows, and stacks of video games. Each time he redirects your attention to his question in hand, you’d slip through the gaps between his fingers and slink away with a strange rebuttal. A rebuttal that makes no sense, countering his question with even more questions. You were unrepentant, offering no answers even at the face of Lucian royalty. Such audacity.

He’s sure his father, King Regis, would know The Architect. After all, you made no qualms of announcing your connection to his father, no matter how thin it may be. Living in the isolation of the 56th floor in your sustained environment of bleak whiteness, dreary books, and a kitchenette too small, all with the express permission of his father—it’s all strange. Whether you were spinning delicate lies with your wagging tongue, or you merely spoke nothing but the truth, Noctis will never know lest he digs for answers himself.

With a sigh, Noctis palms his cheek. “She’s—“
“Oh, it’s a chick?” is Gladio’s answer, eyebrows raised in interest. “Cute? Smokin’ hot? Your type?”

The prince only makes a face at the vaguely leery way Gladio phrased it. “—weird, if you ask me. Sleep, sleep, sleep, that’s all she does. She made me wait for two hours for her to nap, and when she woke up, she just ate cereal and went back to sleep. Who the heck does that?”

He thinks he hears Gladio smother a cough between the words, “Only you,” before hiding it with another cough. As much as he wants to punch his Shield in the arm for being such a smart-ass, unfortunately, he’s right. Gladio’s eyes twinkle when he knows Noctis has no witty comeback, because who knows him better than this man right here, and Noctis’ personal advisor, Ignis?

“Anyway,” the prince clears his throat, “she called herself The Architect. Can you believe it? I pestered her for her name and she kept giving me these,” his hands form absentminded circles in the air, simulating your roundabout way of answering things, “these weird things about how she’s The Architect and she’s from the House of Andronicus.”

That catches Gladio’s attention, erasing his half-smirk into a frown. The light-hearted mood in the training room dissipates into nothingness. “House of Andronicus?” he repeats, an edge of uncertainty creeping into his voice. “You sure about that, Noct?”

And Noctis doesn’t know what to make from his abrupt change in behaviour. His Shield is hardly one who’s all straight-faced seriousness—that’s wholly Ignis’ specialty, so when Gladio’s quiet like this, something stirs in him. “… yeah, that’s what she said. House of Andronicus.”

The sudden solemnity shifts the atmosphere into something else. Gladio’s silent, fingers rubbing his chin thoughtfully, searching the hardwood floor for answers. It takes a moment before he speaks up again, and when he does, he doesn’t smile. “Quintus Andronicus is your father’s strategist. Part of the Lucian Royal Council. She must be his daughter… which means when you’re finally king, she’ll be your strategist. But as far as I know, the House of Andronicus doesn’t let females lead the pack.”

Noctis lets himself off on the 56th floor again, already turning down a familiar hallway that will soon become a habitual action for him. Clean cuts of monochromatic marble are the Citadel’s standard build, paired with glass windows polished to a perfect shine. Against the backdrop of black marble, crimson blooms await his arrival; this time, scarlet dahlias spill from the lips of the vases, with droplets of dew glistening under pale lighting. It’s still morning, fresh after his training with Gladio, so whoever brought these flowers here must’ve known her separate existence from everyone else’s. His eyes linger on the fractal of flowers before he twists the doorknob. It’s not locked. It’s almost as though you expected him, like The Architect you called yourself. But the architect of what exactly? The architect of Lucis’ rise to glory? The architect overlooking Insomnia’s webleke streets, mapping each weakness, all the while presiding over them in your private little chamber in the Citadel? The architect of his future? Lucis’ future?
The delicious smell of early morning pancakes hits him before he actually sees them. Fluffy pancakes are piled up to the high heavens above, with a generous dollop of whipped cream and syrup dripping off the layers. In the background, soft notes of piano echo throughout your room, filling in the stark silence of your humble abode. Seated at your desk, with a plateful of pancakes arranged in a haphazard way, listening to an unnamed classical music, he thinks the languid expression on your face is best described as someone who’d just gotten up from bed, one who’s in the mood for a lazy morning.

Knowing your erratic sleeping habits from yesterday, it’s always a possibility.

“Good morning, Prince,” you greet him in that same monotone, a flat line with no peaks. No traces of surprise at his sudden entry at all, just like what Noctis suspected; you could tell he’s going to show up again, one way or another. “Good timing you have there. I was just about to have my breakfast. Come in and make yourself at home, just don’t forget to close the door behind you.”

Ordinarily, it doesn’t sound like an invitation, judging from your disinterest. Yet, it doesn’t reek of insincerity either. Still, Noctis shuts the door behind him all the same and tries to take a step forward—only to be met with a sharp click of your tongue.

“No, not today. No shoes please, Prince, I just mopped the floor earlier,” you mutter, pointing at his shoes. “Please take it off and set it aside. Socks too, please and thank you.”

Now that is ridiculous. So ridiculous until Noctis feels his brows reaching his hairlines, staring at your impassive face. “Even my socks? Are you kidding?”

“Nah, no jokes.” Your expression remains unchanged. “I just don’t like smelly socks, that’s all.”

If you were implying he practices poor hygiene and cultivated mushrooms between his toes, he’d sorely like to prove you wrong by subjecting his feet to your intense scrutiny, but that’s just wrong. And it feels weird too, just showing his toes to some girl he just met yesterday. But then again, you are weird—strange—whatever it is, and almost as obstinate as King Regis. He somehow thinks you’d sooner make inappropriate comments about the shape of his feet and the length of his toes than being disgusted by it.

As much as he’d like to argue, more arguments will add up to more energy, and more energy definitely adds up to more exhaustion, so with that thought replaying in his mind, Noctis peels his socks off and winces at the icy marble floor of your living quarters. Frigid, even. How you managed to survive in this freezer, he’ll never understand, though nonetheless he finally makes his way to your table with much approval from your end. “Happy?”

“Incredibly overjoyed inside,” you reply—and there it is again, that monotone, and that apathetic expression. “Pull up a chair and sit down, I’ll make you a fresh batch of pancakes.”

As appetizing as it sounds, downing another hearty meal after training is going to kick in some bad reflux in him. “I’ll pass, had my breakfast just now.”

You remain, at most, unconcerned. “Sure. Now sit.”

Sheesh, talk about overbearing. It almost seemed as though whether or not he sits, you’re still going to carry on with or without him. Still, Noctis drags a chair and sits on the firm, high-backed leather, directly across your tableau of silver cutlery, steaming hot cocoa, and decadent pancakes. The saccharine scent following his rejection almost sways his decision, and that lavish helping of syrup and whipped cream isn’t helping, but he’s a man—he can endure this sweet torture, even if it means he’ll have bad cravings later on.
Once adequately satisfied with how he followed your instructions, you shrug, and coming from you, that motion itself must've taken so much of effort from someone who’s always complaining about being sleepy and tired all the time. “Don’t mind me, I’m gonna dig in since I’m starving. Gimme a sec, Highness.”

“Most important meal of the day,” he echoes, mirroring your shrug. “Knock yourself out.”

You didn’t dignify him with a response, not when you’re already wielding the fork and knife like scalpels in a surgery. And that is the story of how Noctis spends fifteen minutes watching your pancakes disappear with quick, painless slices.

“So… you’re Quintus Andronicus’ daughter?”

“The son he never had.” Blithe, with no denials made in between. There must’ve been something wrong with your face, because Noctis supposes he hasn’t seen a person this devoid of emotions before, even with your caustic choice of words. “The Architect, at your service.”

With breakfast cleared and dishes cleaned, there’s nothing else for you to hide from him. No odd quirks of napping in between conversations, no video games distracting your thoughts. Just him and you, seated across one another, with two mugs of instant hot cocoa served on little coasters for refreshments. You didn’t seem like you wanted to run away from the conversation, and neither did he. Not when he’s definitely going to manhandle you for answers if it comes to that.

“So why didn’t you tell me yesterday?” Noctis presses on, leaning against the backrest. “And what’s this deal with The Architect anyway? Some sort of code name?”

“Ah, but I did, Your Highness,” you’re quick to point out. “House of Andronicus, remember? Everyone knows the House of Andronicus.”

Which sorely implies he must’ve been an idiot not to know his father’s council, if he were to dissect your words in deeper context. That somehow grinds his nerves more than he thought, not noticing that you had glossed over his next question easily. Sarcasm dripping from his voice, Noctis cocks a brow. “And why is the great daughter of Andronicus living up here? Don’t you have your own house?”

You took no offense at all—and even if you did, your face remained clean from expressions. Instead, your words only left more questions in its wake. “I moved out. His Majesty King Regis is really kind though, he said I can live here if I want to learn more. I can do whatever I want, and that’s cool enough I guess.” You pause for a moment, eyes lingering heavily on his face. “Oh, before I forget, feel free to help yourself with my fridge. I got it restocked this morning.”

That was so out of topic from all seriousness, his scowl slips out of place and becomes a lopsided smirk. “Thought they said this floor’s haunted? So who’s the idiot brave enough to leave groceries on your doorstep?”

“You count off your fingers, leaning back in your armchair. “With all due respect, you’re the first idiot, Prince, for coming up here when everyone says it’s haunted. The second idiot is my house’s butler, of course. He visits once a week to grab a list of stuffs I want, then he goes on a little shopping trip. I think he likes the trip though, since he always buys extras of stuffs.”

And his chuckle morphs into a scowl again at your insult. Idiot? For someone who’s expected to
serve him in the future, you sure were mouthy enough to call him one. Glowering at you, he waves off the topic absently. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Don’t you do your shopping yourself?”

He expects another silly answer or two, or maybe a sardonic response since your tongue seems razor sharp with wit. But no. You stare at him, a certain calmness crossing your eyes. “I’m not allowed to go out. Father doesn’t like it.”

From what Gladio spoke earlier, the House of Andronicus was already established as a traditional household, disallowing females to reign supreme. A family ruled by Quintus Andronicus and his unyielding grip around everyone’s throat, stripping them of their rights as human beings. He dictates when they breathe, and when they suffocate. Whoever this Quintus was, the funny feeling lingering in Noctis’ guts tells him that he won’t be getting along with that guy anytime soon.

“You didn’t go out to school?” he ventures a little bit more, the bare beginnings of a frown creasing his brows. “No arcades, or part-time jobs? Going out with friends? Nothing like that?”

“Like I said, I wasn’t allowed to.” You echo, though pausing at the scandalised look crossing Noctis’ face. “Okay, let me take that back: It’s not like what you think. I was home-schooled, so I didn’t really need to go out. I pretty much just sat at home, study, sleep, eat, play games, or,” you shrug, “sleep again. It’s the quickest way to pass time. If I need anything from the outside, my butler will buy it for me. That’s all.”

“Home-schooled huh…” he trails off, palming his cheek as he leans forward, resting his elbow on your table. Certainly a common case for most nobility, though he’s the estranged royalty who studied in a public school. “So, if you’re home-schooled, you’ve got your qualifications to enter the university? Or are you in some long-distance course?”

You reach out to grab your mug, taking a sip out of the tepid cocoa. “I already graduated. Call me Dr. Architect if you want.”

If he weren’t listening intently, he would’ve choked on air. “You what?” Graduated? Already? His head is starting to hurt from the ludicrousness of your situation. “You mean, that doctorate? The one where old and balding people hold those titles?”

“Rude, I’m so not old and balding,” you mutter under your breath, eyes narrowed for the briefest of moments. It’s short-lived, but Noctis catches the semblance of annoyance in the quirk of your lips. “But yeah, not kidding man. I got my doctorate last year. Just working on my second doctorate now while I’m here.”

“Your second doctorate?” At this point, Noctis doesn’t even hide the biggest frown on his face. A bachelor’s degree is already hard enough to obtain for some—even though he’s already prepared to graduate with Prompto come next year. But a doctorate? Somehow, Noctis leans deeply into his palm and tips his head aside, finding the matter all too confusing. “What’re you, some child prodigy or something?”

The look you give him certainly isn’t one of disdain, just falling short of fatigue as though your tongue is long used to reciting this particular script. “Everyone who’s expected to serve under you in the future were all child prodigies at one point, Highness. If you’re smart, we’re expected to be multiple times smarter than you so that we can guide you based on our expertise. That way, you can just concentrate on making the right decisions under our advice. Standard protocol, maybe.”

Standard protocol, right. His future is going to be crowded with cheeky geniuses like this? That’s a bleak future.
Still, Ignis is definitely one of the living proofs of your conjecture. His Advisor had been groomed to be an exemplary young man with a culinary expertise above all others, penning notes from the council meetings and rephrasing them in kinder terms for him to digest. What work Noctis supposes he can do within a day, Ignis can finish them with minimal effort within an hour and clear up two more tasks out of thin air. That’s just the kind of man he is. A man to be there for him as he ascends the throne bearing the title King of Lucis.

Shaking off the foreboding thought from his head, Noctis fixes you with a look. “Fair enough. So what did you work on? History? Military tactics? Top secret stuffs I can’t know?”

The room falls into silence.

Your mouth opens, then closes.

Wordlessly.

With your mug resting in your lap, eyes downcast, the conversation died down. He doesn’t know what to make of the sudden reluctance, nor your discomfort in pursuing the topic. In his defense, it isn’t a tactless question; simply a harmless one born out of interest. Your general impassivity juxtaposed your agile tongue, carefully trimming out the secrets from your strange household. Despite your willingness to share everything in this room with him, you offered him none of yourself in the equation. Maybe to you, the lesser he knew, the better.

It reminds him of Prompto, just a little. How the blond hid himself for several years before tailing him around with a desperate eagerness for friendship, for attention. Prompto never talked about his change, never even breathed a word about it, but somehow, Noctis had a feeling it ran deep within his fragile self-esteem. Hiding a joke or two in his pocket, just to mask the jitters in his hand. The things he wasn’t prepared to talk about, Noctis didn’t pursue. Yet, they are still friends until now, and Noctis respects his decision to keep the matter under wraps until Prompto’s willing to talk about it.

Perhaps the same could be said for you.

He opens his mouth to steer the topic into a better direction, but you shake your head to stop him, seemingly coming to terms with it quicker than he thought. “Doesn’t matter,” you sigh, leaning forward to return your mug on the laced coaster. “They’re all a formality anyway. Kinda like trophies you get at school, right? The more the better. Nobody’s really interested to know what kind of stuff you’re doing, since all they care about are the rewards, the medals, the certificates. The honour and the glory you bring to the family.”

Ouch. Harsh, but it is the bitter truth.

He’s attended many formal balls merely to fulfill the invitations sent from prestigious houses serving the kingdom, but they were all the same deal. A party to celebrate a certain nobleman’s son for being wedded to a certain wealthy CEO’s daughter. Another party to celebrate a house and its occupants, merely to show off their opulent riches and gilded statues. A famous spokesman chatting Noctis’ ears off about his son’s engineering background, a pioneering research that will soon rattle Insomnia’s very core. A woman and her diamond-crusted finger, white teeth bared in a smile, introducing her docile daughter to him as she rattles off her talents like an infomercial on the television.

The honour, the fame, the glory painting the houses, adding up to their grandiose history.

He could see that his experience isn’t that far off from yours after all.

“I get what you mean,” Noctis finally sighs, rubbing his nape as he sifts through the memories,
piecing them together to deduce the elaborate tapestry of your ancestral background. “Been there, done that. Most of the nobles don’t even know what their kids do, and all they care about are the results. Sucks to be them.”

His honest answer finally elicits the faintest impression of a smile, curling the corners of your lips. It’s small, but it’s still there. Just a small smile with undertones of regret. You didn’t reply.

Swiveling your armchair slightly to the right, your hands rest on your lap as your gaze falls on the vast landscape of the Crown City. From your little contained environment, he wonders what the world outside looks like through your eyes. The hustle and bustle of the streets and their cars, racing up and down the expressways as everyone goes about their daily lives. The seedy suburbs and their dank alleyways, with smoke-riddled hawkers peddling their wares on foot. The heady scent of perfume coming from brand name stores located on cobblestone streets, little ladies prancing about in their tiny heels as they brandish their credit cards like swords. The shouts and screams from public parks and excited children, all running about in their game of king-and-thief.

A world beyond these four walls, a world beyond your reach.

It takes a long while before he hears your voice once again.

“When you’re born into a glorious house, there is a certain image you have to maintain. And you’re expected to play the part of an actor, careful enough not to taint the image you carry.”

He knows. He knows it all too well.

Noctis turns away, drooping in his seat as he pockets his hands. Hands that gradually curl into tight fists, fingernails cutting crimson crescents on his palm. The image he carries as the Crown Prince of Lucis, it is a painting on a canvas all too big. Each brushstroke from each king depicts each legacy he left behind, detailing his every success and his every loss. King Regis will finish his picture soon, his paint dry and his fingers weary. And he will then pass the brush to Noctis, whose hands are still trembling with uncertainty.

Lost in his thoughts, he almost doesn’t hear what you said. Words that are soft, airy, and full of forlorn as your gaze remains transfixed on Insomnia. Unblinking, lost in your own thoughts as well.

“…once I’ve succeeded my father, only then I’ll be able to serve you, Prince, as your military strategist. I swear I will.”

NIGHT COMES, WITH IGNIS COOKING dinner at his apartment. Lying on his stomach, Prompto taps away on his phone screen, humming along to familiar background music of King’s Knight. Noctis lies sideways on the couch, eyes trained on the latest pages of a comic book Prompto lent him. With the last sizzle in his pan, Ignis turns off the stove and plates some stir-fried vegetables, one of the dishes Noctis loathes with all his heart, and brings it out to the table.

He isn’t surprised to see Prompto and Noctis both lounging at the living room, lazing about. Both already 20 and attending university together, they’re inseparable from the start, high school and heydays of youth. Ignis doesn’t stifle a sigh when he sees the mess of books and pens they left on the dining table, knowing that he’d inevitably have to clean it up. As he busies himself with the process of capping each pen and zipping them into pencil cases, he clears his throat.

“I heard from Gladio that you met Quintus’ daughter.”

He doesn’t elicit a reaction from Noctis, whose attention is rapt on the comic. What he managed to
interest, instead, is Prompto. The blond perks up from his lounging, momentarily distracted from King’s Knight, and blinked at Ignis. “Quintus’ daughter? Who’s that?”

“Just the daughter of King Regis’ military strategist,” he replies, stuffing the cases into each bag. Once that’s done with, he piles up their workbooks and carries it to the side, where it joins the rest of their contained mess. “There used to be a rumour circulating the Citadel that he had a son before, but it quickly died down when they found out it was a daughter instead.”

At this, Noctis finally lifts his head, quietly closing the pages to the comic book. Almost owlish, Ignis thinks, with the way the prince stares at him, but he says nothing about it. “Was Quintus disappointed?”

A very vague question indeed. The advisor only raises a brow at that. “About?”

Noctis shrugs, nonchalant. Try as he might, he couldn’t fool Ignis with that half-hearted gesture. “About having a daughter,” he clarifies, murky blue eyes darting to meet his green ones in a skittish manner. “She didn’t say anything much.”

From Prompto’s end, it looks like he had lots of question bubbling in his mouth, wanting to know what this is all about. Ignis doesn’t fault him, of course. Political intrigue is always a handful of things, catching the interest of many from near and far alike. But the blond casts furtive looks between them, still holding his phone in his hands, King’s Knight blaring from the speakers. Waiting, waiting with bated breath.

Ignis only sighs again and adjusts his spectacles, pushing it up the bridge of his nose. “Quintus is… for lack of better word, a traditionalist,” he begins, crossing his arms over his chest. “He’s fastidious and excellent in every way a man of your father’s council should be, but the Andronici lineage prioritizes sons over daughters. And only sons have been allowed to spearhead the family. The daughters are, unfortunately, cast aside.”

“Woah, that stuff still exists?” Prompto blurts out. He’s met with Noctis’ knowing glance from the corner of his eyes, and his expression shifts into one of discomfort as he lowers his voice in a conspiratorial hush. “So what about his daughter? Is she ever gonna get a chance to become the head of the Andronicus?”

Ignis closes his eyes. This, he knows with a fact. “I doubt it. Quintus is firm in what he wants. At most, she will be married to a man suiting her pedigree, and her husband will rise as the next head of Andronicus. She will only serve as a dear figurehead from then onwards, amounting to nothing more in the end.”

Such is the fate of a female Andronicus. Treated as currency and traded between families, for power, for prestige, for honour, their worth amounts to nothing. Only the beautiful and the graceful are revered, placed on the highest of pedestals for everyone to admire. Yet, they are nothing more than arm ornaments at parties and balls, smiling for their husbands, smiling for the camera flashes.

But Noctis only shakes his head and reopens the comic book with interest. He doesn’t look at Ignis when he says this, but there is a certain finality underlining his voice, as though he knew better than everyone else.

“… nah, I don’t doubt it. She told me that she’s definitely going to succeed her father. We’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

[tbc.]
thank you very much for everyone’s generous kudos and favourites and comment!

suddenly the laidback fic developed a plot. oh no. ovo ;; but tbh we need more stories

of girls chasing their dreams yaaas.

following the standard latin names for ffxv, i decided that most (if not all) noble houses

have latin names, so i kinda had to give a suitable name for the background house as

well. ;;v;; ) and i’ve written until chapter 9 so far… and loads of shit have already hit the

fan. poor noctis. oh no.

PREVIEW:

“Your father is part of the Lucian Royal Council after all, so my curiosity is only

natural,” Ignis replies, leaning forward to rest his forearms on your desk. “His

Highness also said that you wanted to succeed Quintus as head of the Andronicus

family, and knowing how the family works, I doubt that Quintus would allow this to

happen. As such, I’m only concerned if Prince Noctis will get involved in this feud.”
blooming: wings of freedom

Chapter Summary

in which noctis adds a party member to his team

Chapter Notes

REFERENCE: Claude Debussy - Rêverie

See the end of the chapter for more notes

blooming

“you’re such an intelligent child,” mother croons, palm on your cheek, her thumb rubbing loving circles on your skin. “so intelligent… so brilliant, my beloved daughter…”

warm, it’s warm. hot summer’s day, the sun beating down your back, and perspiration running down your arms. crystalline sands, blue seas and blue skies as far as the eyes could see, galdin quay is beautiful. mother is beautiful. sweet mother and her boozy smile, her endearing habit of palming your cheek and letting you nuzzle her hand like a kitten to a cat. she would smile her brilliant smile, one full of teeth and crinkled eyes, and you would return it with one of your own—even with your missing tooth and your split lip. it’s a broken reflection of her beauty, but it’s the best imitation you could manage.

the sea breeze picks up and mother’s hair whips around her as she raises an arm to shield you from sand. oh mother, mother, sweet mother of yours. it’s just sand. it would take more than sand and father’s hands to bring you down. so you grin that toothy smile of yours when the winds passed, and promise her this:

“when i get older, mama, we’ll leave insomnia forever.”
The man pauses mid-stirring, looking up from his given task of making a pot of tea. “Nothing noteworthy, milady,” he reports, slow, before he carries on with his task. Capping the pot and carrying it over to your table, he spreads out some fine porcelain, pairing up the teacups with their saucers. “Maids and manservants are both toxic waste, and your father is as incorrigible as ever.”

He fills up a teacup before passing it over to you, in which you accept with a grateful nod. Taking a sip out of the steaming liquid, you gaze at the delicate roses painted on the pale porcelain. “And if you were to be rude? What do you think of the house?”

This, he answers with a hearty laugh, throwing his head back. “If I were to be rude? Those fuckers are still partying every night after you left, milady. Good riddance, they said. Hah.” He snorts, rolling his eyes. “But fuck them. They’re no longer your problem. Let them die with that place.”

You lower your eyes, blinking once. “I see.”

At thirty-three, Bryon is still as upbeat as his handsome nineteen-year-old self. Only the light wrinkles around his eyes betray his age. He wears his prim ponytail with pride, sunlight carding through his acid white hair, flushing his ashen skin. Albinism and its list of well-known deficiencies never stopped him from doing what he wants—a long list inclusive of fistfights and illegal street races at night, but father took a shine to him. Bailed him out of jail, gave him a proper roof over his head, and gifted him the uniform of the Andronicus.

A courageous fighter, certainly cheeky at times, but Byron is Byron, and he is Byron of the Andronicus. More like Byron the Babysitter, you grouse to yourself, as he finally takes a seat with his own cup of tea.

“So, milady,” he says, conversational as always, “how’ve you been? If I may be bold, I think living in the Citadel suits you. You look healthier here, at least.”

“Healthier?” you quirk a brow, almost scoffing. “Been stuffing my face with so much of cereal, you wouldn’t believe me. I have cereal for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and supper. Cereal all day long. I’m gonna get sugar overdose one of these days.”

Again, he laughs, and the familiar sound comforts you. A familiar sound you always hear back at home, and now here it is, right by your side. “Dear, dear, milady. That’s not what I meant. Well,” he amends, “maybe a little about the food, since you’re finally eating what you like, whenever you like. But it’s something else. You look happier here, that’s what I meant.”

“Happier?”

“Yeah. Happier.” Byron nods. “It shows on your face, and on your skin. You’re finally happy now, aren’t you?”

Happiness is subjective. Happiness is when you hold a brand new video game in your hands, waiting to be played. Happiness is when King’s Knight gets patched with a new update, and you’d roll over in bed as you scuffled through the stages. Happiness is when Byron drops by with a new book, babbling about his latest reading recommendation and how you should read it too. Happiness is when mother sits at the piano, her elegant fingers pressing the ivory keys to produce a hymn only the Astrals could’ve bestowed, her eyes closed, eyelashes fluttering.

And happiness is when King Regis’ letter finally came, freeing you from the shackles within.

So are you happy?
Slowly, your lips form the beginnings of a smile. And it is an infectious disease, for Byron begins to smile too.

“Yeah… yeah, you’re right. I’m happy.”

**IT HAS BEEN A WEEK** since Noctis last visited your quarters, Ignis knows that much. Perhaps the novelty of such visits has worn off and he’s disinterested in your existence, letting it fade away at the back of his head. Ignis doesn’t know if it’s a good thing or bad, but sooner or later, you’ll come into service if you truly rose in Quintus’ eyes. And once you finally succeeded the Andronici, then you’ll serve Noctis with him as your king, and Ignis as his personal advisor.

If he were to be honest, he finds your existence in the Citadel rather baffling. Only the royal family affords the exclusivity of living in the Citadel, and certainly not a common person like you. Despite Quintus’ position in the council, Ignis is rather certain *that* itself wouldn’t ensure a spot for you in a place like this. Something else must’ve happened. *Something.*

As much as he doesn’t want to interfere with Noctis’ personal life, his questionable choice of friends, and his unwinding interest in comics and games, Ignis only knows the barebones of the House of Andronicus. A single rumour from years back, a hushed murmur passed between servant to servant. How a certain Quintus of a certain Andronicus spoke of his wife, heavy with a son, when it was a daughter instead. And how Quintus erased the existence of a certain daughter as soon as it appeared, removing her from the watchful eyes of Insomnia.

A young Ignis paid no mind to the rumour at first, finding it entirely unrelated to his life of serving the Crown Prince. Words are words, and some are mouthier than others. But now, with Noctis’ fateful encounter with Quintus’ estranged daughter, he knows he needs a deeper grasp of the situation to foresee how it’ll play out. It wouldn’t do if Noctis were to get caught up in the Andronici crossfire when the time comes. Such is one of the many tasks of an advisor to the prince.

The central lift dings and lets him off the 56th floor, where it is devoid of servants. Most floors are anyway, since King Regis only occupies certain floors for his meals and meetings, while the royal chambers are located on a different wing altogether. Ignis doesn’t need to look far to know where you stayed, for the obvious indication lies in the two vases crowning the entrance to your room. Crimson chrysanthemums lean heavily outside the white china, their heavy heads lolling with their weight. From the looks of it, they are fresh, specked with droplets of water as though they were recently groomed to perfection.

Someone else must’ve been here before. Either a personal servant of the Andronicus, or someone in the Citadel who’s aware of your unique predicament.

Without much delay, Ignis breaks his attention from the flowers and raises a fist to make three sharp knocks at the door. Each sound cracks loud and clear against the wood, so it would be impossible for you not to hear it—unless you were embodying Noctis’ spirit and slept heavily through it. Albeit soft and a little inaudible, seconds later, Ignis hears faint traces of someone’s voice coming from inside, presumably yours.

“Come in.”

It’s more than enough permission for him to twist the doorknob and invite himself into your room. Much like most rooms in the Citadel, it had large, clear glass panels that showcased the entire Insomnia panorama as a feast for the senses. Minimalist in nature, it contained the barest of necessities such as bookcases, a television, some selection of video games and console, an absurdly
large pile of pillows leaning by a cupboard, a kitchenette, and a worktable littered with papers and pens. A worktable with someone sitting behind it.

“Oh,” he hears you say, and watches as your eyes grow round. “I seem to be meeting lots of new people lately. Hello, hello, do come in. Just leave your shoes and socks to the side, close the door, and join me at the table.”

He doesn’t want to be rude, of course, so Ignis peels off his shoes and socks before he makes his way to your table, seating himself on a firm leather chair across yours. Finding absolutely moot point in beating around the bush, Ignis decides to cut to the chase straight away. “My name is Ignis Scientia, and I’m Prince Noctis’ personal advisor. I trust you are Quintus Andronicus’ daughter?”

“It seems that is what everyone calls me lately,” you note, though the odd detachment in your voice is something he finds incredibly unsettling for some reasons. “But yeah, you’re right, I’m his daughter. If you’re His Highness’ personal advisor, then I guess you’ve heard some stories about me? From the Prince himself?”

How sharp.

Ignis adjusts his eyeglasses and stares at you as he formulates some form of reply. There’s nothing particularly striking about your features, not like former Princess Lunafreya’s flaxen hair, nor her watery blue eyes brimming with innocence of an Oracle. Dressed in a simple shirt, surrounded by sheaves of papers and a computer, you are the image of a bumbling young adult with dark circles and a gaunt look in your hollow eyes. A part of him wonders what possessed Noctis to strike a conversation with you—not once, but twice, but he supposes he’ll find out soon enough.

“Yes, His Highness mentioned you before. Seeing how you’re the Quintus’ daughter, I had to come and confirm this for myself.”

His statement elicits a quiet hum, a toneless sound from you. “Interesting. So everyone’s here just because I’m his daughter?”

“Your father is part of the Lucian Royal Council after all, so my curiosity is only natural,” he replies, leaning forward to rest his forearms on your desk. “His Highness also said that you wanted to succeed Quintus as head of the Andronicus, and knowing how the family works, I doubt that Quintus will allow this to happen. As such, I’m only concerned if Prince Noctis will get involved in this feud.”

He knows it’s unbecoming of him to nose into someone else’s private matters, what with his direct questions that lacked courtesy when it comes to addressing a female. For an outsider like him meeting someone for the first time and then getting all personal, he could’ve been thrown out of the door with a solid smack on his face. Yet, he doubts you cared about it, because your face says it all. Blank, ironed out of expression, a poker face. Not a single twitch of your eyebrow, not even a sarcastic smile. It was like dealing with Noctis all over again when he’s in one of those moods, and Ignis isn’t quite sure what to make of this situation.

Then you finally decide to mirror his posture and leaned forward, propping your chin against your palm.

“I know, and I’m not planning to inconvenience the Prince in any sort of way,” you mutter, locks of your hair brushing against your cheek, partly obscuring your eyes. “I think the whole Citadel knows how much father doesn’t like me. It’s not surprising, but I’m not going down without a fight. Father should know that much, at least.”
Father, father. Not dad. Just father, a formal representation of a parental title. The distinct formality in your description tells him all he needs to know about your relationship with Quintus. An incredibly strained one, at that. Adjusting his spectacles in a habitual response, Ignis releases a quiet breath of air. “I apologise. It seems I’ve brought painful memories with that knowledge.”

“No, no, don’t sweat it.” Your hand is quick to bat off all apologies, but the indistinct indifference in your voice makes him wonder if you truly meant what you said. “I know how he is. That’s why I had to leave the house. Only statues can live in there anyway. Or dead people. Anything that doesn’t breathe.”

It’s a good thing you brought it up on your own because he’s uncertain how to pry deeper into the matter without seeming more obnoxious than he is already. Sensing no other opportunity better than the immediate, Ignis perseveres. “On that note, how exactly did you manage to achieve this feat? The Citadel is only reserved for the royalty, and the servants only occupy the lower quarters. Even if you’re nobility, or your family serves the royals, rules have explicitly stated that none other may live inside the Citadel than the Lucian royalty themselves.”

If your expression had been hard to read before, now, it’s downright unreadable.

With a shrug, your answer comes just as easily as the action. “I wrote a letter to King Regis. With how father is, he’d rather keep my existence a secret and marry me off to another man he deems worthy to be his successor. If I can’t get through father, that’s fine. But I had to get through to King Regis, no matter what. He has to know I exist.” You pause, your words coming out terse, like you were reaffirming your own existence. Not to him, not to anyone else. “I’m here, and I matter too.”

At your final answer, Ignis allows silence to curtain the conversation. While it lets you stave off your emotions from showing, it lets him collect his thoughts as well, since it’s getting harder to describe this odd mixture broiling in his head. A mixture of what-ifs, misplaced sympathy, and logical explanations.

There is a certain depth to your story that he knows he couldn’t reach out. Something presumably sensitive in nature, and something incredibly private in sentiment. But he supposes he’ll let it slip past for now. What matters the most is ensuring you’re not a threat to King Regis, and certainly not to Noctis himself. The rest of these complicated semantics can be resolved on a much later date, he reasons. A much later date of researching into the Andronici lineage, more likely.

“I assume King Regis took plight to your situation and made special arrangements for you to live here?” he asks, just for the sake of filling in the silence. “Knowing His Majesty, his word is law.”

“No. It’s not His Majesty.” You shake your head, and Ignis never thought the day would come when he’d hear a note of shame colouring your voice, what with your general impassivity to life. “I actually requested to live here because I know if I lived anywhere else outside, father would retrieve me sooner or later. But if I live here, closest to His Majesty, then father can never touch me. He knows he can’t.”

A wise choice, as expected of an Andronicus. Calculating the risks in your actions, you constructed a plan delicate by nature and bypassed your own father, venturing where his hands were tied by the King’s law. What he cannot touch, he cannot have. Yes, the risks were ultimately high, a gamble had to be done, but you seemed to be enjoying the success of the payoff. Now Quintus is silenced in exchange for your freedom. And enjoying your newfound freedom within these four walls is an apt choice.

While the details of your plan are still rather abstract to his eyes, and many more questions remain to be answered, Ignis fixes you with a look. “And when will you tell Prince Noctis of this?”
A pause.

There’s something about the prince’s name that elicits a faint reaction on your face. Whether it’s one of shared familiarity, or one of quiet discontent, he doesn’t know. A reaction simply too brief for him to read. But you tear your gaze away from him and look upon Insomnia through those glass walls, a solemn silence following. A heartbeat passes. Two heartbeats. Three heartbeats and a half. Six heartbeats later, your lips curve with each syllable, and your words resonate in the silence.

“Maybe if he comes up here again, I will.”

**reverie. looking at mother was like looking at a reverie. a reverie painted in pastels, sweet shades of spring intermingled with the warmth of summer skies. she smells of lavender and baby powder, a scent of nostalgia you could never replicate despite its stunning simplicity. father only wrinkles his nose at her choice, lips curling in distaste. he says nothing of it—but you’re sure she’ll stop wearing it sooner or later.**

three words.

“they saw you.”

**books have long worshipped the phrase of three words, often linking them to the glorified nothing of ‘i need you’ and ‘i miss you’ and ‘i love you’. but these three words are different. these three words are your death sentence.**

with your hand in mother’s, you feel her every tremble. it starts from her fingers—a jerk, as though someone doused her in cold water. then, she shakes. small, minute trembles like ice darting through her veins. her face is clean from any expression, but her hand says otherwise. your eyes dart from her face to father’s, one after another in quick successions, with your heart in your throat and your stomach under your feet. when mother says nothing in defence, father’s eyes slither from her to you. you know that look very well.

it only takes him three words to come up with a solution to the problem, the strategist of a great calibre he is.

“take her away.”

three words, and mother’s warmth leaves your world. forever.

**THE CITADEL, IN ALL ITS glorified stories, is actually an oversized office with workers constantly drugged on Ebony to survive their overtime. At least that’s what Noctis thinks. Maids skulk every corner and members of the Kingsglaive patrol the hallways in select intervals, keeping a wary eye against intruders and the like. Even at 4 a.m. with a sudden craving for burgers, all it takes is a single call through the intercom to summon a serving of hamburger, fries, and diet soda—though the royal kitchen has it all measured out in healthy portions fit for a prince to consume. While the amnesties are all so convenient and has everyone envious for the title of a prince, to Noctis, it means little to nothing.**

He’s stopped living in the stuffy Citadel for a while now, only making occasional appearances within palace grounds for either training with Gladio, or sharing a monthly dinner together with his father. Because, seriously, nothing beats calling Prompto at 2.30 a.m. just to sneak off on foot to enjoy
Insomnia’s seediest streets, with its charcoal-grilled beef patties and Leiden pepper fries, accompanied by flickering flares of LED advertisements to light their paths.

So why is it that he finds himself taking the lift to the 56th floor again, right after getting his ass handed to him by Gladio’s oversized training sword?

*Just to make good on the invitation from Ignis,* Noctis thinks to himself, as the lift dings and he drags his aching body through the chilly hallway.

He’s heard your story from one end to another, courtesy of his personal advisor’s dramatic retelling. Picking through his dinner of catoblepas steak, he listened mulishly when Ignis divulged his afternoon encounter. A single letter from King Regis was what it took to wrench you away from Quintus, yet, is it truly better to keep you confined within these walls instead? From his observation, your designated quarters contained everything of the physical nature needed to sustain a comfortable existence. Your personal butler runs errands for your every want and need, giving you a fragment of what the world outside has to offer.

But what about freedom?

What about your freedom?

What about late nights at Crow’s Nest, chewing through hypertension-inducing fries and cardiac arrest burgers? What about multiplayer shooters at the arcade, and creaky swings at the park? What about the clean scent of a bookstore, and the hushed murmurs in a coffee shop? As much as he’s mulled over your caged existence, he knows he’ll never find the answers through Ignis. It’s something he has to find on his own.

Noctis stops at your doorway, greeted by a pair of camellias for this week’s bouquet. He doesn’t even need to open the door to know what you’re listening to—*Rêverie*. It’s been a while since he’s last heard this, from his earlier years of personal tutors relentlessly droning on and on about the importance of classical music to one such as the prince himself. Though the name of the composer eludes him yet again, the clear, dreamlike notes are familiar, even memorable enough to him.

A hand on the doorknob, he pushes the door open. It falls open with nary a single creak, unveiling the panoramic view of the Crown City from a vantage point. Here, the air is colder but the afternoon sunlight burns bright enough to cast distorted reflections on the marble floor. And the floor is also where he finds you sleeping—or napping—on a sunny patch, nestled soundly in the embrace of your pillows and comforters.

Hair all mussed up over the sheets, chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, you hugged a pillow as you slept on, oblivious to his entry. Not even the high notes of *Rêverie* rouse you from your slumber as the song reaches its crescendo. The serene sight unsettles him, just a little. It’s so easy to see the peace reflected on your face, with your eyebrows no longer knitted in a perpetual frown, and your lips not upturned in a glower or two. There’s only hushed silence in your sleep, and nothing more than that.

Perhaps for someone like you, whose ostentatious house is in shambles, the majestic Citadel must’ve offered great reassurance like no other. Something so safe, something so secure, something that lets you drop your guard and rest your weary bones. Something that Noctis only finds when he’s back at his apartments, surrounded by Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio.

Without thinking, he closes the door behind him and toes off his shoes and socks. He supposes could keep himself entertained for an hour or two before he heads back to his apartment, or at least until you wake up—whichever that comes first. His first visit had him spending more than two hours
while you were out of commission, and he spent it by clocking in more hours on a video game from your modest library of console games. As he is half-bent inspecting the steel casings from *Persona 5* to *Assassin’s Creed*, a persistent beeping sound comes from behind, the sound of a typical alarm programmed on a phone.

While *Rêverie* didn’t wake you up, the alarm certainly did.

Peering over his shoulder, Noctis observes your little languid movements as you rise from your temporary death. Much like any zombie surfacing from the ground in any horror movie, first comes the bleary opening of your eyes, then the stretch of an arm to the skies as if you were trying to claw your way out of your pillow. After maintaining the pose for several seconds, your arm drops listlessly to the side, and you frantically fought the temptation of falling into your pillow’s trap once more. He knows—he can tell by the lazy droop of your eyelids how much you wanted to go back to sleep again.

From the looks of it, sleep-hazy and still groggy, you haven’t noticed his presence yet. All you do is to turn over on your side where he could see your dazed expression clearer than before, a hand desperately fishing underneath your mountain of comforters for the source of the chiming alarm, and finally withdrawing what seems to be your phone. On screen, you swiped upwards and the room descends into silence once more, save for *Rêverie* in the background.

With your attention focused entirely on your phone, it’s safe to say that he’s entirely invisible in the room. He’s been standing by your television for several minutes now, yet you still didn’t spot his obvious existence. Instead, you continued to tap on your screen one after another, and after several heartbeats, another familiar jingle plays in your room.

Noctis blinks.

Because, really, it’s hard not to know it’s the opening song from King’s Knight, what with its heroic anthem and flashy trumpets.

Still oblivious to his presence, he hears the comical beeps every time you press a button on the game, maybe scrolling through the daily quests posted by the developers, or checking your in-game mail for daily login items, or upgrading your equipment at the armourer. Now it’s borderline ludicrous how he’s entirely unnoticeable when you’re busying yourself with the game, and he doesn’t know what’s the best way to make his presence known. Because once someone starts playing King’s Knight, Ragnarok could be upon them and they’d still be ploughing through polygonal monsters on screen.

And that gets a thought running in his head: Did you just set an alarm so that you’d wake up on time to play King’s Knight? *Seriously?* Even as a self-proclaimed hardcore fan of King’s Knight, Noctis wouldn’t sacrifice his nap for something like this.

Finding this strange—since you’re strange and this situation is just *too* strange, all he could think of is clearing his throat loud enough across the room, punctuating it with a throaty, “Hey.”

That does the trick.

You freeze uncharacteristically, almost dropping your phone in the process. He watches as your brows furrow and you peer over your device carefully, as if expecting a behemoth to strike. Of course, when you finally realise it’s none other than him, your wary expression drops into one of immediate relief and you had the gall to roll your eyes, sighing under your breath.

“Geez, Prince, give a girl some warning, will you?”
Now the fault’s on him? He crosses his arms and leans against the shelf, cocking a brow. “Not my fault someone just woke up to play King’s Knight. I’ve been standing here for the past ten minutes.”

Blatantly ignoring his proclamation of having to stand there for the past ten minutes, you rolled onto your stomach and sat up on your elbows, cradling your phone in your hands. You give him a level-headed stare, one that definitely means business. “’Course I have to play King’s Knight. My MP refills at this hour so I’m going to finish it, then I’m gonna head back to sleep.”

Hearing the confirmation from your own lips just hurts his head. “… you actually set an alarm just to wake up and play it?”

“Uh-huh.” Unabashed, you nod along. Your gaze drops from looking at him to your game, and he hears more comical beeps coming through. “Nothing wrong with that. It feels kind of wasteful if you don’t spend it on time, you know. If you don’t play the game past its MP refill time, you’re kind of prolonging the hours you have to wait for the MP to refill. And you could’ve used the hours to do something about it, probably to level up or to grind for stuffs. Don’t you ever get that feeling when you play a game?”

And now you’re ignoring him in favour of King’s Knight. That level of sheer calculative attitude in a game is hard to beat. Shaking off the crawling sensation in his stomach, Noctis pushes himself off the shelf and strides over to your spot. Sitting cross-legged by your nest, he holds out a hand and looks at you pensively.

“Let me see your account.”

You shrug. Not much resistance is there when you gingerly place your phone on his palm, your cold fingertips brushing over the hard calluses on his dominant hand. Bringing the device closer, Noctis begins his inspection on your King’s Knight account. The home screen depicts your character, one that he recognises as Kaliva, the staple wizard of the gaming series. But what catches his interest is Kaliva’s art, decked in garments he doesn’t recognise. Mild curiosity powering his search, Noctis scrolls downwards and hits the Stats button.

Oh.

His eyes widen.

Oh.

Coupled with your previous explanation on your tenacity for using MP at its precise point of restoration, the numbers on the screen don’t surprise him anymore—well, what’d he expect anyway? “Rank 186? Tier IV, necromancer class? Seriously? How many hours did you invest in this game? You upgraded him past wizard?”

His disbelief has you grimacing a little, avoiding his eyes altogether. “Um. Lots of hours. You kinda need lots of Mage’s Credits to upgrade him past Wizard to Mage, and then you need Sorcerer’s Credits to upgrade to Sorcerer, then you can choose to specialise as an Elementalist or a Necromancer. I picked Necromancer because it has tons of AOE skills, but you have to pay the price with longer cooldown. Still cool though, you can solo lots of dungeons without needing to call for backups.”

Yep, that sums it up. That nicely sums up his thoughts.

“You’re crazy.” He deadpans. “You’re definitely crazy.”

The grimace turns into a full-out wince. “’m not. Anyway, give that back.” Now, it’s your turn to
hold out your hand expectantly. “I need to farm some dragon scales.”

There’s not much argument he can make against someone who’d use her strategizing skills on something as measly as video games. Nevertheless, Noctis returns your phone and watches you furiously pressing through the game’s navigations without reading each button. At this point, he could safely assume that you even memorised the layout for each command anyway.

On screen, Kaliva materialises inside a gritty dungeon and wields an impressively animated staff, one that’s unfurling dark miasma at the end of its jewelled tip. Waves of skeletons and undead monsters assault him, but clack clack clack goes the button on your game and he watches in faint envy as Kaliva effortlessly fends them off with a devastating slew of area-concentric spells. He wonders if he can get his Warrior, Ray Jack, to be as strong as Kaliva the Necromancer too.

Without much thought, Noctis casts a look at your direction and watches as your nimble fingers input one command after another, commanding Kaliva to guide you to victory.

Lost in your own world, you’re pointedly ignoring his presence now. Concentrating on the game, and nothing else but the game. The Prince of Lucis is as good as wallpaper. Chocobos will roam the skies. The sun is never going to rise. People are going to start turning into daemons. The Citadel will fall. Yet, no matter what happens, he knows he can count on you to ignore the freakish end of the world just to get this dragon scale of yours.

So he waits. He waits a few minutes as you’re rapt in game, narrowly avoiding the final boss’ claws before delivering a finishing blow. Only when your phone proclaims VICTORY in proud letters across the screen, Noctis leans sideways to rest against your pillows, making you shift slightly to make some room for his body.

“So,” he starts, peering at your screen, “what’re dragon scales? High level stuff?”

Your head rose sharply from looking at your phone, he thinks you could’ve cracked your neck. And now you’re looking at him as though he’s stupid for asking such a question. Cue an uncomfortable few seconds of persistent staring, one full of disbelieving eyes and pursed lips. But seemingly coming to better judgment, instead of poking fun at his stupidity like what Gladio would do, you heave a sigh and patiently offer an explanation. An incredibly lengthy explanation.

“… you need dragon scales for upgrading the Revenant weapons. You can’t upgrade Revenant-class weapons with crystals anymore once you reach its weapon cap. They’re really strong and really special, so you gotta grind at these element-specific wyverns at the Coral Cave until the scales drop, and then you feed it to your Revenant weapon. Once you get your weapon to Level 10, then you have to uncap the Revenant weapon with a same copy of the Revenant weapon, so it means you need to have at least two—“

This is crazy. You’re crazy.

And it’s making him crazy too.

“—okay, stop.” Noctis holds up a hand, cutting you off mid-sentence. “Just show me where I can get this weapon thing.”

And he’s definitely crazy for entertaining thoughts of equipping Ray Jack with a Revenant weapon. He could just think of all the sleepless nights he’s going to suffer as he grinds through one level after another just for a scale to drop. At this rate, Prompto’s going to shed tears of blood when he’s dragged into this whole Revenant weapon shenanigan too. No doubt Ignis’ judgmental stare will begin once they’re both drowning in King’s Knight over their breakfast, lunch, and especially
You take a moment to tap on a few buttons on the screen, and it brings up a series of numbers, followed by an empty slot for inputting an ID. And Noctis knows once this goes down, it won’t go down well.

“… well, let me invite you to my party first,” you say, as a prelude to his brand of hell. “What’s your friend ID, Prince?”

And that is how Noctis forgets going home in two hours when he overstays his welcome for five instead.

[tbc.]
Chapter Summary

In which Noctis adds Prompto to the equation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**blooming**

THE WORLD IS ONLY BLACK or white. There are no greys in between, no room for grey areas, no room for doubt, no room for mistakes. A mistake isn’t as easily removed as a pencil scratch, remedied by an eraser. A mistake on the chess board comes with expending a pawn to conquer each chequered land, building an empire on the corpses of others. It starts small, consuming the infantry—the pawns. Then it comes with sacrificing the rook, letting it fall. Then, like a plague, it spreads—claiming the life of a knight, a bishop. Yet, even with its people disposed and the kingdom in tatters, the king and the queen shall not fall.

They must not fall.

And it is your task to ensure they will never fall.

That is the world you live in.

"he is your butler from today onwards."

you chance a glance at the pale, white man. illuminated by the morning sunlight, he stands in attention with his hands behind his back and his long ponytail over his shoulder, unsmiling. his startling paleness looks very out of place in this room, you realise, for other manservants wore bleak blacks for their uniforms, whilst his is white. white, just like everything he is. strange, white hair, with sideswept bangs falling over his forehead and a ponytail—and even stranger eyes, for the greys are flecked with watery reds. almost like clean water seeping with blood. you’d know, because you’ve washed your hands before.

he must’ve felt your questioning gaze, but he’s been trained to ignore it. everything owned by father is trained by his own two hands anyway, so you’re not surprised this new butler of yours is just following instructions. it doesn’t matter. nothing matters. nothing ever matters in this house except for father himself. still, among all these wan-faced servants and a dour father, there is a face you yearn to see once again. just to see that familiar smile of hers, and to feel that familiar warmth in your hand.

you turn to father, fingers nervously toying with the hems of your shirt. “where’s mama?”

as always, father remains an expressionless figure whose face betrays nothing of his thoughts. you can’t get a good read on him—but what can a five-year-old fathom anyway, except for the love of her parents and the numbers on her fingers? he doesn’t answer, instead choosing to stride towards
your butler. the strange white man straightens up on his feet, face forward, even as father stands as an imposing presence before him.

and with a clean, solid crack, father slaps him.

you shriek, hands slapping over your clamour. your gut twists and turns, your heart in your throat, your stomach on the ground under your feet, just the same way when you last held mother. the trembles that once wracked her overtakes your limbs, rendering you a quivering mess. the butler, to his credit, doesn’t flinch, nor does he show any signs of pain. but you could see the reds rising to his injured cheek, washing over the white of his skin.

father turns to you once more, and the faintest smile upturns a corner of his lips. father hardly smiles. and you hated that expression—you hated it when he finally shows his expression.

“did i forget to mention?” he says, light and airy with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “he is your whipping boy as well.”

“A REVENANT WEAPON!? DUDE, THAT STUFF’S LEGENDARY!”

There they go again. Ignis doesn’t even need to look over his shoulder to know what they’re talking about; with King’s Knight theme song playing and two overly hormonal young adults lounging on the sofa, there are more than enough contextual clues for him to follow the line of conversation.

“Yes, I just got mine today,” comes Noctis’ voice, coloured with a tinge of pride. “See? It’s the Revenant sword. Still didn’t upgrade mine though, so it’s stuck at Stage One—for now anyway. C’mon, Prom, let’s get yours too.”

“Oh you bet your sorry ass I’m gonna get my Revenant dagger! I’m gonna get so strong!” Prompto crows, and Ignis winces a little at the reminder of how loud the blond can get when he’s too excited. Flailing on the armchair, he is the very image of a humanized chocobo if there were such a thing. By now, he’s already withdrawing his phone and seconds later, a second King’s Knight background music joins the fray, with Prompto shoving his phone to Noctis’ face. “Quick! Show me how to get one!”

While Ignis doesn’t laugh at the sight, he does hide his smile as he continues busying himself with marinating the tender garulesa meat.

There they are, a prince and a commoner, enthusiastic over a mobile game. Noctis is every bit an ordinary man who’s buried in university assignments and keeping tabs on the latest release of Justice Monsters series. A simple glance at the sight of him and Prompto bantering back and forth on King’s Knight would’ve passed for just two young adults trying to get a hang of life and its bizarre mechanics of being a full-fledged adult. Ultimately, it hides little of the fact that he is a prince whose lean shoulders carry the weight of a decaying kingdom in a ruined future, unconsciously waiting for the day his father will pass on.

A foreboding sense overcomes him at the thought and just as quickly as it comes, Ignis shakes it off. Doubting himself won’t do him any good now. There is no room for doubt now, and he prefers it that way.

He sets the tray aside just in time to hear Prompto screeching. “What!? The boss has over 3.2 million HP!? Noct, buddy, I’m gonna get my ass handed to me here—we can’t deal enough damage with just the two of us! Call for backup!”
“You worry too much,” is Noctis’ easy reply, and Ignis looks at him from the corner of his eyes, seeing the prince wearing a smug grin now. “Hold on for a sec—yeah, here she comes.”

A comical trill flits in the daunting boss battle music, one that Ignis recognizes as someone else joining their party from whenever Gladio plays with them. Only—Noctis mentioned ‘she’ and definitely not ‘he’. Raising a brow, Ignis observes their interaction as he grabs some nutmeg from the spice rack. Bending over to inspect the pineapple tarts baking in the oven, the Advisor keeps an ear trained on the conversation, picking up the bits and pieces of their voices.

“Uh, Kaliva? Who’s that?” Understandably, confusion is evident in Prompto’s voice. “And what’s with the weird username? The Architect?”

“The Architect—that Quintus’ daughter we talked about? It’s her,” Noctis explains offhandedly, like it describes everything the world has to offer. Unconcerned, his slim fingers continue tapping on the screen, probably coming up with a reply on the in-game chat system. “Met her again today and she was playing King’s Knight too so, meh, she helped me with my Revenant weapon. Raiding dungeons will be easier with her in our party since she mains Kaliva. Lots of AOE skills at her disposal.”

Today? That’s an interesting information. While it had only been last week since their last encounter, to think Noctis would make good on his promise this week. How odd. Pestering Noctis for answers wouldn’t bring him anything, not with how distracted he is with King’s Knight, so Ignis continues busying himself with his handicraft. Satisfied with how the tarts are browning in the oven’s heat, he brings the nutmeg over to the garulesa meat and sets to work, sprinkling in a dash over the mixture.

In the distance, Prompto blinks, alternating glances from Noctis’ phone to his. “Does she have a name? It’s kinda weird how we just keep calling her as that Quintus guy’s daughter but we don’t really know who she is.”

“Dunno, she didn’t tell me.” The prince mumbles, blue eyes trained on his phone screen, fingers nimbly keying in a reply. Unconcerned again, much like everything else he does. When it comes to King’s Knight, he’s hopeless. “Heads up Prom, she’s telling you to ready your debuff skills. Start with poison and I’ll lower the defense, then I’ll tank it. She’ll go on major DPS once the aggro is on me. Just make sure to stay out of the boss’ AOE and go for ranged attacks.”

“R-Right, sorry!” the blond sits up ramrod straight. “I’m ready now! Let’s goooooo!”

As they go about their little dungeon spree, Ignis continues watching from afar, lost in thought.

**ALL I EVER WANTED WAS FRIENDS, but no one ever wanted me back. So when I finally found people who did want me, I did everything I could to make them stay.**

It sounded pathetic. Pathetic Prompto, isn’t that such a nice ring to it? Somewhere inside, he gives a self-depreciating laugh at his inner monologue.

Pathetic Prompto doesn’t have many friends. He knows he’s well-liked, friendly, and cute to boot—if Prompto may say so himself—and girls flock to him as much as they flocked to Noct, but he knows this well: He doesn’t have anyone else other than Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum. And, of course to a certain extent, befriending the prince comes with his personal advisor and bodyguard too, like a Buy-1-Free-2 deal at the local supermarket. And freebies don’t count.

Without Noct, without Gladio, without Ignis, he’s nothing. After all, who’d want to make friends
with the fat, ugly, and insecure boy from a decade ago, right?

Or at least, that’s what he tells himself.

He knows he’s changed, dramatically changed from his pudgy body to a lean one. Swapping dorky glasses for contact lenses, slathering hair gel and wielding hair dryers in the morning, dressing up in tighter shirts and stylish coeurl-patterned pants, nobody could put two and two together if they didn’t know him back then. Jogging every morning as a routine, counting his calories obsessively, joining Noct on his training for standard Crownsguard stuff, nobody knows under this plastic skin, the pudgy boy smothers his nerves when he receives handshakes and makes jokes about himself at the expense of his self-esteem.

It’s pathetic, just like Pathetic Prompto he is.

And then there’s this straitlaced person over here—

—well, straitlaced is a bit of a stretch. Indifferent is more accurate, he thinks.

There’s nothing about you that struck his interest. A smudge on the walls, a cloud in the skies. Someone seemingly ordinary stationed behind the table, poring over a paper with a pen behind your ear, casually dressed in a shirt and sensible pants. A reading glasses sits on the bridge of your nose, and your eyes trail over one sentence after another on the report, nodding all to yourself.

Somehow, standing here makes him nervous—heck, the air in your room feels weird because who even listens to classical music while working anyway? Then, an answer struck him wide-eyed: Only psychopaths in thrillers do because that’s what all stereotypical psychopaths do—and Six, Prompto’s already praying that you’re not one because he’s sure as hell he’s gonna be wrapped up in one of Noct’s many messes again.

“Hey, busy?” Noct calls out from his left, and Prompto almost jumps a little at how his voice rebounds throughout the vast expanse of your room. “If you’re busy I can leave.”

Prompto doesn’t know if you actually noticed that they came in through the door like a few minutes ago. Even if you did, you made absolutely no signs of acknowledging their presence. And Noct looks like he’s very much used to your quirk. He’s not even irritated, for crying out loud. All you do is to nod at Noct’s general direction, eyes still intently staring at report, untuck the pen from your ear, and scrawl in some words on the paper before slotting it into your drawer. After all that’s done, only then you rise from your chair, removing your reading glasses with a hand massaging your arm.

“Nah, nothing that important.” You stretch a little at your spot, flexing your fingers and rolling your wrist. Must’ve been from a long day’s work, Prompto thinks, watching your little exercise play out. You finish off the little stretching routine with a crack of your neck, heading over to the kitchenette. “Anyway, the usual. Shoes and socks off, sit down and make yourselves at home. Coffee, tea, canned juice, or soda?”

Seeing how Noct’s already halfway removing his boots and toeing off his socks like it’s an unspoken agreement between you two, Prompto hastily unlaces his own boots and rolls off his own chocobo-dotted socks. He only utters a silent prayer that you don’t judge him by his socks, or worse, make fun of him for wearing them. They were on sale, damn it. Because, seriously, psychopaths don’t judge people by their socks, right? And chocobo socks are the epitome of coolness.

“Soda for me and Prom, I guess,” Noctis answers, setting his boots to the side as Prompto meekly mimics his movements and places them by the door lest he triggers your sudden urge for murder. “Oh, by the way, this is Prompto, the guy I was talking about. He’s the Toby from yesterday.”
“You mean that Toby with the username Chocoboy?” you call out, looking over your shoulders briefly to meet his eyes—and Astrals, there’s something about you that makes him jump—before you return to whatever it is you’re doing with the mugs. “Good thing the Revenant dagger dropped after we farmed about seven times, huh? He’s lucky.”

“That’s Prom all right.” Noct chuckles, and they both move to occupy the section closest to your television and the shelf of video games. “He’s always the lucky one.”

Always the lucky one, ha. Prompto swallows a nervous gulp. Sure, he’s lucky all right, being friends with the prince and getting access to the Citadel whenever Noctis brings him along, but this? He chalks it up as an unlucky streak because your presence is just sooo unsettling, what with the weird look in your eyes and that empty face of yours, and all he wants to do is to go home and roll around with his chocobo plushies and forget this ever happened. No such luck though, because you’ve already loaded the mugs on a tray and brought them over, kneeling down on the floor.

“Here you go guys, cold soda.” Without missing a single beat, you serve Noct his drink, to which the prince accepts with a small thanks, while Prompto gets a cute cat mug with the frothy soda bubbling inside. “And that’s yours, lucky guy. Congrats on the Revenant weapon, by the way.”

Is that really a thing worth to be congratulated on? It’s not like he saved the world or something since it’s just a game. Still, Prompto bites back a nervou...
can’t summon the courage to look you in the eyes because—is it possible to sound that dead and look that emotionless? The only one who’s managed that feat around here is none other than Noct, the Prince of Apathy, and only his close friends could discern that his monotone hums are sounds of interest in all actuality.

“Anyway,” you start again, gaunt eyes gazing at him in that vacant way a ghost usually does, and it takes every bit of Prompto’s courage not to throw in the towel because Noct invited him here, damn it, and where his best friend goes, he’s going—and that’s final. “Sorry, but I kinda noticed something just now. Mind if I ask you some stuff?”

“You already did,” he blurts out, automatic wit loaded on the tip of his tongue because he’s usually the one countering Noct’s sheer assholery, and Astrals he’s already regretting it when you’re subjecting him to that look. “Uh—yeah, I mean, sure man! Go ahead!”

As much as Prompto’s tried throwing a desperate, pleading look at Noct’s direction, hoping his man would wing this out together with him, Noct the Asshole is only draining his soda and contemplating stealing some more from your untouched mug. And you’re actually enabling him by handing over your very own mug, depositing the crimson ceramic right in his hands, and shrugging wordlessly when he nudges you in thanks. Something about the strange harmony between you two made him think about ulterior motives and—Gods, please, that better not be poison inside that ominously red mug of yours—and too late, Noct’s already drinking away, polishing off your drink in just three gulps.

“—right,” you say, utterly oblivious to his internal meltdown, “so I was just wondering about your socks? The chocobo ones. Where’d you get them? They’re cute, I kinda want a pair too.”

If this were a comedy sequence, there’d be a freeze frame with a comical scratching record sound effect. And then the title will pop out like some retro-vibed TV show on the afternoon slot called ‘Prompto’s Misadventures’ with some kweh kweh accompanying the title screen.

Because seriously—what?

“Socks?” he hears himself echoing dumbly, faint. “My socks?”

And you’re still oblivious to his entire life orbiting before his eyes like some catastrophic flashback scene. “Yeah dude, socks.” Your lingering gaze darts over to his shoes, where his folded socks are lying in a hapless pile by the side, examining them in great curiosity. “I like cute stuffs. The mug you’re holding? That’s limited edition Neko Atsume stuff. Cute cats, cute game. Had to collect ‘em all.”

This bit has Noct snorting under his breath. “You mean that cat-gathering game? You actually played it?”

“Don’t judge me, Prince, this is a No-Judging Zone,” you warn accordingly, already averting your face from Noct the Asshole, who’s probably already hell bent on teasing someone once he finds the secret weapon to be used against them. “The music’s cute. The graphics are cute. Everything’s cute.”

Sure, everything’s cute and Prompto’s a huge fan of cute stuffs too—but the monotone in your voice failed entirely to deliver your apparent enthusiasm about the topic. Prompto’s not sure if he should be butting in the conversation, not when Noct’s already palming his cheek and grinning from one side. And when Noct gets That Look™, he’s never going to let go.

“You like cats, huh?” says Noct, lazylike but not without a notch of keen interest playing subtly in his tone. Still with that unrepentant grin, Prompto almost feels sorry for you because you’re gonna be
in for a ride and then some, with how Noct usually is. “Just cats, or?”


And oh boy, without a word of warning, Noct turns away from you and sets those devilish eyes of his on Prompto and all Prompto can do is not scream because why is he suddenly involved in this again? “Then Prom’s the Crazy Chocobo Man in the making. You two have a lot in common huh.”

He loves his best friend.

He truly does.

He swears by the Six he won’t nail Noct in the shin after this.

…maybe next week because he’s probably too petty when it comes to defending the chocobos’ honour.

“Noct, chocobos are cool. Do yourself a favour and buy yourself a pair of chocobo socks, then you’ll see what I mean. It’s a life-changing experience, I swear,” Prompto shakes his head with a melodramatic sigh, the back of his hand nursing his forehead like he’s got the worst headache ever from dealing with Noct. To you, he thumbs at Noct’s general direction like seriously get a load of this guy? and you’re all sympathetic nods, wrinkling your nose. “ ‘neways, got my cool socks for half-off at the Crown City Zoo merch store. They had other colours too but I was broke at that time, so I told myself two pairs and that’s it.”

“Crown City Zoo huh,” you muse, a hand over your mouth in deep thought. “Is it far from here?”

Is it? Prompto scratches his temple, rattling his brain’s storage space for the exact coordinates of the place. “Not really, if you know which bus to take,” he says after a while, “but you gotta be careful not to get off at the wrong stop. Boy, was I in for a ride when I accidentally took the wrong interchange and found myself almost inbound for Leide!”

“That bad?” You flinch.

The blond stifles the urge to emit a theatrical groan and rolls his eyes. “Nah, not really. Just that I was really dead broke at that time and ate peanuts for breakfast—“

Well, of course, given the chance to talk, Prompto prattles on and on and on enough to make up for three people’s worth of conversations, but then his eyes drift over your pensive expression as you remain all ears for his tragic tale, and then he comes across Noct. Noct who’s hiding half of his face behind your emptied mug, dark blue eyes watching, and he has this knowing smile on his face as if he accomplished a great heist or something.

And oh.

Oh.

Somehow, amidst his blabbering, amidst all the disastrous details he’s dishing out for you, amidst all your slow nods and quizzical tilts of your head, Prompto can’t stop the fond smile from seizing his lips when he thinks about it, thinks about Noct and Noct the Prince of Apathy and Noct the Asshole who kept egging him on.

Because, truly, Noct is his best buddy in the end, his wingman in all desperate times, and no one
comes close.

“what’s it like outside there?” you ask him, swinging your dangling legs from the armchair. “is the world still big like what mama showed me?”

fingers thread through your hair, raking a comb through your locks. byron’s gloved touch is warm even with his icy colour. he’s warm, just as warm as mother, but mother is the sun to your earth. and byron, byron is the star watching over your world. he remains steadfast as he cards his fingers through your hair, gently unravelling the knots in preparation for a braid, already equipped with a ribbon hairclip to finish off the look. for a moment, he is silent, formulating a response.

watching his reflection on the ornate vanity, you couldn’t help but to bite your lip and turn away. his cheek is swollen from father’s harsh slap, but he carries on with his duty without complain. the maids from lunch whispered bad things about him, about his street rat upbringing, about the permanent scars littering his knuckles, about father’s kindness of taking him in. how the holes puncturing his ears are past hints of his earrings, how his high-collared shirt hides a silver chain underneath.

“sort of, i guess?” he answers, sounding rather unsure of himself. “i mean, the kingdom of lucis is big, that’s for sure. why’d you ask me that, milady?”

how can someone who touches you so gently be someone so rough? they’re all lies. they must’ve been lies father fed the servants again. byron isn’t like that. byron isn’t like that at all.

clenching and unclenching your hands, you didn’t miss how his ruddy eyes flit over to meet your gaze, making the heat bloom in your cheeks. “well, mama took me to galdin quay once. father didn’t like that. so he took mama away from me.”

if your sombre answer affects him, he doesn’t say anything at all. instead, byron hums. “galdin’s real pretty, if you ask me.” he removes the comb from your hair and parts your generous locks in three sections. always deft with his fingers, byron makes braiding into a work of art as he sets to the task, twining one after another. “the sun, the sea, the beach, i miss it all. we should go there again, just the two of us. how’d you like that?”

you’d like that. you’d like that very much. he must’ve seen the hope in your eyes, the faintest glitter of bliss, since he smiles—though he winces, because his cheek’s all puffed up—but just as soon as that, you remember your place and all hope crumbles away. because here is your place, here is where you live, and here is where you’ll die.

“I wanna go. i wanna go with you. i wanna go with mama too.” you begin worrying your bottom lip with your teeth, tangling your fingers in your shirt. “but… father’s not gonna let me out of the house. he said i can’t go out, no matter what.”

you almost expected him to laugh. because what would a nineteen-year-old man understand from a five-year-old child anyway? he doesn’t understand father can be a cruel master to those who oppose him. he doesn’t understand father took mama away from you, and he can take byron away just as easily too. and if you overstepped your boundaries, then there’d be a price to pay. a price slotted under byron’s tab, to be paid in full.

but all byron does is to continue smiling that mysterious smile of his, and it quells all of your fears in an instant.
THERE IS A MESS WAITING FOR him when he steps through the doorway, and it’s such a peculiar sight until Byron stops dead in his tracks to stare. He’s known you for practically all of your life, and messy is definitely not one of the words he’d use to describe you. Pillows, comforters, bowls of cereal, and mugs of soda are strewn in clusters near the television, roughed up like someone threw a party in here. And the subject of suspicion is napping harmlessly on the floor, curled up on one side with a blanket pooling loosely around your ankles.

Really, it’s so odd until Byron tilts his head to the side and almost wants to scrutinize this crime scene from every angle. Closing the door behind him, he sets the bagful of grocery on the kitchen counter and decides to approach the spot, careful not to make any noise. Sure enough, upon closer look, he sees three mugs near your head paired up with three more bowls of cereal, all in varying degrees of emptiness. Silver spoons, fruity cereals, milk, and soda. What an odd party indeed.

But a meal of three, really? With who?

Bathed in the light of Insomnia’s sunset, ambers and scarlets dance on your skin as you slept, entirely unconscious of his questions. Sleeping so soundly, Byron thinks it’s a waste to rouse you from your sleep.

Kneeling on the floor, he gently pulls the blanket up to your shoulders and pats your head.

This time, he doesn’t smile.

[tbc.]
YOU HAVE A NEW MESSAGE FROM NOCTGAR!
PLEASE CHECK YOUR MESSAGE BOX!

A message. You quirk a brow at the notification popping up after your raid battle in King’s Knight. While it’s an extremely common occurrence as of late, give or take a few weeks ago, you wouldn’t have received a notification like this out of nowhere. Now, you’d get this notification popping up after every few hours, saying you have a message or two posted in your inbox. It’s strange. All too strange.

Without thinking, your thumb hovers over the INBOX button and presses down. What used to be an empty inbox devoid of messages is now filled to the brim with short notes, all bearing the name NoctGar.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: Prom and I are planning a raid tonight on the new Eleastor dungeon. Wanna come? We’ve got a fourth party member too.

And NoctGar is none other than Prince Noctis himself.

You skim through his raid invitation once more, lips pursed thoughtfully. Ah, yes, the Eleastor dungeon from the time-limited event in King’s Knight. Figures that the boys would be excited over it. Seeing how you just finished soloing a round, you suppose it won’t be too bad of an idea to join them in their raid. The item drops ranged from common antidotes to rare weapons, though rumours circulate the web that there are five-star drops with an appalling drop rate left to be scavenged by some lucky souls. And those five-star drops are precisely what you’re aiming for.

Already knowing your answer, both thumbs expertly key in your reply.

TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
Subject: Sure
Message: What time?

Succinct, just enough to get the point across. You had just sent the message with a tap of a button when your phone vibrates, indicating yet another prompt reply from the prince.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
Subject: [none]
Message: 9.30 tonight. I’ll text you the room ID later.

9.30 p.m.? That’s close enough to your bedtime, you suppose—but then again, you pretty much napped anytime, anywhere if you got the chance, so if you napped in the evening then you guess you could stay up a bit later to raid with them. Anything goes for that five-star drop to come true. With that plan firmly cemented in your head, your fingers are hard at work again.

TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
Subject: Ok
Message: See you later.

Aaaand, send.

You navigated out of your inbox, knowing that no more replies would be coming in for now. After all, it’s already afternoon, where the sun glows brightly above Insomnia, swathing its citizens in balmy heat. Afternoons are usually bustling, where people roved about in their daily business, getting on with their lives just as easily. Surely the prince and his cheery friend, Prompto, are still in class. Sharing tables with the rest of the students in a university, doodling in seminar when the lecturer’s droning way past lunchtime, and munching through an unhealthy tableau of greasy burgers and salty fries.

You lock your phone with a click of a button and glanced at the world before your eyes, a sprawling cityscape of glass and steel magnificence.

“Why the long face, milady?”

Byron’s voice comes just as easily, interrupting your brewing thoughts with a soothing baritone. From your spot by the television, a spot where Noctis and Prompto once shared, he locks eyes with you and offers a crooked smile from the kitchenette. As usual, Byron’s brewing a signature pot of black tea—one of his favourites, you realise—and in the midst of arranging some biscuits on a paper doily, readying to be served for teatime.

Dropping your face into your pillow, your reply comes out muffled. “Nothing much. Just thinking about uni.”

“University?” he parrots after you, pale eyebrows raised high on his forehead. “Are you worried about your thesis? As far as I know, your progress is on track, so you needn’t worry much. Worrying will only give you wrinkles, you know. If I’m still wrinkle-free at thirty-three, then you should strive to do better than that, milady.”

Again with that jibe of his. You can always count on Byron to lighten the mood when you’re a mess of a gloomy cloud. Turning to lie on your side, you pull the blankets up to your chest as the man
dawdles on, emitting faint tinkling sounds of silverware against porcelain from the kitchen.


You’d seen him before—or rather, more accurately, you had read news with his face on it. A brooding prince printed in both colour and monochrome, eyebrows straight and lips pressed into a firm, thin line. Long lashes curtaining hazy blue eyes, complementing flawless expanse of skin. All sultry dips of collarbones, broad shoulders, and sinewy arms. Whenever he shows up around here, he’s always in a dark shirt and cargo pants, sometimes looking like a sweaty mess, and sometimes looking like he’d just stepped out of shower. With your chastising, he’d set aside his boots and claim your television area as his new territory, playing a game or two.

Did that constitute as a friend?

You roll over on your stomach, pulling a pillow close to your chin as you explore the thought.

Would a prince want to be friends with someone like you? Would he prefer the company of one such as yourself? Would you be worthy enough to be called his friend?

Prince Noctis is an untouchable figure, one who manifested out of the papers and stumbled into your room. He doesn’t talk much—except, when he brought his friend over last week, he seemed to be in a good mood all the time. Together, the three of you played through hours and hours of King’s Knight, achieving a grand total of four dragon scales out of 68 rounds before he breaks it off with a phone call from Ignis, who requested their hasty return for dinner.

It was fun.

If you closed your eyes, you could almost replay their voices in your head, a broken record of Prompto’s whining and the prince’s grumble.

It was really, really fun.

Is that what having friends felt like?

With them around, your thesis is just a pile of papers too difficult for a twenty-year-old to be writing. Your box of cereal is shared between three, a meal fitting for the palate of a royalty. Your world in these four walls threatens to expand, to burst out of its glass box with Prompto’s ringing laughter and the prince’s incessant sulking. Your existence is not seen as merely Quintus’ object, but as someone. Someone they talked to. Someone they shared soda with. Someone they saw as a human. A human being.

Noctis doesn’t scoff at your inability to articulate emotions like the rest of them. There are no scathing one-liners designed to shame you. He kept things light, much like his name, Noctis Lucis Caelum. The first crack of light you see when he opens your box, the first light lining the horizons when dawn comes. The daughter of Andronicus is not deigned a stranger to the many magnanimities of the prince, never once regarded as one beneath him. He sees you for who you are, and your worth is weighed only in his hands alone. None other may influence his judgment, not that he allows it.

The House of Andronicus matters little to him, and so does Quintus’ name.

Subconsciously, your fingers dig deeper into your pillow.

“Hey, Byron?”

The albino, readying tea for two, stops working on the simple treat. “Yes, milady?” he answers,
cocking a brow in concern. “You’re acting like a garbage maggot doused in hot water on the floor. What’s troubling you?”

You almost wanted to throw a pillow at his explicit description of disgust. “Meanie.”

“I’m sorry, milady, but that’s the truth.” He shakes with laughter, mischievous eyes glinting under his bangs. “Since you’re already cocooned up like one anyway.”

Impertinent Byron and his eternal teasing. On some days, he could be a mean surgeon with a scalpel for his tongue, and on others, he’d be the sweetest angel the Astrals created just for you. Still, he’s what you’re used to—and he’s the only one who’d talk to you anyway. Nobody else did before the prince showed up. Nobody but Byron.

Fiddling with your fingers, you peer up at him curiously from your pillow barrier. “I was just wondering if… y’know… if we’re considered friends?”

Silence.

He’s heard your question, loud and clear. But the look in his eyes are heavy, heady grey, offset by the scarlet flecks in his irises.

“Oh dear, milady… we’re not friends. You own me.”

father would kill him if he catches wind of this. but byron is undaunted, humming cheerily to himself as he adjusts your oversized shirt and tucks the drooping neckline into place.

“it’s too bad you’re not allowed to wear dresses, milady,” he laments with a dramatic sigh. “i saw this cute dress at laellum market while i was out and about today, and i almost had the urge to buy it, you know?” he laughs at the look on your face. “no, not for myself. for you, milady. it’s cute and stylish for girls your age.”

father would kill him if he catches wind of this. but byron is undaunted, humming cheerily to himself as he adjusts your oversized shirt and tucks the drooping neckline into place.

a dress. you saw them before in books; cute, floaty frocks princesses wore as they danced with prince charming. under a cherry moon, painted in watercolours, mother read those books to you before. princesses twirling about with their princes, glass heels encircling their feet, a tiara of gold resting on their tresses. will there ever be a moment in time for you? where the galaxies are your halos, the stars crown your hair, and the nebula for your dress? will they throb and glow, minute lights dotting your tresses, as the universe kisses your lips?

but it is a hopeless desire even if the astrals craft your dress out of its constellations, for a dress is a dress. a dress father once ripped to pieces because you do not exist you do not matter you were never a daughter—

byron’s jostling breaks your reverie, and his hand in yours leads you away from those terrible thoughts. “anyway, let’s get a move on. today’s special.”

special, he says, but you don’t know what’s special anymore. byron said father would not hesitate to cut him down if he’s caught doing unsavoury things, but the man doesn’t seem to care. he’s told you with a roguish wink and a hushed whisper that today’s special, today’s the day you’ll remember, today’s a good day. dragging you out of the room and into the hallway, he marches you towards a parlour with an adjoining piano chamber where mother once played. he locks the door behind him, ushers you towards the connecting door to the room nearby, and kneels before you.

“i can only do this much, milady, i’m sorry i’m powerless to do more,” he says, despite the
confusion swimming in your eyes. then, he tears away from the contact, keying in three sharp knocks at the door. “she’s here, lady mnemosyne. I brought her, as promised.”

your eyes widen. and tears flood your eyes just as easily.

mnemosyne.

mother.

mama.

“no—” comes mama’s voice from the other side of the door, stifling a sob. “no, no, don’t say that, byron. thank you, thank you so much for thinking this up for us.”

pressed against the door, you couldn’t feel her warmth. not anymore. but hearing her voice is enough to make up for the distance in between. eyes brimming with unshed tears, your voice comes out as a warble of words, words that were unintelligible, words that had byron laughing, words that even mama hiccupped with laughter. but words were all you had before—and now, byron too.

“I’M SO TIRED!” PROMPTO WHINES from his spot on the hardwood floor. He flops backward with a thump, lying spread eagle as sweat continues dripping off his skin. “Gladio, don’t you have an easy mode or something!? I can’t beat you like this!”

“That’s the whole point. You’re not supposed to beat me.” The taller, brusque man mutters under his breath. “Not that you can, anyway.”

“Whaa—then what’s the point of our training?!”

Wiping his forehead with the hem of his shirt, Ignis steals a glance at his wristwatch, tuning out the rest of their bantering. 8.57 p.m., just several minutes shy of nine, which means he’ll have some time to make preparations for dinner after locking up the training room. As part of the Crownguard, their training drill takes up most of Noctis’ night, seeing that the prince himself is busy juggling his studies with Prompto. It’s a cycle of swords clashing against shield, daggers soaring through the air, and Gladio barking out orders left and right.

Adjusting his slipping gloves, Ignis tosses a look at Noctis, who’s chugging down a bottle of water. “Well then, let’s clean up and hurry home. The later we return, the later dinner will be served.”

But Noctis seems to be having other plans. “Sorry, Specs, I’m taking Prom and Gladio with me.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, setting down the bottle. “We’re going to raid some dungeons upstairs.”

Upstairs only meant one thing: The 56th floor, the room of the strategist’s prisoner.

As much as Ignis wanted to say he’s seen this coming, he knows it does little to remedy the situation. Restricting the prince from doing whatever he wants will only result in the situation backfiring, and he’s saying that from experience. The foreboding feeling from Ignis’ heart doesn’t go away even if you presented yourself as a harmless lass; he’s seen snakes twining around apples before, hiding poison in their fangs. The moment you strike will mark Noctis’ downfall. And by then, it might be too late for him to retract his actions.

At the very least, Ignis supposes he could divert Noctis’ attention. “Noct, King’s Knight can wait.”
“Nope, can’t wait,” Gladio pipes up, hoisting his broadsword and returning it to the brackets on the wall. He’s met with Ignis’ silent eyes, completely glossing over the warning signs of his stiff posture. “Saw these kids getting their Ravager—“

“Revenant! It’s Revenant!” Prompto squawks. “Get it right, old man!”

“—yeah, whatever weapon that was,” the Shield brushes it off, “so I’m jealous as hell. We’re definitely gonna do some serious raiding tonight.”

Prompto isn’t remotely helping the situation either. He’s stowing his guns away with a flicker of Noctis’ magic, fragments of light bouncing off the hardwood floor. “Mhmm! We’ve got a really strong Kaliva on our team too! It’ll be a cinch, big guy.”

“Heh, you mean that Quintus’ daughter, right?” he grouses, retrieving Noctis’ own training sword to store it in its rightful place. “She plays Kaliva?”

Prompto bounces on his feet, chiming in. “Yeah—she’s pretty weird, but she’s like a talking King’s Knight Encyclopaedia or something.”

“Like how you’re a talking chocobo, huh?” Noctis looks on, taking another swig of his drink, a lopsided grin seizing his lips.

“Noct, buddy, chocobos are cool. I’m honoured with your compliment.” The blond snorts, obviously offended. “We had this talk before, remember? Sheesh.”

He’s only met with a roll of Noctis’ eyes. “That wasn’t a compliment but whatever. C’mon, let’s go.”

Things aren’t supposed to go this way. Noctis should have agreed with him and acquiesced with nary a protest on his lips, tempted by the promise of dinner with his friends. Only, his circle of friends might be expanding—will be expanding—has expanded, more likely. Dinner for four no longer whets his appetite. Dinner for five, a dinner with a prisoner of fate, with much laughter and more smiles. An incredibly disconcerting prospect, that’s for sure.

And Ignis only prays it doesn’t escalate more than this.

Rubbing his nape, he swallows all his dissents and seals them behind his lips, clearing his throat. “At the very least, let me grab the groceries from your car first. Noct, your keys, please.”

NIGHT FALLS OVER INSOMNIA, an assemblage of stars spreading over the skies. Rich, black velvet studded with Swarovski, you think to yourself, as you lean against the window.


Your computer screen glows bright in your dim room, like a beacon of light in this solitude. This jarring silence could be banished if you played a selection of mother’s favourites. Debussy, Ravel, Satie—anything, as long as it chases these thoughts away, keeping them firmly locked from your eyes. But no. Thinking about mother hurts. The exquisite pain she bestows upon you—memories of her smile, her voice, her scent—everything hurts you tonight.

Nineteen long years in isolation should’ve taught you how to cope with this. The darkness should’ve been your friend. The silence should’ve been a constant in your life. The sorrow should’ve been your shield.
Was father truly right all along? That you were but a weak, wretched child of his, and you couldn’t compare to a son. A son would’ve been stronger, impervious to lonelines, emotionally detached from worldly things. A son would’ve done him proud. A son is what you’re not. A son does not think, he acts. A son is fit to lead an empire while a daughter plays the part of a wife. A son is the symbol of strength, and a daughter is the emblem of calamity. A son is a son, and a daughter is a daughter.

Even if you fought like a son, you were still a daughter.

Nothing could change it.

Tearing your gaze away from the glittering cityscape, you run your fingers over the filigreed cover of a book in your lap. Across the forest of silver, a name stands out.

*Titus Andronicus.*

By chance, Byron had picked it up from a second-hand corner in Laellum many years back. *Like a namesake,* he laughs when he thrust the book in your hands. Byron never got around to telling you the price, though you suspect it’s worth a whole month’s salary or more, judging from the gilded embellishments scattered on its spine. Always so secretive, he dodges the question the moment your tongue curls with the weight of it. You turn the book over in your hands, a wry smile crossing your lips before you realise it.

*Titus Andronicus* and House of Andronicus.

The Astrals must’ve been snickering when they scripted your fate, naming your life after a tragic tale.

You barely have the time to react when there comes a succession of footsteps stopping beyond your door, laughter, laughter, and more laughter resonating in the hallway. You’ve never heard this many people before, like a stampede of dualhorns you saw on television. Someone pushes the door open and pale light illuminates his features, highlighting the shaggy strands of dark hair, turning blue eyes gleaming black.

You didn’t need to look further to know the silhouette belongs to—

“You asleep already?”

—*him.*

A hand reaches out for the switch and lights come on with a click. You wince at the shock of white entering your vision, closing your eyes and rubbing over your eyelids. *Ouch.*

“Woah! Lucky, she’s still up! C’mon guys, we’re gonna party tonight!”

“Huh. She’s smaller than Iris.”

“Be polite, Gladio. We are intruding on someone’s home, after all.”

“Technically, it’s Noct’s place though.”

Voices. You’ve heard them before. Three familiar voices, and a new one, rich and low. By right, it should’ve surprised you when you opened your eyes once more, staring at the doorway. Overcrowded, four men in varying shades of clothes, Noctis already with his boots set aside, Prompto jumping around on one foot as he tries to get his socks off, Ignis in the background, and a behemoth-man whose massive forearms are fiercely inked.
“Um.” You start, only to realise you’ve got nothing to say when Noctis fixes you a blank look. “Um —wait. Why are all of you here?”

Prompto’s smile is wide enough when he kicks off his offending socks and stumbles into the room, holding out his phone. “It’s King’s Night, duh!”

You open your mouth, then closed it with a click at the pun. It must’ve looked dumb, because he laughs at your face and makes a beeline for the television. Wetting your dry lips, you try again. “No—wait, that’s not what I meant. I mean, what are you guys doing here?” You point at Noctis for emphasis. “Didn’t you say you wanted to text the room ID?”

Like any of this isn’t his fault, the prince just follows Prompto from behind and settles down on his favourite spot closest to your gaming console. “You said ‘see you later.’ Thought you meant we should meet up here.”

What a blatant lie. He clearly knows more than he’s letting on, albeit expertly masking it behind feigned indifference.

Ignis sidesteps the strange behemoth-man, already having removed his shoes and socks as per custom before entering your room. In his arms are grocery bags spilling with vegetables, wrapped meat, and other condiments, settling them on your small kitchen counter. “I’ll make something quick for all of us. Will sandwiches be sufficient for tonight?”

“You said out the veggies for our prince,” the hulking mass of muscle rumbles, shutting the door behind him. “I sure as hell don’t wanna be the one scraping his veggies clean tonight.”

“Neither do I.” Ignis replies just as easily, picking apart everything your humble kitchenette had to offer. Pots, pans, ladles and bowls, he’s probably doing a little logistics at the stuff in your cupboards before deeming it satisfactory. “Looks like we’re in luck. I’ll put in a side of stew as well, if sandwiches aren’t enough.”

“That’ll be great!” Prompto crows in excitement as the theme song of King’s Knight blares from his phone. He looks past Noctis, who’s already logging in the game, and you find yourself staring right at him, blank. “Hey—c’mon, Architect guy, let’s get started already! We’re sooooo gonna get that five-star drop tonight!”

Architect guy?

—oh.

You never got around to telling them your name, did you?

“Yeah, c’mon, Quintus’—whatever you are.” Behemoth-man waves you over, already settling down comfortably between Noctis and Prompto, holding out his own phone. “These five-star drops aren’t gonna fall from the skies by themselves, y’know. Start farmin’.”

The noise level in your room is off the roof—louder than what you’ve blasted from your speakers. A cacophony of human laughter, indignant shouts, and motherlike chastising, paired with Noctis’ judgmental look at his companions. A broken symphony of cut-off words overlapping with arguments and dares from one another. An unfamiliar and deafening noise you’ve never heard before. Prompto talks and behemoth-man cuts him off, erupting into more laughter. Noctis drops into a scowl and Prompto nails him in the side, then behemoth-man chuckles when Ignis sends off a warning look.
Everyone’s here.

Acquaintances and strangers alike.

Do they care about your name? No, you suspect not. Do they want anything to do with your father? No, you suppose not either. Amidst all the chaos, the prince turns over to look at you and rubs his nape. The look in his eyes is a brush of familiarity in its quietness. You’ve never seen that kind of look before.

And when he speaks, he speaks so softly you might not have heard him at all.

“So, what’s the room ID?”

IT MIGHT’VE BEEN A MISTAKE when Noctis gets up from the floor, making his way to your kitchenette just to grab some soda from the fridge for their five-minute break. Something thick and silver gleams underneath your table lamp, highlighting the curl of its sheen and unveiling its age. An old book, he thinks, and almost pays no mind to it until his eyes slip from the spine to its cover.

_Titus Andronicus._

That stops him in his tracks.

He’s never heard of the book before, in all the exercise drills his private tutors made him memorise in his earlier years. But the name Andronicus puts him on the spot. Was it a fictitious tale penned by a poet? Or was it a book detailing the skeletons of the Andronicus, the proud males who stood as strategists for the Lucian kings? Curiosity shouldn’t have seized his heart, but his detour to your desk catches both yours and Ignis’ interest, each pair of eyes boring down heavily on his back.

Picking up the deceptively heavy tome, he takes in the elaborate scrollwork sprawling over the cover, burying the title under silvery vines. Fingers then picked through the ageing papers, catching the names composing the play.

_Titus. Bassianus. Lavinia. Quintus._

It’s a name he’s familiar with.

Quintus Andronicus.

“Something caught your interest, Prince?” you call out from across the room, sotto voce. Your question is slow, calculated, manipulative in nature. That much, Noctis knows, because he’s put his nose somewhere it doesn’t belong. But it’s too late to put it away now, not when he’s sniffed out something.

He keeps his inflection flat as his fingers skim through the weary pages, pretending that Ignis isn’t adjusting his glasses simply because he wants to. “Titus Andronicus.” His voice has gone quiet.

“Looks interesting. What’s it about?”

Noctis half expects the answer to come from you since you owned the book, but his advisor lends his thoughts to the matter instead.

“It’s a play written by a certain playwright several hundred years ago,” says Ignis, delivering a brief history lesson as he expertly flips a sandwich in a pan. “A grotesque tragedy, if I must summarise its contents.”
Noctis lowers the book and scans your expression from the corners of his eyes. He’s seen you in various states of unsmiling before, being the sleepy child you are, but this time it’s different. It’s a vacant look. Eyes placed on him, yet not quite on him. Seeing past his skin, digging into the gelatinous depression of his eyeballs, fingernails delving into his brain. You’re picking him apart, he realises, to look for answers when he’s only coming up with one.

“Sounds bloody.” Prompto makes a retching sound at the back of his throat. “Is it violent? Full of gore?”

“Violent and bloody, yes. A vicious cycle of revenge that ends in unhappiness, as all tragedies are.”

What a depiction. An exceedingly unsettling depiction of the play, thanks to Ignis’ excessive narration. Plays aren’t usually Noctis’ thing, even if his old tutors are groaning at him in exasperation at the back of his head. Standard royalty tuition classes come bundled with public school, since it is expected for a prince to be well-versed in the classics as much as King Regis was, no matter his waning interest in it. Yet, there is something about Titus Andronicus that Noctis should probe deeper if he wants to dig out the skeletons under your name.

You’ve gone silent since your first question, withdrawing into your world of King’s Knight again. Tapping relentlessly on the screen, probably going through a dungeon raid on your own as you tune out the rest of the world. Gladio doesn’t seem to bother much about the conversation, scrolling through his phone on another journey in the game. But somehow, Ignis’ depiction of Titus Andronicus roams the prince’s thoughts with more guesswork, and he only sets down the book in its rightful place again.

“Not my kind of thing.” Noctis dismisses the topic, and resumes his expedition to your fridge.

He doesn’t miss how your attention diverts from the game, furtively trailing after him from your desk to the fridge, tracing up the curve of his spine when he bends over to fish a cold can out from the bottom tier, cracking it open. But just as soon as he finishes gulping down its contents, flicking it into your dustbin, you’ve turned away from him, reverting into the hollow husk of a human you are.

[tbc.]
In all of your disgusting desperation, there is beauty in how you gaze at the prince, the wide-eyed ingénue you are.
blooming: the architect’s book of friends

Chapter Summary

in which Noctis dips his toes into the architect's world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

blooming

IT DOESN’T TAKE HIM MUCH time to find what he’s been searching for. The Royal Library, a separate section in the Citadel spanning over four gargantuan floors, is a labyrinth of wood and papers building up the history of the Lucian Kingdom. An area whose silence rivals a mausoleum, certainly not many frequented the library unless they are either the royalty, or one of the Lucian historians working for King Regis. And knowing Noctis, it’s very likely that he’s only set foot in here once or twice out of his entire lifetime.

All clean decor of black marble and delicate crystalline chandeliers, Ignis navigates himself through the automated barriers to locate the librarians. Of course, given his title as the prince’s advisor, they are generous enough to redirect him to some of the many computers hooked up to the walls. Despite the breadcrumbs of information on the Andronici stored in the archives, the digital collection of newspapers did not disappoint him. Ignis clicks on one of the two articles showing up on the computer screen, green eyes glinting as he scans over the title.

THE ANDRONICI FAMILY’S GENIUS

The Andronici welcomes another doctorate holder in the house. This is an achievement unlike any other in Lucis, as the youngest Andronicus is only 19 years old. A private graduation ceremony was held in the House of Andronicus to commemorate this event. Quintus Andronicus, the current head of the House of Andronicus, mentioned that he expected nothing less for someone bearing the name of the Andronicus. He declined further interviews on the matter.

A brief article devoid of pronouns, sidestepping the delicate matter of your birth. No mentions are made on your thesis, and not even the university you graduated from. You are, for a lack of better word, erased out of everyone’s sight. Perhaps Quintus had generously paid an additional sum for the journalist not to mention anything further, or certain threads are sewn upon the lips of those who chatter too much; that, Ignis doesn’t know.

What he knows is this: The more he pries on the Andronici, the sooner he’ll find himself erased as well.

With that thought lingering in his mind, Ignis closes the article with a click and deletes the browser’s history.

and so, it has become a routine of sorts. the days go by a little bit easier now, less empty, less
lonelier, because your head’s all clogged up with thoughts of mama. mama and her undying
elegance—talented fingers pressing in each note on the piano, as you’d sit in the adjoining parlour
with your ear pressed to the door, a hand in your mouth to stifle your sobs. the astrals must’ve
blessed mama, you see, for she births music as easily as she breathes. a debussy for a day, and a
satie for the next. sometimes she’d sing along, a wordless mime of the music she makes, and you
follow her song, albeit your broken warble remains incomparable to her songbird voice.

each day, she plays a tune for you. each day, she presses her lips to the door, kissing you through
the wood.

and each day, byron stands dourly at the back, keeping a watchful eye over the entrance lest anyone
intrudes.

IT USED TO BE A PRISON of glass. The world outside of the prison tempts you with many
sights and sounds, but they all remained out of reach, obstructed by that cold, transparent wall. Try as
you might, pounding your fists until you bleed, and you’ll still amount to nothing. Byron likened you
to that of a tragic bird in a cage. With him as your arms, you could grapple and reach between the
iron bars for slivers of pleasure from the outside world. Red apples from Cleigne, cute stationeries
with cats printed on them, fashionable pair of heels trendy girls would wear, or a book on the Seven
Wonders of the Lucis Kingdom for your imagination to take you places.

But what would you call those who willingly stepped foot inside this cage of yours?

“Shit—Noct, get that wyvern off my back! It’s poisoning me!”

Rapid keystrokes and the prince’s eyebrows are all furrowed, face perfectly fixed in a scowl. “Get
out of the AOE, I’ll take the threat from you. Architect, stay on the boss. DPS until the aggro falls on
you, then I’ll come back to tank it.”

You almost rolled your eyes at his command. “Prince, in case you haven’t noticed, the aggro’s
already on me. Just that your Ray Jack’s in the way, so it looks like you’re tanking it since you’re
absorbing all my hits.” The look on Noctis’ face is best described as the calm before a storm, so you
quickly bit your tongue and remedied it with the press of a button. “Right—let me just go and get the
wyverns from Prompto while you stay on the boss.”

For a scholar who devours words all your life, your tongue struggles with naming this feeling.

This feeling of having Noctis on your right, elbows propped up on one of your pillows, lying on his
stomach as he fends off the boss’ attacks in desperation. The feeling of Prompto to your left, chewing
on his bottom lip, whining when the boss knocks him out and you had to revive him, thanks to
Kaliva’s necromancy. This feeling of being cocooned in your blanket, resting your head on a pillow,
hands holding up your phone when Prompto sends a heart emote to Kaliva as thanks, narrowly
fleeing the fiery onslaught from the boss’ wrath.

Does it matter if it had a name in the end?

No, you suppose. It doesn’t matter at all.

Noctis lands the final blow with Ray Jack’s special ability and the prince’s lips immediately curl into
a smirk, nailing a high five to Prompto when the screen lights up in VICTORY. To you, he nudges
you in the shoulder with his elbow in what seems to be a show of appreciation, and you return it with
lightly punching him in the arm, feeling the briefest tug of a smile on your face. No sooner than you
—it drops, automatic, and you immediately refashion it into a neutral expression, turning away from
the prince’s sharp eyes.

No.

It wouldn’t do.

This wouldn’t do at all.

“Maaaaaaaan, that was so tough, I’m so lucky I only died once!” Prompto groans, dragging a hand
over his face as he flops backwards on the floor. “Seriously—this event’s gonna be the death of me!
How much longer do we have to farm until everyone gets their five-star weapon?!”

And you’re thankful for his untimely interference, even if he doesn’t realise his heroic action.

Almost reluctant, Noctis passes it off and looks at Prompto, who’s already lying on the ground like
he just got out from a life-and-death fistfight with the daemons. “You’d be long dead if King’s
Knight isn’t a video game, buddy.”

“Noct, buddy,” the blond corrects him with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, “I know I’m definitely
stronger than Toby right here. Just you wait until I get all the credits to give him a new rank—he’s
gonna come equipped with epic debuff skills and you’re gonna cry for my help in the long run. Still
not too late for you to say sorry to me, y’know.”

Amidst their pleasant bantering with one another, Noctis’ low voice contrasting deeply with
Prompto’s affronted squawks, you find yourself rolling over to your side, scrolling through your list
of friends in King’s Knight. What used to be an empty space has three boxes on its screen now, each
detailing the nickname, the class, and the pixelated rendition of the player’s character. NoctGar
Ray
Jack the Warrior, Noctis’ character.

Chocoboy
Toby the Thief, Prompto’s selection. And

Beefcake
Barusa the Giganto, Gladio’s newest addition to your book of friends.

It’s strange having all of them here together with you, even if it’s just on your phone. A silly notion
father would’ve scoffed at, easily dismissing it with a derisive click of his tongue.

You almost missed the sound of the doorknob turning as the door swivels open, and all the raucous
chatter in your room died down just as immediately as a white blob emerged from the doorway. Of
course—you definitely couldn’t have missed the scarlet glare in the sea of murky greys, nor the prim
ponytail slung over one shoulder.

Byron closes the door behind him, taking off his leather shoes and socks with one hand and a bagful
of groceries in the other. You could hear Prompto whispering under his breath, a soft
followed by Noctis’ noncommittal murmur of I can kinda guess in reply.

“Good day, milady,” Byron greets, an unmistakable cheer in his voice, yet the quick scan of his eyes
across the room says otherwise. Putting down the chunky paper bag, he takes no interest in the two
new occupants, instead finding more joy in restocking your fridge with two cartons of eggs and
chunks of butter. “There was a good deal on the eggs and you know me, I can’t resist a good deal.
picked up some strawberries for dessert too, so we can have some tarts for tea later on.”

You pull yourself up from the floor, languid, and rub a hand over your neck guiltily. Throwing an
apologetic look over your shoulder, Prompto only makes abstract movements of confusion, while
Noctis is hardly any better, just alternating furtive glances between Byron and the fridge.

Once restocking the fridge is crossed off his agenda, Byron straightens up, reaching over the counter to procure a frying pan. His gloved hands expertly lights the stove, wields a spatula like a dagger, all the while rambling on. “The weather’s getting terribly cold lately, milady, until I’ve been having so much trouble trying to stay warm while I’m sleeping. Do you think I should invest in better blankets? Or should I wear more layers when I go to bed?” He hums a little, oils the pan in stunning fluidity, and cracks an egg. “Should I go for both? Or am I going to catch fire and die in my sleep?”

From behind, Prompto’s whispering continues with a conspiratorial dude, is this guy okay in the head? and met with Noctis’ low murmur of dunno, go and ask her what she thinks, and now Prompto’s tapping you on the shoulder, giving you weird facial expressions and thumbing at Byron. This is definitely going nowhere. You placate the blond by patting his knee, reassuring him with a thumbs-up, and clearing your throat. “Byron—“

“Ah yes, before I forget.” The sizzle of egg fills the air and Byron fixes you with a look. The knowing slant on his lips has disappeared, shadowed by something else altogether. “Your father sends his kindest regards. He’s pleased to know you’ve made tremendous progress while living here. Aren’t you glad, milady?”

THE MOMENT HE MENTIONS QUINTUS, whatever’s on your lips left your mouth, replaced with a vacant look again. Noctis knows he’s seen this before, seen those times when you bite back on your emotions and revert into the non-existent shell of a human you are. Denying even the smallest of smiles, you only wore the lightest of frowns or the barest of scowls, keeping the rest of your emotions stowed in a chest—away, far, far away where the prying eyes couldn’t see, and the knowing tongues wouldn’t wag.

How absurd it is to make another person deny their feelings, robbing them of their humanly rights. It’s as if you had no right to begin with.

To dignify the albino’s question with an answer, you lift your chin and regarded him, sedate. “Please thank father the next time you see him again.”

Curt, almost dismissive in nature. Whether or not you’ve taken it to heart, Noctis is unsure, not when you are toneless, emotionless, expressionless to everything else around you. A defence mechanism of sorts, maybe? He knows he’s put up quite a few walls when he thinks of the sunsets where his dad was supposed to visit him—only, King Regis didn’t show up and left him all alone to entertain the weight of his thoughts, looking at the pathetic stumps for his legs, thumbing the raised scar that ran across his back.

“An excellent choice, milady,” the albino utters—and Astrals know that Noctis’ seen better smiles on the faces of hyenas than this man right here. He plates a perfectly fried egg, cracks another, and this time scrambles it on the pan with a dash of pepper. “May I know if those two fine young men flanking your sides might be interested in eggs? Scrambled, fried, or sunny side up?

Oh, so now they’re finally getting acknowledged? Something about this guy pisses him off. Still, two could play this game, and Noctis knows he’s the better gamer around here. Crossing his arms over his chest, cocking his head to the side, Noctis puts up a slow, deliberate smile. “Scrambled.”

“Um.” Prompto’s sitting up straighter now, blue eyes the size of chocobo eggs. “Uh, can I ask for an
omelette? With some shredded cheese on it? That tastes super good.”

“I’ll throw in some extra milk in the mix,” the man answers airily, already moving towards the fridge to withdraw a carton of milk and flimsy packets of cheese. As the rich scent of fried eggs permeates the air, he works on a second frying pan, stunning his audience of three with intense professionalism that rivals Ignis in the kitchen. Then, almost abruptly, he breaks off to look Noctis in the eyes. “Ah yes, how silly of me. I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Byron, her butler.”

Noctis thought as much. “Kinda figured that out a while back.”

His wit goes unappreciated, and the albino—Byron—returns to his task of making them eggs for lunch. “Good to know you’re such an intelligent young man.” Dripping with sarcasm, Noctis notes, but his friends are champions of backseat fishing so he supposes this is the best this Byron guy could do. Oblivious to his internal monologue, Byron cracks open a second egg and lets it fall on the oiled pan with a crackle. “What about the other young man over there? You look positively adorable with your chocobo-themed hairstyle.”

The sarcasm lost on Prompto, he immediately perks up. “The name’s Prompto, nice to meet you.”

And Byron doesn’t even offer him a second glance. “Likewise.”

Is that sentiment even mutual? Clearly it isn’t. With how Prompto’s grin becomes downcast in mere seconds, it’s telling enough. A part of Noctis wants to shut this guy down for being such a cynical bastard, all haughty grandeur even if he’s just standing at your kitchenette, frying some eggs Noctis doesn’t even care about. Because nobody gets away with treating Prompto like that. Nobody gets away with treating his friends like that.

He’s already opening his mouth to offer his rebuttal with a snarl, but you’ve already set your face straight and cuts him off.

“I don’t appreciate the way you’re talking to them,” you utter, and every single word slipping past your lips makes him stare. “Please don’t repeat that unless you want to make me angry. They’re my friends.”

Friends. It must’ve been a foreign word missing in your lexicon, for a moment of self-doubt manifests as soon as it tumbles from your lips. You cast a look at Prompto, inquisitive, and the blond only returns it with a standard Prompto Smile™ before you turn to Noctis, giving him the same inquisitive look. A worrying, searching look. As if reaffirming that this is friendship and yes, they’re your friends, and Six forbid that anyone takes it away from you.

To others, it must’ve looked stupid because a twenty-year old is only starting to make friends.

But hey, Noctis supposes, returning your abject look with half a smile, nudging you in the arm, everyone’s gotta start from somewhere.

“what does snow feel like?” you ask, sprawled messily over your unmade bed. Byron, in the midst of rearranging your avidly growing collection of novels, catches the pensive look on your face, and straightens up as you fire off more questions. “it’s cold, right? but does it feel like touching solid ice? or is it like touching cold sand? kind of like a popsicle, maybe? hey—hey, byron, what do you think?”

how ridiculous it is for a child to have seen snow, yet deprived of the experience of touching it. all you’ve seen are the white dusts falling from the skies, a rain of white, colouring everything in white,
white, and more white. everything the snow touches is preserved in beauty, rendering it a timeless
piece.

but you mustn’t know of the outside world.

if you knew, you’d desire it even more.

desire leads to want.

and want leads to need.

clearing his throat, he chances a glance outside the windows and eyes the darkening sky. “it’s cold,
yes. what brought this on, milady?”

“well,” you begin, all sheer excitement as you lift the book you’re reading—it’s something byron
vaguely recognises as a title he picked out in a local second-hand store last week—and points
excitedly to a watercolour picture on its page. childish gushing, ecstatic, all hopeful smiles and
wishful sighs. “they’re talking about having a snowball fight with their friends! but snow melts when
you touch it, right? so how can they fight with ‘snowballs’ when it’s going to melt the moment they
touch it? tell me, tell me!”

ah, the magnificence of childlike innocence. it’s hopeless to deny you of your rights to feel passionate
about something. after all, you are only human—even if you are the child of the andronicus. byron
resumes his task, half-bent over a shelf of literary classics, and breathes out his warning.

“when you’re with me, it’s all right to feel everything under the blue sky, but you must remember
this: in front of others, you mustn’t show your emotions. never. only with me you’re safe, milady.
nobody else. you know how much your father hates it. and i don’t wish for him to hurt you.”

THE ANDRONICI FAMILY IS FRIENDLESS, and that’s a fact. They carry themselves with a
certain self-assurance that one might misinterpret as excessive arrogance, finding fault with every
stray detail obstructing their plans, and keeping themselves at a distance from others, away from
friendly contact. Quintus Andronicus, too, made only acquaintances and Byron supposes nobody is
deserving enough in their ranks to be called a ‘friend’ to him.

Seeing the beginnings of a frown settling on your forehead, eyes dark, mouth firmly set in a thin line,
makes him wonder if all of this ‘friendship’ nonsense will pay off in the end. Nothing good ever
stems from building a ‘friendship’ brigade, especially with one like the prince himself. He knows it’s
Noctis from the start—who doesn't? The Internet’s full of his face with just a simple search, and the	tabloids gossiped about his university life like what the prince is eating should be everyone’s main
concern for the day.

Nothing good comes out of this. Nothing.

“My apologies,” Byron offers, yet he knows you’d know he doesn’t mean a single word of it.
“Milady, with all due respect, please stop whatever it is that you’re doing now. No,” he firmly cuts
you off the moment he sees you readying a retaliation on the tip of your tongue, “stop. Yes, I know
you’re all buddies with the Heir of Lucis, but are you ready to destroy everything with this whole
friendship nonsense? It’s not worth it, if you ask me.”

“In case you missed it, nobody asked you,” Noctis grits out, and for the slightest moment of humour,
Byron finds it cute that the prince is trying to level him with a glower. He’s obviously ten years too
young to start a fight he’s not going to win.
“Freedom of speech allows me to say what I want, all in the best interest of milady,” Byron reproaches, wagging a finger warningly. “You know nothing of Quintus Andronicus, so kindly stay out of this, Highness.”

What he said must’ve loosened the muscles in your mouth because you’re openly glaring at him now—and by Six, he’s never been subjected to this level of loathe from you before. Lips curled in disgust, half-lidded eyes, neck fraught in thinly quelled anger, you’re the very image of Ifrit’s wrath ready to scorch those who crossed your path. It’s silly how something as trivial as ‘friends’ would surpass his decade-long servitude with you.

And it’s sillier how this game of friendship’s got you all worked up, ready to defend them with a bite of your fangs.

“No—I know what father is like. I know him best.” You shake your head, staring him down. “He hates it if I have friends, hates it if I show any emotions. So what? I came here to get away from all of that—I purposely came here to get away from him, get away from all of the restrictions he puts me under. I want to live, Byron.”

You’re obviously speaking under great duress right now. He knows where you’re coming from because he’s been there, done that. One year after another, teaching you how to skirt the boundaries of Quintus’ domain, pressing sticky sweets in your clammy fingers with a roguish wink, shielding you behind his figure when the maids pass by with their noses upturned. He’s heard the aged manservants lamenting the dismal disaster of the Andronici daughter, he’s been subjected to their ‘careless’ hands staining his white laundry load with coloured clothes, and—

—you’re looking him in the eye, the glassy reflection of a white visage reflected within.

Fuck. He hates it all.

The egg’s already burnt around the edges and the acrid stench is almost enough to make him retch. He clicks off the stove and shoves the whole pan in the sink, letting it sizzle under a great waterfall from the tap.

“Remember what Quintus said?” he reminds you, trying to keep his voice trimmed from excessive ire. “A great strategist is never one who’s easily influenced by their emotions. A great strategist offers nothing of their thoughts on their faces. While I’ve been at fault for playing a part in your rebellion, part of me hoped that living here would’ve offered you a different perspective on your dreams and aspirations to become the next in line. You know I’ve always encouraged your every step, milady, but there are limits to certain things. Stop this nonsense immediately.”

He doesn’t expect anyone to understand this.

Nobody ever does anyway.

It’s not safe outside for you. It’s not safe for someone like you to showcase your emotions as though it is an art exhibition in the Royal Museum of Lucis and you’re one of the subjects in a painting. It’s not safe for you to be with someone without him. It’s not safe at all. And it’s complicated. Everything’s complicated when it comes to him, when it comes to you, when it comes to the two of you together with Niflheim’s unspoken promise breathing down your back.

But nobody else needs to understand this.

As long as you understood him, then the rest of Eos can go fuck themselves.

Yet, the blond—Prompto—Prompto’s flushed with obvious anger, a scarlet haze crossing his
freckled cheeks and colouring the tips of his ears a violent red. Hell, the kid’s even got his hand balled up in a fist. “Dude, what’s your problem? Let her have friends! You’re not her mom. It’s not enough that she’s locked up here—"

“—out of her own volition, must I remind you,” Byron tuts, shutting off the tap and letting the clogged sink stay there for all he damn well cares.

“—yeah but she’s right,” Prompto goes on, all mouthy with the heat coursing through his body like he’s desperate to get it out of his system. “She finally got her freedom and now she’s finally trying to get a life of her own, but you’re taking all of that away from her. What do you even see her as? A robot? She’s a human, for Gods’ sake. Let her have friends.”

To make matters worse, even the prince is under their friendship spell now, wearing a slightly playful grin as he prods you in the side, making you look up at him in surprise. “Heads up; I don’t wanna work with an emotionless robot in the future, got it? So you better work on your expressions a little bit more. Not too late to start now.”

“R-right,” you stammer—and for the love of Six, did you actually stutter like a giggling girlen? That’s completely unheard of. “I’ll work on that, I swear. I think.”

Noctis’ playful grin slips into something else, sliding into a lazy curl of the prince’s lips, and he all but claps you on the back with a hearty thump. “Good.”

It’s just a simple word. Good. Yet Byron knows you’ve been starved of attention, of acknowledgement. The feeling of being recognised, being wanted for something, being given something—just like the abandoned child you are. Even if Noctis is feeding you scraps of praises from his outstretched hand, you’re nothing but a ravenous mongrel eager to lap it all up, licking all over his palm and sucking off his fingers. In all of your disgusting desperation, there is beauty in how you gaze at the prince, the wide-eyed ingénue you are.

Ah.

Byron thinks he knows what this is.

The ardent yearning mirrored in your eyes, veiled partway by your lashes. Dilation of your pupils, unconsciously parting your lips, breathing quietly through your mouth. The fleeting touches Noctis gave you must’ve short-circuited your brain, crossing the wires and sending all sorts of mixed signals in your head. You must’ve not noticed that you sat so close to the prince until his knee bumps against yours, and you both had been like that ever since he first came in. And how long have you been like this with him? Surely it’s been weeks by now, long few weeks with many hours spent on coddling the baby prince.

Were you that desperate to mistaken acknowledgement for love?

This is silly. This is so silly until he knows he has to put a stop to this madness. He’s got to prune the roses from the desolate garden of your heart and leave you with the thorns. There is no choice. Not for you, anyway.

“Best forget that, milady,” Byron quips, pointing at your proximity with Noctis. “You don’t even know how to love to begin with. You’re not made for this.”

That is uncalled for.

He knows.
All is lost when you wrench your gaze away from the prince so sharply until he sees the broken reflection of his whiteness in your watery eyes.

“Get out.”

There it is. He knows he’s hit a nerve for you to use that tone on him. Still, an order is an order after all, and he’s made to follow orders. Despite the many circumstances surrounding your birth and your entire life, he doesn’t fault you for it. Not a single bit. Not when he’s too deeply involved with you to ever go away. Pan in the sink, the bitter stench of burnt egg in the air, Byron saunters over to the exit, slipping on his socks and shoes in a subconscious routine he’s already mastered in a heartbeat. With his hand on your doorknob, he wrenches it open.

There is only a single farewell, but it’s definitely not his last.

“But milady, do remember this,” he says without even looking at you. Not that he needs to anyway, when he knows your eyes are pinning needles in his back with your tears unshed. “You know I can’t live without you.”

And your answer comes just as sharp as the crack of Quintus’ slap.

“Neither can I, but right now, I can’t bear the sight of you.”

IGNIS IS IN THE KITCHEN, and Noctis hunches over his assignment as he scrawls down several key points about this fictional Zeus guy who’s a supposed God in this weird novel their lecturer made them read. He can’t focus even if he tried to think of studying as a means for distraction, not when he’s seen the devastation wrecked in your little home, watching the cracks in your life grow bigger and bigger.

What that butler said still pisses him off—even thinking about his sneering face, all white hair with a heart all black, is enough to irritate him to Galdin and back.

The aftermath of the destruction was a quiet room devoid of sounds, and the only hint he received from you was from the unshed tears brimming your eyes. Yet, you blinked them away, didn’t even sob when Byron closed the door behind him. Prompto was there in two quick steps; he grabbed your shoulder and pulled you in for a hug, running a hand down your back in comforting little circles, whispering it’s okay and hey you’re gonna be fine and shhh we’re here for you in repetition like a looping lullaby. Only then, only after the storm had passed, after your little trembles gave way into even breathing, Prompto pulled away and they left just as quietly.

Sighing, Noctis props his head up with a hand on his chin and banishes the thoughts with the sight of his dull book. Tapping his pen against the list of characters he made on the novel, he skims through his notes again.

There’s Zeus, the almighty God whose number of wives and children could’ve surpassed the Lucian lineage, and his wife Mnemosyne, the personification of memory and remembrance. Together, they had nine children, all of which are muses for inspiration. Memorising all these nine names are definitely going to be a pain in the ass, and Noctis already feels a migraine kicking in as his dark blue eyes scan the names; Calliope of the epic poetry, Polyhymnia of the hymns of Gods, Urania of the stars and astronomy, Melpomene of the tragedy—

“It’s a play written by a certain playwright several hundred years ago,” Ignis says, delivering a brief history lesson as he expertly flips a grilled sandwich in a pan. “A grotesque tragedy, if I must
What Ignis said before surfaces in his mind, unbidden.

A tragedy, huh. Much like the title Titus Andronicus, Noctis supposes. Before he realises it, he’s already circling Melpomene with his highlighter, putting a star mark right next to it. Then, he shuts his book and calls it a day.

If this were truly a tragedy, then you were undoubtedly the architect of your own destruction.

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

;;v;; hi guys pls don’t hate byron yet, he’s got very good reasons you’ll find out in a few more chapters ;;v;; but that aside, i’m rly blown away by everyone’s kind kudos and comments and generous thoughts! <3 you guys are blessings to my awful work life (work sucks but ah well such is adulting) ;;v;; <3 <3 the next chapter is plot-development fluff so look forward to sleeping with noctis!!! he’s such a floof and a dork!

p/s i screwed up the timeline orz this is what happens when u let a grandma write fics ;;v;; resetting their ages to 20 bc i realised they started somewhere in october and forgot to take into account that noctis’ birthday had already passed _(:’3 im sorry agh i was writing chapter 15 (they’re already starting january) so i want to take this time to apologise for my rapidly deteriorating grandmotherly memory!

PREVIEW:
“Hey, you look like shit,” Noctis says—and he can mentally imagine his etiquette tutor screaming at him at the back of his head because he did not just address a female nobility like that and oh Six where have I gone wrong? as she wrings her hands tragically. Still, his casual greeting cracks the sleepy stupor you’re in, and your lips curve into a small smile. It’s nowhere a big one, but it’s a start.
blooming: into the light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

blooming

SOME WOULD CALL IT A childish fight. A hug, a peck on the cheek, and all that’s left is for you to make up with him. Yet, the thought crossing your head isn’t one of apology, not that you had anything to apologise for. Byron’s transgression is expected for one such as him, and you were long beleaguered by his critical dissection of your decaying life.

“You don’t even know how to love to begin with.”

You repeated his choice of words, knowing they were uncalled for.

The very same words Byron uttered, a callous weight to the sentence. Somehow, it sounded stupid for some reasons. Logically thinking about it, all human beings are capable of loving, wanting to love, and yearning to be loved in return. And love takes form not only as eros, the romanticism portrayed in novels of passionate rapture; ludus spoke of the playful love between two persons, agape represents the universal and unconditional love, and philia—the mutual friendship, the bond you now share between the prince and his excitable companion.

They, too, are forms of love.

And you are capable of loving them just as much as you loved everyone else.

Just thinking about your butler’s cryptic words hurt your head. Your half-eaten lunch of ham-and-egg sandwiches lay in a plate on your table, but you’ve long lost the appetite for it. Not when your head’s all wrapped up in thoughts of Byron, Byron and his dismissive nature, Byron and his stupid long ponytail, Byron and the icy glaciers in his murky eyes. Byron who tucks you in your bed once upon a time, Byron who coddles you with books and ribbons and food, Byron who takes you by your chin and whispers into your ear that you’re not made for this, you’re not made for loving, you’re not meant to be loved—

you were not born out of love

—ah.

Father is in your head again.

You bury your face in your arms, slumped over your work table in a helpless heap. Father and salt-and-pepper for his beard, a balding head, crow’s feet crinkling his eyes in that expression of perpetual disappointment. When he holds you with rubbery hands, you know a severe lashing is in order. What does he care anyway? He’s never hid the fact that he wedded mother—sweet Mnemosyne Ignatius born into a family of commoners—not out of love, but out of sheer profit. Her indomitable intelligence captures his attention, and being the strategist he is, seeks to claim her like a piece of land for Lucis.

If he could engineer genetics to provide the best of both parental genes, then you supposed you were the test tube baby. Science breeds love. And you were a product of it.

In fact, you would’ve been a genetically superior species if not for a slight defect; you are a daughter,
and not a son. What is seen as the pride of the Andronicus is lamented as a tragedy spanning generations and generations of males, all bones and skeletons chanting your name as a curse from their graves.

*Disgusting daughter of the Andronicus doesn’t need to go out for school, they say, so keep her in the house and give her home tutors.*

What could you do? What could you do to outshine others when you’re already shadowed from the start?

Trying to win father’s approval, your tiny hands constructed a manor out of building blocks.

The base would be your education, first and foremost, whilst its pinnacle will be your induction into the Lucian council. Touted as a bright child whose intellect surpasses those your age, your primary education flew by in just several years. Then comes your secondary education at ten, swallowing algorithms and equations and history and Crystal knowledge and regurgitating them with your fingers down your throat within three years. Fourteen and dying, tertiary education waits for no one but those who persevere; thick textbooks are your bedtime stories and writing discursions is your forced hobby. Academic journals are your daily reports and publications bearing the penname *T. Andronicus* is a common quote from one scholar to another.

With this, you had hoped, at the very least, father’s impression would improve. ‘*Look, father, look—I’ve graduated at nineteen with a doctorate!*’ you’d rehearse in front of the mirror, and father would finally regard you with light in his eyes and an approving hum of ‘*yes, child, I see it now; you’re definitely an Andronicus, worthy enough to carry on the family name.*’

But no.

Disallowed from attending your own graduation at the prestigious Lucis University, confined to the living room with only Byron and the chancellor of Lucis U attending, the ceremony is a disquieting funeral progression in all blacks. No commemorative pictures, no bouquets of flowers, no twirling of doctoral gown, and certainly no tossing of tudor bonnet. Not when father’s a lingering presence around the corners, watching.

In the end, what did nineteen years of your life amount to?

Nothing.

Nothing but a rolled up piece of paper.

With a weary sigh, you drag your unwilling body from the table, approaching your trusty cupboard of escape. All the emergency supplies are neatly folded within, clean white linens and scent of sunshine on the sheets. Wrenching the contents out on the floor, you make your way to your favourite spot by the glass windows, where the sunlight falls just right and the warmth seeping through the glass panes feels just nice. An afternoon nap is in order, and you’re not going to take no for an answer.

A customary action you’ve already perfected, you lay out the sheets, layered it up with comforters, decked the corners in pillows and bolsters, and leapt onto your private heaven. Always in an oversized shirt too big and pants too baggy, you shimmy down your blanket and bury your face in the reprieve, even if outside, Insomnia is a constant force in the world.

You don’t have to care.

You don’t have to care at all, for it is a world out of your grasp.
Scrubbing away all remnants of Byron and father and papers and pens, you turn to your side and grabbed a pillow, encasing it in a bear hug. Sleep will come, sooner or later, even if it rides a late train.

That is, until, you hear the doorknob turning.

“—and the teacher said it too!”

from the other side of the door, mama laughs. you couldn’t see her past this wood, but you could just image the way her face lights up with mirth, her luscious curls bouncing, her shoulders shaking. somehow, the thought makes you smile too. even if you’re separated by this door, nothing separates the bond between a mother and a daughter. what was it called again, in that blue-and-red book byron got for you? oh—right, storge. a bond built upon empathy, familiarity, and the natural love between parent and child.

if this is truly love, then you’d never want to let it go.

when mama’s laughter dies down and she speaks up again, it is all breathy with a trace of melancholy. “byron,” she says, and the albino standing by straightens up at the mention of his name. “thank you, thank you always for risking your life to bring us together. i can’t repay you enough. if—if quintus knew of this, then you’d surely—”

the steady footfalls of byron approaching your location echoes in the parlour, and he too kneels by your side, pressing a gloved hand on the door. it’s as though he could feel mama, just like you. “not at all, lady mnemosyne. taking care of her is my job. and,” he pauses, eyeing you from the corner of his eye with a smirk, “even if taking care of kids isn’t my specialty, the astrals are helping out loads. six knows how rowdy she can get when she’s bored.”

in an instant, your face shoots up in flames. “whuh—hey! that’s soooo not true!”

he laughs. and mama laughs too.

but mama’s laughter is strained, breaking at the edges.

WHAT GREETS HIM WHEN HE steps in is the usual plateau of Insomnia’s generous panorama of skyscrapers—and the sight of you, all cuddled up on your makeshift island of blankets and pillows by the sunshine. This time around, you noticed his presence straight away, for you sat up on your bedding and gave him the haziest of looks, one with half-lidded eyes, mussed up hair, and a drooping neckline teetering on the edge of your shoulder, revealing the sharp cut of your collarbones.

In other words, Noctis realises as he shuts the door behind him, you are a mess.

By all means, it’s not unexpected, he supposes. Last week ended on a sour note with your butler being a jerk not only to you, but to him and Prompto as well. The albino scoffs at the idea of ‘friendship’ and probably thinks it’s like a kid’s show, one with loads of rainbows and glitters raining from the sky in all its neon glory. Friendship is magic or whatever it is that Kenny Crow squawked in an ad by the subway. In a ritual increasingly habitual to him, he slips off his loafers and socks, drops his satchel behind the door, and plods over to you.

“Hey, you look like shit,” he says—and he can mentally imagine his etiquette tutor screaming at him at the back of his head because he did not just address a female nobility like that and oh Six where
have I gone wrong? as she wrings her hands tragically. Still, his casual greeting cracks the sleepy stupor you’re in, and your lips curve into a small smile. It’s nowhere a big one, but it’s a start.

A hand rubbing your eye, legs splayed by your sides, you yawn. “Compared to you, yeah I look awful. What’s with all the getup? Some fancy royal stuff you had to attend, Prince?”

Oh—right. It had been the norm to show up in shirt, cargos and boots to your room, so you obviously haven’t seen him in a black dress shirt, fitted pants, and matching tie. Cufflinks and tie pin too, if he were to count that in. Being subjected under your intense scrutiny puts him in an awkward spot, so he looks away and busies himself with unfastening his diamond cufflinks, drawing his sleeves up to his lean forearms.

“Yeah, last paper for finals today,” Noctis grouses, rubbing his nape. “Lucis U and their formal dress code, seriously.”

That makes you laugh, a small sound in a room too big. And that, that’s definitely a good start for him.

“I feel you,” you agree in an almost placating manner, pulling a pillow to your chest as you rest your cheek against it. “They made me wear formal stuff for finals, even when I was taking it in my own house. Sheesh, talk about upholding the proud Lucis U custom.”

Leaning backwards and holding his upper body weight with an arm, Noctis regards you under curious eyes. “You’re a graduate of Lucis U too?”

“Yeeeep, that’s the one. Just don’t call me a senior or alumni or whatever,” you brush it off, shaking your head. The subject is dropped just as easily as a new one is introduced, something you’re skirting around again. “Anyway Prince, now that it’s the end of the semester for you, what’re you gonna do? Got some exciting plans all laid out?”

Well, that’s a first. He’s hardly heard you talking like this, all laidback and bare to the world—to him. Mentally filing away the random trivia in his head, Noctis studies the lazy hints of a smile on your lips before shrugging. “Nope. It’s December and I’ve got absolutely nothing to do.” He pauses for a while. “Well—except Justice Monsters is gonna come out with a new game soon, but you know how they’re always teasing us with the release.”

At the news, your eyes are round, blinking at him owlishly. Half of your face buried in your pillow, your voice comes out muffled. Almost reminiscent of a preying cat waiting for the perfect moment to ambush his legs, Noctis thinks to himself as you speak up. “Justice Monster series? You mean the arcade ones, right?”

“Well, that’s the one,” he repeats your words right back at you, and he doesn’t miss how you wrinkle your nose at him in mock exasperation. “Their last game was what—four years ago? Prom said they’re revamping their whole system to make it new, but I don’t know if that’s the case. Kinda liked the old battle system, to be honest. Can’t add much to a pinball game anyway.”

For a moment, there is a lull in the conversation.

You’re all quiet, contemplative, eyes trailing down from his nose and resting on his knee, and all Noctis thinks is that he’s messed up somewhere. But it’s a video game and you’re a diehard fan of games, right? So what’s with the awkward silence?

“I’ve never played Justice Monsters before,” you say, a slow and thoughtful drawl of your words. Almost too loud in the deafening silence of this room. “Since they’re all arcade stuffs.”
That’s not a problem because Noctis supposes Justice Monsters series isn’t for everyone and the gaming machines are all located in rowdy arcades, teeming with high schoolers raring to outdo each other in high scores—oh.

_Arcade._

He almost wants to drag a hand through his face at his momentary lapse in judgment. “My bad.”

“Nah, no harm done,” you reply, and there it is again, the fledgling of a smile on your face. “I just know most of the console stuffs since I can play it from home, and that’s easy enough. Any chance of Justice Monsters being ported to console or mobile? Maybe I can get a chance to play it someday.”

All he can do is to shrug, scratching his cheek. “Don’t hold your breath on it. If it took them this long to release a game, it’ll probably take them decades to port it over.”

You make a noncommittal sound at his answer and flop backwards, snuggling in your nest of pillows and blankets, sprawling all over the white sheets. The drowsy haze is back at it again, gradually consuming your limbs, starting from the languid curl of your legs to the indolent circling of your arms around a pillow. Rays of sunlight fall on your features in fragments, the warmth from the sun a stark contrast against the biting chill of your room. Sleepy, lazy child of the Andronicus, all nestled up in your kingdom of pillows and fort of sheets. Always tired, always sleeping.

Finding neither the need to break the silence nor the want for a new conversation, Noctis hooks a finger in his necktie and loosens the loop strangling his neck. He throws the silk piece aside and sets to work on rearranging your feathery mountain of pillows, making some space for him. If anything, you don’t seem to mind it at all. Your encouragement is to pat the space right beside you, already relinquishing the hold of several pillows to be gifted to his territory. By the time he’s done, he’s already lying on his back, taking in the arabesque detailing on the plaster ceiling, half of your pillows by his side.

It’s a quiet affair, lounging about like this.

You’re not talking, he’s not talking, and that’s fine. Conversational silence is an art many failed. Cold silence is offset by the warm brushes of sunlight on his skin, all over his body. The fuzzy hum of the central air conditioning, your even breathing, and just pillows. _Very fine pillows,_ he thinks, as he shifts about to get the perfect position on this little island.

Undisturbed by his presence, you continue to stare into space, lost in your thoughts. A blank look he’s seen for weeks now, eyes trained on the ceiling, broken by the slow flutter of your eyelashes every now and then. Almost like a default expression of yours but you made a favourable impression so far, starting from the smaller smiles and even smaller laughter. He’s not expecting full-out chortles like Gladio or one of Prompto’s indignant cries, but you’re getting there—slowly.

Maybe by the time he’s King of Lucis, you’d wield an array of expressions like King Regis’ Armiger, ready to laugh, ready to smile, ready to shout your way to the top as his strategist.

And he thinks Prompto will like that very much.

Gazing at the parading clouds in the sky, cotton white on baby blue with just the barest hints of crystal pink from the magic barrier, you finally breathe out a sigh. “Hey, Prince? You wanna sleep together?”

He blinks.
Distracted by the hushed tranquillity of your room, Noctis almost misses your question. Craning his head to get a better look at your face, his eyebrows furrow in automatic. “Uh—what?”

Did he mishear that?

“I said, you wanna sleep together?” you repeat a tad bit firmer this time, rolling sideways to look at him. “I’ve got extra blankets and pillows back there. You look like you could use some extra hours ‘cause your dark eye circles are starting to scare me.”

Geez, that’s what you meant. You almost gave him a premature death. With how your face is clean from any suggestive traces of—whatever it is, all that you’re offering him is an invitation to sleep. Nap. Pillows and blankets provided. Absolutely free of charge. All of that, and something else. Friendship. Unspoken in the air.

“I blame it on the finals. Too much Ebony and too little sleep,” Noctis grumbles, pressing a hand to his hair as the beginnings of a yawn threaten to ruin his denial. “But nah, I’ll pass—“

Aaaaand you’re already up and about without even caring about what he has to say, walking towards the cupboard in a few resolute steps, wresting the doors open. Emptying the entire content of two comforters and three pillows stacked on your tiny arms, you cross the entire length of the floor with the same hurriedness as before. In dogged determination, you fuss about with donating his landscape of pillows with even more pillows and almost buried him under two comforters before you’re finally satisfied with the arrangement.

Dusting off your hands, you return to your half of the land and slip under your blankets once more, pulling them up to your chin. “Good night, Prince. See you later.”

He isn’t even given a say in the matter? “Hey, wait—“

Turning away from him, you pull your blankets over your head and all is lost to the world.

sunday. sundays are best spent with family, a quality time shared between parent and child. to you, no day matters more than the days you spent with mama, reverential over the piano keys she pressed, keeping every single musical masterpiece locked tight in your mind. today, a sunday, is just as good as any other day as byron places your hand in his, guiding you to the parlour by the piano room. he must’ve felt your excitement since you bounce on your feet and eagerly sat by the adjoining door the moment you entered.

two quick knocks and a word. “mama—“

only, her shrill scream answers your call.

THAT FEELING WHEN HE’S HIT with one of Prompto’s misfired stopcast in one of their training rounds? Yeah, that’s exactly what he feels like, now that he’s up. Or barely up anyway. Crimson stains the rumpled sheets, telling him of a sunset bleeding past the skyscrapers and blending into the distant horizon. A persistent hammer is hitting the back of his brain and his throat is all scratchy, bordering on a gaiatoad’s croak. Another nap sounds like a brilliant idea, but two things are nagging him right now; one: his shoulder aches like Gladio took him camping, and two: someone’s phone is in his face.

Forcing the sleep away, Noctis rubs his eyes and attempts to straighten his vision.
Phone. Hands holding said phone. A distinctly feminine face and complementing effeminate features attached to said hands. Sloppy shirt and a drooping neckline and all clean cuts of collarbone with a blanket hiding the rest of the body beside him. Shoulders rising and falling in steady breathing, wordless.

*What in the Six is this.*

Is this a newer version of a wet dream? With girls showing up in his bed, holding up a phone to his face? That’s impossible. His toes are freezing and his fingernails are bluish bordering on purple and this really doesn’t feel like any of those hormonal teenage fantasy phase he outgrew—even if it’s too realistic to begin with.

“Hey Prince, you’re up.”

Where has he heard that voice before?

Eyes peer curiously from behind the phone.

“Prince? You up yet?”

And quite suddenly, everything jolts back into his head like someone’s hit rewind on a tape; the stiff pain in his shoulder is because he’s an idiot for rolling in his sleep and ended up lying on his side, he drove his Audi to the Citadel to make a long overdue visit to your room, the finals seized him by his throat while it had Prompto in a chokehold on the wall, Ignis made oatmeal and berries for today’s breakfast, and—

“Slow start, huh?”

—right.

Finally, everything makes sense.

“Yeah,” Noctis finally finds his voice, even if it is raspy like he spent a night at a karaoke box with the gang—minus a brooding, dismissive Ignis who’d rather be found in a bookstore. “I feel like a zombie.”

Now you’re looking at him, all sympathetic even as you’re tapping on your phone. “That’s awful. Those late-nighters finally caught up to you, huh. Want some aspirins?”

As groggy as he is, he has half the mind to refuse your offer. “Pass. I’ll be okay.”

“If you say so.”

A distracted reply.

And a distracted reply from you only meant one thing: King’s Knight.

He’s not wrong when he sees your fingers working on overdrive over the screen, chewing on your bottom lip in pure concentration. Entirely absorbed in the game, teeth grinding, brows stitched together, it almost looks like you would break your phone if you missed out on a combo or two. He knows he can count on you to wake up only to play King’s Knight and tune out everything else on Eos if it meant clearing a raid with a perfect score. But at this point, he’s torn between deciding whether your obsession with the game borders on downright lunacy, or you’re going to drag him deeper by his feet into this hell as well.
The dramatic moment ends with much harrumph on your side and you lifelessly throw yourself on your back again, phone aside. Blue eyes stray from the way your brows are pinched together and your teeth littering your bottom lip with bites, to the sprawl of your arm and down your phone, where DEFEAT drops over the screen in gruesome reds and blacks.

Ah. Right.

Losing a raid is always frustrating, that’s for sure.

“That sucks.” This time around, he’s the one who’s sympathetic. “What raid was it?”

“Against one of the Einherjars.” You mourn, rolling over to your side. Face half-obscured by your hair, falling over your cheeks, Noctis isn’t sure what to make of your expression. Is it one of resentment? Or simply one of lament? Turning on his side, Noctis squints to get a good look as you continue your spiel of grief. “You know these Einherjars, right? You gotta fight them to recruit them?” At his nod, you continue—not before sighing deeply like it’s a long-suffering disease. “There’s a secret dungeon in Yeiva Village where you can fight the Einherjar Callisto. And he pretty much trashed me good. Real good. I got wiped in 1.5 minutes flat.”

“Probably because Kaliva’s cooldown on his shield takes fifteen seconds,” Noctis offers his conjecture, in which you meet with rapid agreement. “Sure, Kaliva’s got high resistance towards magic but he’s a glass cannon at physical defence. He can’t take those big attacks if the boss comes at him.”

“That’s so true, Prince,” you mutter under your breath, rolling your eyes. Your free hand reaches out to tuck the offending locks of hair behind your ear, and you all but pulled your blanket over your shoulder again, smothered in a cocoon. “Necromancer Kaliva’s got better RES than most, but his DEF is still tiny compared to Warrior Ray Jack. Ugh. This feels so hopeless. I can’t get that Einherjar at this rate.”

Noctis bites back a small laugh.

Because—seriously, are you actually sulking over this?

Fumbling under the covers, he reaches for his phone and draws it out of the pocket. Within two clicks of unlocking and logging into King’s Knight, he settles his eyes on you again, fighting the grin that’s starting to grow on his lips.

“Hey, c’mon. Let’s try again. I’ll tank it for you.”

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

if someone says they’re gonna tank a boss for you, those are words of pure love right there. ;;; honestly this chapter is such a warm fluff when i wrote it (i’m around chapter 17 rn where sweet fluff happens again) and writing fluff makes everyone happy <3 except. when plot comes into play. that’s when tragedy happens. ;v;;

out of curiosity, how tall are you readers? ouo ) if you readers don’t mind sharing? or what sort of height would you readers prefer? or would you readers prefer if there is no
mention on height at all? i was writing a chapter and encountered some difficulty as i couldn’t imagine the average height of the readers of this fic in comparison to noct (involving some brushing-touching-feely stuff), so i’m trying to establish some average height to get it going. <3 please and thank you, if you don’t mind!

PREVIEW:
“Never seen you standing around out here before,” Noctis says, and only then he manages to draw your attention to him. “Morning. Got your groceries delivered again?”
blooming: the castle of sand

Chapter Notes

WARNING | Abuse & Torture

See the end of the chapter for more notes

blooming

“lady mnemosyne is ill.”

there are words a child does not wish to hear. there are words he swallowed, leaving a substitute for a lie. a simple white lie, one he thinks you wouldn’t find out. at least with ill, he does not face a barrage of questions. at least with ill, he does not hurt you. all he does is to take your hand in his, kneel by your side, and watch how your eyes grow round with tears.

“flu? fever? is that why mama screamed?” you try each question in fervent desperation, seeking answers from his stoicism. unshed tears threaten to cascade your cheeks, but you held them in as how you held your breath, clutching his hand tight. “she’ll be okay, right? byron, she’ll be okay—right?”

no, milady, she will not be okay, the doctors have strapped her in. she will be sedated and bedridden and she will never see you again.

he tests the words in his mind, replaying them several times until he decides you deserve nothing of the pain that comes with those words. a lie. a lie will do. you’ll eat the simplest of lies from his hands. you are dependent on him. you cannot survive without him. you are weak and pathetic, yet, most beautiful things are. so he closes his fingers over your tiny palms, clasping them in a tiny prayer in front of his beating heart.

“she will. she is a fighter, and so are you.”

MORNING PRACTICE BEGINS WITH AN intense reproach from Gladio, who vows to work him twice as hard over the semester break. More like a total ass-whooping, but Noctis’ ego is too high to call it an ass-whooping when he’s sure that he’ll throttle Gladio down by a few notches in the coming week, so he settles for an ‘extreme workout camp’ instead. It starts at the crack of dawn when he shows up, bleary, mussing up his bedhead as he saunters into the training room with a readied Gladio lying in wait, swords laid out for two. It ends with a sputtering heave, Noctis on his hands and knees, sweat drenching his shirt, and a taunting Gladio shit-talking him from the distance.

Of course, Prompto has to make the mistake of ringing Noctis up in the morning, wanting to grab breakfast together to celebrate their newfound freedom for a month, and Gladio’s all too pleased when he picks up the call instead, telling the blond to ‘get his ass over’ and ‘join them for some real
Fun means seeing Prompto flying to an adjacent wall because Gladio’s sword has thrown him off his feet.

Fun also means sitting on their haunches with Gladio marching in front of them, prattling off their appalling mistakes one after another.

Fun also means tomorrow, same time, same place.

From his spot by the wall, Prompto holds his face in his hands. “This sucks.”

Noctis only rolls his eyes. “Glad you’re here with me, best friend.”

**IN RETROSPECT, BREAKFAST FOR FOUR** seems like a good idea. Ignis shows up precisely at eight with a bagful of morning groceries he managed to pick up whilst Noctis and Prompto are both having the time of their lives, and he’s more than ready to chauffer them home to Noctis’ apartment complex. But then again, the prince has a mind of his own and only casts an upward glance towards the ceiling, shouldering his bag with a towel slung around his neck.

That’s all it takes for Ignis to adjust his eyeglasses with a disapproving air. “Something the matter, Noct?”

“Was thinking about stopping by upstairs for a sec,” is his simple answer.

Ignis’ figured as much. Just hearing the confirmation coming from the prince himself is enough to get the gears in his head turning.

“What, you’re gonna visit the architect chick again?” Gladio rumbles, locking up the double doors with a jingle of his keys. “So what about breakfast? Thought Prom’s gonna grab some grub with you just now?”

In the midst of nursing a newfound bruise on his elbow, the blond only puts up a sigh. “My spirit for breakfast’s already gone. Gladio took it. All I wanna do now is head home and never wake up until January.”

“Stop being so overdramatic.” Gladio barks out a laugh, slapping Prompto’s back heartily—and sends him right into the floor. “Uh. My bad.”

The silly antic does little to disperse the solemn expression lingering on Ignis’ face. He watches the prince’s back as he walks away, probably with his head in the clouds and legs guided by a single thought. A second later, he draws out his phone and starts texting someone, gazing at the screen for a few minutes, before pocketing the device again. Gladio and Prompto both follow him like an automatic reaction, still bickering in between, all flailing hands from Prompto and more grumbling from Gladio. Yet, none of them questioned Noctis’ choice. Or rather, none of them saw what lies ahead.

By right, none of this should be happening this way.

Absolutely none of it.

Their walk to one of the many lifts scattered in the Citadel is filled with Noctis’ unrepentant texting, Prompto’s incessant whining, and Gladio’s outline for tomorrow’s training regimen. For one such as
him, Ignis doesn’t need to look further to know that the prince is gradually accepting your presence as part and parcel of his life. A seemingly harmless tactician paving the path for Lucian military in the future, there is merit in establishing friendship with someone like you. But the purging of identity Quintus subjected you under—that and his strategic erasure of those who stumble into his path, it left a bitter taste at the back of Ignis’ throat if he were to be frank.

Something about it doesn’t ease the unrest in his gut feeling.

The lift takes them up to the 56th floor, where the maze-like twists and turns of many similar hallways would’ve complicated someone who doesn’t know what they’re searching for. Yet, Noctis knows. A practiced habit for him, Ignis realises, as he retraces the winding hallways to take him to your room. That much tells him of the prince’s whereabouts if he’s not with any of them.

At the end of a bright passage, clusters of windows gleam under the morning sunlight. The usual standard of two vases of flowers mark the entrance to your room, and each bouquet is a weekly affair of crimson blooms. This time, though, two things are amiss; one: Violet hyacinths crowd the vases, each bouquet almost spilling from the porcelain lip, a poignant ballad of blossoms; and two: Standing in front of your own door with your hair damp and brown bags of groceries by your feet, you are oblivious to their presence as you remain rapt in examining a piece of paper between your fingers, wearing the expression of a static television.

It doesn’t go unnoticed by the prince.

“Never seen you standing around out here before,” Noctis says, and only then he manages to draw your attention to him. “Morning. Got your groceries delivered again?”

Adroit fingers halve the paper with a clean fold to the center, and you hold the piece by your side as your eyes rove over the entirety of the team. “Oh. Good morning, Highness.” To the rest of them, you nod with each name. “Morning, Prompto, Gladio, and Ignis. Why’re you guys here?”

“Gave these runts a solid kick in the ass this morning,” Gladio chuckles, and Prompto jabs him in the arm in affront. “Standard Crownsguard sparring. Noct himself is still shit when it comes to parrying attacks since he keeps leaving his sides open, and Prompto—“ he chuckles more, “he’s got better luck shooting himself in the foot.”

“Can it, Gladio.” Noctis is already scowling. “Specs, no breakfast for this guy. He doesn’t deserve to eat.”

Prompto nods vehemently. “Seconded! Let him starve, Iggy—payback is sweet.”

“There will be no breakfast for all of you if you do not return to Noct’s apartment before nine,” Ignis warns, adjusting his hold on his own bags of groceries. “Now, make haste; the sooner we return, the better.”

In hindsight, it is a feeble attempt meant to redirect them home. Now that Noctis has ‘stopped by upstairs for a sec’, or so what he spoke earlier, they should be very well on their merry way. Though somehow, things would certainly not be as simple as that. Noctis leans against the doorframe, head tipped back and a leg braced against the wall, and he regards Ignis with a quizzical look, one that says he’s already got everything planned out from the start. And Ignis certainly has no choice but to play the part in his many machinations, just like all the years before.

“You can just cook breakfast here, right?” Noctis suggests with the barest hints of an idea he’s thought out long before practice this morning, trying to disguise it with a light shrug. “That okay with you?”
Prompto is never one to miss out on a chance for a big gathering—that, Noctis definitely knows for sure. Glittering blue eyes already cemented on the prince’s idea, he’s all but scooped up your groceries into his lean arms, crooning, “Ooh, you mean like a big breakfast for all five of us? I’m in! I’m in! Count me in!”

A disarming smirk plays on the edges of Noctis’ lips at his best friend’s approval, and he turns to regard you with the same look. “You ate yet?”

“ Nope,” you admit with a shake of your head, rubbing your nape. With your damp hair playing down your back, you bend over to hoist yet another bag Prompto missed out, cradling it like a child. “Just woke up, actually. Didn’t even start on breakfast yet.” You pause to work out a sleepy yawn, a hand covering your mouth. “…didn’t even have the time to dry my hair properly, to be honest.”

“No hairdryer?” Gladio points out. “My lil’ sis swears by it.”

You barely stifle yet another yawn at that, rubbing your eye with the back of your hand. “…not much of a morning person, sorry. I don’t function until it’s at least past ten a.m.”

“Eh, well—Noct’s like that too.” Sympathetic, even if he’s imitating Ignis. “Sleepyheads, the lot of you.”

And the prince drops into scowl again. “Shut up.”

With the idea of heading home already drained down the sink, Ignis only swallows the dregs of ill-omened encounters and stows them at the back of his head, hiding them warily. One may see it as paranoia, but to him, keeping the Crown Prince safe from harm’s way is long ingrained into his bones, carefully tailored around his every move. Even if it means doubting those the prince came in contact with, then so be it.

He would rather lose them than losing Noctis in the end.

**quintus must’ve found out about it.** if not, byron wouldn’t have been restrained on his knees, arms outstretched high above his head, thick steel cuffing his wrists. the range of expression quintus wields is much like the whip he carries in his hand; a long, thin line that promises pain to come. and he understands that much, understands what’s to come in the hours ahead. but what he doesn’t understand is this: you, screaming by the corner of the room, held back by wan-faced maids whose claws are digging into your bony shoulders.

“byron fafnir.”

he doesn’t flinch. it’s been a long time someone’s called him by his full name, and as much as it is disconcerting to hear fafnir rolling off quintus’ snakelike tongue, he won’t give him the satisfaction of fear.

“byron fafnir,” quintus repeats in the same, boring drone of a man holding himself back. brandishing the leather whip, he assumes the façade of a concerned father in the face of many—but byron doesn’t buy into his bullshit. not when quintus’ regarding him as one would a stray. “i believe you know your transgressions.”

there’s nothing else he could say in denial. lying only results in one—or many more whippings added to his never-ending tally. quintus is an expert in making people talk, wresting the answers from their lips no matter how unwilling they may be. perhaps that is why he serves the lucian royal
council with an unfeeling fealty to King Regis; he has all of his ancestors’ secrets all sealed up inside
that calculative head of his. He knows how to make them talk, one way or another. Perhaps, to an
extent, this is also why all the late Fafnirs served the Andronicus unhesitatingly, knowing their short
leashes are tethered to a cruel hand.

Byron’s silence only serves to spur Quintus on, who has already placed a hand on his chin in coy
contemplation. “Fafnir is a dragon, you see,” he begins, “in the old tales our ancestors passed
around. A great and terrible dragon who guards his treasure and slays all those who came close. Did
you father tell you this?”

As much as he’d rather bite his tongue and die than answering about his asshole of a father, Byron
sucks in a deep breath and counts to ten. “No.”

Quintus hums again, disenchanted. “I’m not surprised. Percival’s trail went cold; probably took a
boat to Niflheim, for all I know. All I found—”

“—is me. Yeah, I know that much.”

He knows, of course—he’s not a fucking idiot.

Percival Fafnir is a coward who broke his piggybank and swept all of Byron’s gil into his pockets,
ducking out of a rainy shack and never to return. Duscae is cold and biting with swampy monsters
nestered behind trees, and all Byron has is the rainwater in his boots and the shirt on his back. So yes,
he knows, he damn well knows that it’s him who picked up a twig and wielded it like a sword, it’s
him who dried the plates at Greasy Diners, and it’s—Surprise!—None other than him who scammed
enough gil to bribe someone for smuggling him into illustrious Insomnia.

“You are where you came from, Byron.” Quintus shakes his head, disproving, because when else is
he ever approving someone anyway? “You’re fortunate I’m still doing you a great favour by taking
you in. Other nobles would’ve scoffed at your name, no matter how much you may offer. Your
existence is useless in this era. And I am doing you a service by rebuilding you anew.”

That breaks an itch on his tongue, tingling his vision in red. Glaring at him underneath dishevelled
bangs, Byron spits out, “Oh yeah? You ever thought if you’re the one who’s useless around here? For
someone who talks all big, you’re so full of shit for calling me useless when you’re one hella useless
father to her. Ever asked yourself what you’ve fucking done for her lately?”

His insults barely elicit a reaction from Quintus. All he does is to twirl the whip between his fingers, a
glaze of scarlet in his eyes.

And that’s all the warning Byron gets before the first crack of leather sears his skin.

“You’re right. I should give her lessons by making you into an example,” says Quintus, glancing
sidelong at your direction. “Watch and learn, daughter of mine.”

“Say, how come you never told us your full name?” is Prompto’s innocent question as he
shuffles through King’s Knight. Draped over a stack of pillows, legs swinging in the air, the blond’s
lying on his stomach in the usual spot he always takes, which is right next to Noctis. “Cause, you
know, it’s kinda weird calling you ‘the architect guy’ all the time.”

“You can always call me Kaliva, if you want,” you answer with a shrug. “Works too.”

It gets Prompto chuckling as he ducks his head, mischievous eyes glinting from beneath his
meticulously gelled hair. “Dude, you’re probably the best Kaliva I’ve ever teamed up with, but that’s going too far. That’s like some RP stuff right there.”

“Nothing’s wrong with a little RP. Life’s always an RPG anyway.” Noctis shares his princely wisdom without much thought, tapping through the buttons on his screen and scrolling through the dungeon in quick motions. “Everyone’s expected to play a part or something like that.”

“Deep stuff, man, real deep.” The blond’s full-out laughing now, nudging his friend in the side. “Do tell us more, Your Highness.”

And that’s the end of that. But sooner or later, the very same question will rise again.

A name.

He wants a name to your existence, when such privileges are lost to a daughter of the Andronicus.

Sitting with your back pressed against the glass panel, the late morning sunlight casts opaque shadows on your face, an effective mask to hide your disillusionment. The rest of the prince’s entourage are scattered everywhere in your room; Ignis’ taken your kitchenette as hostage for breakfast preparations, Gladio’s occupied your pillow island with his nose stuffed in a well-read book from your collection, and Noctis sits alongside Prompto as the two are raiding in King’s Knight. And here you are, alone, but not entirely alone, with a note pinched between your fingers.

As much as you welcomed their presence to colour your mornings brighter, there’s no hiding the conflicting emotions coursing through your head when you saw a familiar monogram peeking underneath a vase of purple hyacinths. It’s as though the world slows down to a halt, much like the cliché novels spoke of.

T.A.

Embossed on thick parchment unsupplied to any common corner store is an ornamented monogram finely done in gold foil. Your monogram, inlaid with a crest of the Andronici dragon, its great claws and wings curling around the lettering as it remains a protector to the family. Father never approved of this, you know, for he shredded all thoughts of your ascension. He never believed in you. But only one man did. And only one man knows the existence of this monogram.

Flicking your fingernail underneath the fold, you examine the careful cursive done in black. Only one sentence with no name for the sender.

If you forgive me, then you have shown me the greatest love of all.

Biting on your lower lip, you closed it again. Byron. This whole letter carries an edge palpable only to those who knew him like you did.

In the past, you’ve fought with him. Hissed at him for his overprotective nature, shutting him down for all the solid rebukes he gave. And he, too, is a far cry from a saint. A vindictive streak runs deep in his blood, wanting to shield you in his shadows as long as he breathes. It’s his job to smother your every move, pillowing your thuds on the wall, dampening your screams and shouts. For all the years he spent on you, of course, the proximity between you and him blurred past that of a butler and a mistress, a caretaker and a child, a babysitter and a burden. The books have said it’s only a natural progression in life to fight with those closest to you, and each argument brings people closer together once mended.

But you knew him better, read the old scars littering his knuckles, seen his fingers playing over the
many holes on his ears.

Your ideals are his ideals, but his ideals are his alone and you have no part in it whatsoever.

“T.A.? What’s that?”

Lost in your musings, a voice overhead fails to alert you of a distinct shadow falling over your figure. It’s only too late for you to react when deft hands swipe downwards to snatch the letter from your grasp, right into the possession of the prince himself. Standing before you, Noctis’ face remains partially obscured by the heavy parchment, and you only fleshed out the minor quirk of his eyebrows to the subtle narrowing of his blue eyes as they scan over the monogram. You couldn’t fault his confusion, not at all, not when he knows nothing about you.

Getting to your own feet, you dust off your back and nick the parchment just as easily as he did, tucking it by your side. Under the harsh sunlight, the dark mess of Noctis’ hair burns gunmetal, juxtaposing Byron’s endless whiteness. A ring of platinum stains his steely blue eyes, almost like the bloodied waters in Byron’s eyes.

It’s more than enough to seize your heart in little fits.

Even without him, Byron haunts you in every corner.

Clearing the sudden dryness in your throat, you sidestep Noctis and amble your way to your study with a casual shake of your head. “My initials. A for Andronicus, remember? So T.A. in short, like Titus Andronicus. Also stands for The Architect, just so you know.”

“Yeah—figured that much,” he says, lofty, keeping up with your rapid steps in slow jogs.

Reaching your desk, in three precise motions, you unlock the top drawer, slip the letter in its depths, and shut it with a small click. For good measure, you pocket the silvery key just because Noctis hovers dangerously close to your workplace, until Ignis has kept a mindful eye on the two of you even if he’s stirring a bowlful of batter. Brushing off the matter just as easily because the prince obviously looks like he won’t get off your back anytime soon, you retreat to where Prompto’s sitting, making some space for yourself.

And Noctis, sleepy Noctis who’s always yawning or two, definitely knows more than he lets on. His silence on the matter is only one out of respect, never asking more than what you’re willing to tell.

“Do you use T. Andronicus for everything you do?” Seemingly harmless, the prince’s Advisor speaks up from his corner at the kitchenette, setting down the batter. “Or is that simply an allusion to the play itself? You seem rather fond of the name.”

“I wrote academic papers with that very same name, citing lots from Professor Estheim,” you point out. “Most people have to publish their full name, but I get away with just T. Andronicus. Probably because nobility issues, the usual deal.”

It’s either that, or they answer to Quintus and the rest of the Andronici, for his influence runs deeper than the Insomnian sewers. But it’s nothing they should know, nothing Noctis should be digging into, not if he wants to be safe. Even if Ignis might have discerned the distinction between yourself and another noblewoman, he breathes not a word of it. He’s merely content with carrying on this façade, checking the cupboards for a frying pan and fetching a spatula.

Prompto looks up from his game for a split second before returning to King’s Knight, fingers carefully directing Toby away from the boss’ onslaught of icicle shards. “So, being nobility lets you get away with stuffs like this?”
No—yes—no.

Is it a yes, or is it a no? There is no denying that others might have lumped together all nobles underneath the lights of opulence and splendour, hosting charity balls and mingling with those they deem worthy of their time. Flagrant in every way, they ride in Audis and Aston Martins, heels clicking with every step and tottering everywhere with their bodyguards. But surely the estranged Lady Andronicus knows nothing of such affairs, yes? For Lady Andronicus does not exist within the records, yes? And that’s the end of that.

Scratching your cheek, you cast a look at Noctis, who’s taken residence by the blond. “I dunno. I’m not the token spokesperson from nobility around here. Not exactly an exemplary noblewoman with the lifestyle I’m leading.”

“Indeed,” Ignis says, inclining his head in agreement. He’s gone and heated up the pan, the very same pan you scrubbed until the burnt black egg bits go off and your fingers went raw, oiling the surface lightly. “Most noblewomen are different from her, Prompto. Either tutored by a privately hired scholar or sent away to prestigious schools, their schedules are packed with additional lessons such as etiquette or dancing. They are groomed to be the leaders of their family, regardless of their ranks.”

Not like you. Nothing like you at all.

Swallowing the bitter truth, you thumbed at the Advisor over your shoulder, Prompto’s eyes falling on you again. “What he said. Sorry, my life’s a bit weird. Not your stereotype noble, nope.”

“No—no, definitely not weird!” He all but crows, arms flailing and looking on in horror as if he’s been such an idiot for barging into the nitty-gritty details of your life. Pure Prompto knows nothing—nobody knows anything, and it shines in how he gushes, “Dude, shhh, seriously, you’re okay, okay? I mean, I don’t think other nobles would be as chill as you. Heck, nobles probably don’t even wanna make friends with me. So you’re okay. You’re definitely more than okay.”

“Well, you’ve got the Prince as your BFF, so.” You make artless gestures in the air as Noctis looks on, wry. “You don’t need to make friends with the nobles like me. You’re way too cool for that already. Like, the coolest BFF of the Prince.”

For some reasons, that gets Prompto all huffy as he puffs out his chest in comical rendition of a haughty royalty. A haughty royalty who happens to finger-gun your way, throwing a cheesy wink with a click of his tongue. “Then, as the coolest guy in this room, I hereby declare that you’re a cool noble. We good?”

It’s all so whimsical and utterly ridiculous and lacking logicality until you feel the corners of your lips lifting into a smile—

stop this nonsense immediately, milady, he will hurt you

—and it almost falls, almost breaks off at the edges, but you held on to it, held on to your wavering smile even when Prompto freezes up and almost asked if anything’s wrong, if there’s anything he can do for you, and you just shake your head, holding your breath, shaking your head again because you don’t trust your voice when you know it’s going to crack and all eyes are on you, the prince’s, Prompto’s, Ignis’, and even Gladio’s, but it’s just that maybe, just maybe, just maybe with how your heart’s squeezing and your pulse is racing—

Having friends is just so, so good.
—and the monogram lies in the desk, forgotten.

**father is a cruel man.** He sees pleasure in inflicting pain upon others, and that much is evident in the lessons he imparted on Byron’s skin. Sitting by the fireplace, your butler is a white silk stained scarlet. Crisscross marks on his skin, over his muscled back, over the flat planes of his chest. Almost like a needle threaded him red. And you are but a broken mess of tears, snot, dry throat cracking from all the crying you’ve done, fingernails digging into your palm to leave crimson welts as though you could feel a fraction of the pain Byron’s gone through.

He is strong. He is strong for having survived that ordeal and remaining conscious, right up to the bitter end. He is strong for still having enough strength left in his weary bones to gather you into his lap, resting his chin on your hair. But he is weak, too weak for words, too weak to admonish you for crying tears after tears for his sake. Too weak until he slumps over your little body, arms circling your waist in a loosely-held hug.

This is all your fault, isn’t it?

This is all your fault for wanting mother so much.

You want, and want, and want, and want, and want and want and want and want and want and want and want and want... and this is what you get.

And since you overstepped your boundaries, a price had to be paid. A price slotted under Byron’s tab, paid in full.

Your eyes ache from all the tears. His blood seeps into your shirt. You daren’t move a muscle for his comfort. He remains numb, breathing from his mouth. You want to hug him. He shouldn’t be hugged. Your fingers graze his flanks. He doesn’t recoil from your touch. Your tongue is heavy with sorry I’m so sorry I’m so sorry Byron I’m so. His throat bobs, and you press your lips against it to keep him still.

“I’m sorry.”

It is a raspy apology, but you are. You truly are. You are a fool for a five-year-old, expecting to be coddled in a prison at the expense of others. You want mother so much, you were blinded from seeing what you already have. You sacrificed the only person who stood steadfast by your side, all because you wanted more than you needed. You are a selfish child for thinking your little charade could fool father.

The walls have ears. The statues have eyes. They must’ve whispered to father and tattled on your every move. And father is a strategist of a great calibre, so great until it only takes him three words to come up with a solution to the problem. Three words. Watch and learn.

Yes, you learnt. You learnt your lesson very well.

The first thing to do is to get rid of all your tears.

And later on, the rest of your feelings.

[blooming | end.]
hello readers it’s trainwreck time 8) this marks the end of the blooming arc, and we’ll move into the flowering arc starting with the next chapter (flowering of many things)! pls be warned that from here onwards, things get a little freaky and a lot little questionable, so the rating has to be increased to M + extra warnings will be tagged and included at the beginning of every chapter, totally for some reasons hmmm I hope everyone’s ok with that (°_°)

thank you so much for all you dear readers reading this stuff <3 im honestly rly surprised and blown away by everyone’s comments and kudos! ;;v;; thank you for your kind encouragement, it really helps loads with writing out the future chapters (gives me motivation to chug through crap work life and write fics lol) <3 and thank you for chatting with me in the comments, you readers are too sweet <3 I hope everyone enjoys the next chapter, where we have the dreaded showdown between Dad™ vs Prince™!

FLOWERING ARC PREVIEW:
[9] And it’s not the four walls anymore, it’s the 56th floor of the Citadel nestled in the dizzying Crown City, all black marbles symbolising the Lucian royal colour and a vase for two bouquets of purple hyacinths, with father’s eyes narrowing and his hand curling loosely into a fist as an uneven gait breaks the fragile silence in the air.

“Your Highness, Prince Noctis,” father utters, tacking on a slight bow to the greeting.
“Fancy meeting you here, out of all places.”
how does one remove their feelings? the same way a doctor removes a tumour, of course. feelings are a collection of malignant, yet immaterial things contained within a human body. you supposed you should run a knife from the tip of your chin, carving a deep line in its wake, right past your throat, carving crimson cuts, down the valley between your breasts, carving viscous red, and set the blade aside to make way for your fingers. you’d pick into your flesh as how one opens a cupboard to remove its contents. squelching past the slippery fats, nails scratching over ribcage, digging into the slick scarlet of your body.

innards, one by one, you’d wrench them out, arranging them aside on a clean black plastic bag for disposal.

and once eviscerated, once you are truly the epitome of a hollow husk of a human, only then you’d pinch the flaps together with a needle and thread, sewing them shut.

YOU MUST’VE SLEPT IN, you see, for the sun’s already blistering bright as it hangs out in its usual spot above the pink-tinged Insomnian skies. Rumpled bed sheets rustle under the sluggish push and pull of your limbs, pillows are straightened, bolster placed right where it belonged, and you’re up on your feet with cold marble burning your skin. Glass panels trimmed in silver showcase the extravagance Lucis offered in its Crown City, all peaked tips of skyscrapers jutting out in the network of expressways slithering between the concrete forest. It is an image that once made you suck in a deep breath, pulse pounding underneath your skin, gawking at the magnificence of the glass globe you lived in.

And it still does, even until now.

Because, really, what’s more exciting than going out there—living among them?
The wry thought almost made you snort at yourself. A hopeless dream that will never see the light of the day, definitely.

Your bedroom—personal, private bedroom with an attached bathroom—is a quiet affair of only three furniture; a four-poster bed following the standard Citadel furnishing, a plain vanity with a comb sitting on its lacquered finish, and a cupboard tucked in the farthest corner of vast emptiness. Barebones of a room, really, one with no personal attachment. No pictures hanging off the walls, no traces of a human living here. Almost like you rented the space in your haste, caring little for individual preferences and focusing solely on the practical aspects of living.

Still, it doesn’t matter. Your home isn’t here nor there; your home exists in a person, not a place.

Trudging over to the bathroom, you make quick work of cleaning yourself for the day. A spray of hot water falls from the ceiling, emulating the feel of a waterfall, with a claw-footed bathtub sitting in the distance. Between the bathtub and the shower, it’s always easier to get into the shower, wash up, and get out than lounging about in a tub of soapy water, luxuriating in the fancy bath gels the Citadel had to offer. Maybe someday you’d drown yourself in the tub, letting clear waters run red—but definitely not today, not when you’re running late behind your schedule.

Soaping up a foamy lather, rinsing off, wrapped in a fluffy towel, brushing your teeth and gargling, you exit just as easily as you entered. The closet is bloated with your clothes and knickknacks packaged in tight bags, shoved into the deepest and darkest corners; they’re the ‘impractical’ stuffs Byron bought on a whim, items like strappy sandals and glossy makeup kits and silver bangles, items you can’t quite see yourself using in the long run. What’s laid out within easy reach are your comfy, worn-out shirts and sensible pants, your standard selection for loungewear. Selecting a seamless pair for today, you shimmy dark panties up your thighs, bra caging your breasts, slipping on the rest of your clothes.

There, all ready for today’s work of papers and more papers. How exciting.

Exiting your bedroom and right into your workspace, here, it’s a lot more familiar, almost like home. There’s the kitchenette and a fridge of food, well-curated list of books lining up the shelves, and video games all readied for a day of escapism. Boiling some water in an electric kettle and setting out some butter to thaw, your fingers lift a spritz bottle by its trigger, throwing the door to your exit open.

Outside is a vacant corridor of glass reinforced with silver, monochrome marbling, and vases perched on two side tables. Purple hyacinths peer at you curiously, heavy heads lolling with the weight of its six-petal blossoms. They’re the flowers Byron left yesterday, as per his promise he kissed on your knuckles on the day you left the House of Andronicus: “Two bouquets each week; one for celebrating your departure from this dreadful coffin, and the other for all the days I couldn’t congratulate on your graduation ceremony.”

You run a languid finger over its waxen petal, half-lidded eyes drinking in the sight.

But purple hyacinths are different.

Your finger dips in the center of the bloom, fingernail scratching oh-so gently in its heart.

They are the flowers begging for forgiveness.

At the end of the hallway, footsteps reverberate through the corridors, breaking the solemn silence. You perk up, analysing the sound. Noctis’ footfalls are an uneven gait, leaning most of his weight on his left leg than right for some reasons. Byron is more leisurely when he walks, ambling about when he carries your groceries for the week. But this particular set of footfalls are neither Noctis’ nor
Byron’s; each step is a crisp sound, each step ready to crush the skulls underneath heavy boots, each step a lurch into the battlefield.

It is a sound you’ve heard before.

A sound you recognise for the way it subdues your nerves into high alert, pinpricks lining your spine, bringing ice on your nape.

And just as easily, you hear his voice.

A voice you learnt to fear.

“Ah, my daughter, there you are.”

Father, the very man who reigns over a household of statues, emerges from around the sharp bend of the corridor. Swathed in the blackest ensemble of the Lucian Royal Council, it is a raiment he dons with inimitable pride. Gold trimmings cradle his neck before cutting down into the loose flares of a robe, fine silks blending with the heavy brocade and leather of the attire. Emblazoned on his shoulder is the crest of the Lucis, a gilded grim reaper connecting with the chains overrunning his back. He carries himself with such sureness, such arrogance only an Andronicus could appropriate, each footstep punching in holes through your stomach.

He doesn’t smile.

And you’re thankful he doesn’t.

Stopping short of several meters away from you, he holds out his arms as he regards you from a distance. “What,” he says, a slow drawl, “a surprise to see you healthy and well here. I’m pleased to see you like this, keeping yourself together even when you’re away from home.”

“Father,” you begin, terse, setting the spritz bottle aside. “A pleasure seeing you here as well. I’ve long reached the age of being capable to fend for myself.”

“Is that so?” father hums in that same, toneless sound he makes when he whipped Byron. “What a capable daughter you’ve become.” Then, his tongue sharpens with the intent of his visit, always cutting to the chase all too soon. “Why, you’re more than capable enough to care for a family of your own now, aren’t you?”

What a cliché.

What a repulsive cliché.

It’s like he’s merely reciting a script he had written a decade ago, acting his part in a theatrical play. How laughable. If he expected you to bow and grovel to his demands, you’re more than ready to disappoint him again. And again. And again. And again, because you’ve always been the family’s disappointment, haven’t you? Always the family’s deepest shame, always the family’s disgusting daughter, so being a disappointment is one thing you clearly excelled in.

Fighting off the shivers in your fingers, you pocket your hands, lifting your chin parallel to the ground. Careful, careful enough to erase any lingering emotion in your voice, keeping it neutral. “Charming offer for any fair-minded lady, but I am an Andronicus. My dreams are bigger than nursing children and singing nursery rhymes.” At this, he raises a brow, but you remain clear in your decision. “First comes my duty as the future king’s military strategist. Everything else remains irrelevant in my life.”
He’s gone silent now, deliberating you with those beady eyes of his.

“Mnemosyne would’ve been so disappointed in you.”

There is no denying the surge of ire racing through your veins to hear his tongue sullying her name with his treacherous agenda of guilt-tripping you into agreement. Your teeth click together and he must’ve heard it, must’ve felt glee because he’s bested you in this game for two, but father remains standing erect with the barest of emotions crinkling his eyes. Always masking himself, always hiding, always.

You’re sick of it all.

“You don’t get to talk about mother, not when you’re the bigger disappointment here,” you rebuke, a corner of your lips tugged to the side. “You’re not exactly a redeeming patron of a parental figure either. Blaming her only shows the shell of a cowardly man you are, father, and it’s unbecoming of an Andronicus.”

Your chastising is starting to wear on him.

Still, father is a famed actor known for his lies, and he lives up to his reputation by carrying on as though you are but a wordless mannequin. “Your mother would’ve loved to see you with a husband, wouldn’t she? As all mothers would love to see their children with grandchildren.” His jaw tightens faintly, shoulders tensed. “Do yourself a favour, daughter, and grant her one of her wishes.”

“Denied, for you’re only putting words in a dead woman’s mouth.” You lean against the door, crossing your legs at the ankles. When father doesn’t speak, you know you’ve gone and pushed needles under his fingernails, waiting for his scream, waiting with bated breath. “Do try harder, father, you don’t want to be bested by your daughter, do you?”

Father’s nostrils flare at your challenge, and the slant on his lips sharpens with the growing coldness in his eyes. “A pity. Well, I guess you would know her last words. After all, I wasn’t the one holding the knife.”

—knife.

The ice grows from your nape to your throat, frigid.

Something must’ve shown on your face, for father appears to be amused with his discovery, what with the languid tilt of his head. He scrutinises your face for any traces of his beleaguering weighing on you. “Ah yes,” he breathes out, each word punctuated with the beginnings of a savage curl on his lips, “how can I forget? The most memorable moment out of my dearest daughter’s extensive list of mistakes. Tell me something: Was she warm under the knife?”

—knife.

Warm, it’s warm. Hot summer’s day, fluorescent bulbs beating down your back, and tears streaking your cheeks. Sanitized white tiles, a broken mirror with two cracked figures reflected, and a tubful of running water splashing on the linoleum. Mother is beautiful. Sweet mother and her boozy smile, her endearing habit of palming your cheek and letting you nuzzle her hand like a kitten to a cat. She smiled her brilliant smile, one full of teeth and crinkled eyes, and you returned it with one of your own—even with her hands around your neck.

“Did you kill her out of love, or did you kill her out of kindness?” father goads—and oh, he’s smiling. “Tell me, child. I’m dying to know.”

Your fingers are cold, you’re not sure if you’re leaning against the door, or if the door is leaning against you.
“Did you like it? Did you like your first kill? Was it an easy kill? It was, wasn’t it?”

Insomnia blurs and father is not there anymore.

You are not twenty, you are sixteen. Trapped between four walls, naked and sopping wet, the tub sloshing water all over the floor, and mother is there.

Mother is warm and tangy when your tongue laps up her reddened spatter on your lips.

“What makes you think you can succeed me when you can barely fight?”

Hands constricting around your neck and thumbs pressing into your throat and you flailed, choking, gasping, wheezing, *stop mama stop* but the words don’t come out so she doesn’t know what you’re saying, doesn’t know what she’s doing wrong. With her hair plastered over her cheeks, over her shoulders, over her back, mama has a warped glint in her smile and all she does is to coo over your cries, and you struggle and struggle and struggle to get away but it’s mama and what is mama doing with her hands throttling you?

>You are weak, father’s voice bleeds profusely into mama’s, ringing astringent and chaotic, *you can’t even fight to save your life, what more fight to protect the future King of Lucis? Heed my words, child, you will only destroy him in the future.*

Byron is there. He dunks his hands into the tub, letting the clear water seep with blood, a beautiful watercolour red just like his eyes. He teaches you how to scrub underneath your fingernails and to rub the valleys between your fingers. He says hot water is good for warding the germs since germs are a big no-no. He shushes your questions and guides you out.

>You are governed by your emotions, father mocks, *dictated by irrationality, you can’t protect anyone.*

Byron is there, he dries your hair with a bath towel and laughs when it’s smeared in red, he says he’ll do laundry later and he knows how to get rid of tough stains, he pumps out two rich dollops of shower gel and scrubs every inch of your body until you’re raw, he pulls up these rubber gloves and throws on an apron and shushes your questions and guides you out.

>Daughter, daughter, he sing-songs in sick satisfaction, *answer me this.*

Byron is there and his fingers slick your lips with blood and he smiles with flecks of blood spattered over his pale skin and painting his white eyelashes in blood and he rubs your back to quell your cries and he is a bloodied stain caught in the chaos of this lunacy and he closes the tap to the bloodied tub and he shushes your questions with a bloodied finger to his lips and guides you over mother on the bloodied floor and lets you out.

>What makes you think you’re worthy as the Head of the Andronicus?

“You don’t get to decide if she’s worthy. That’s my decision alone.”

And it’s not the four walls anymore, it’s the 56th floor of the Citadel nestled in the dizzying Crown City, all black marbles symbolising the Lucian royal colour and vases for two bouquets of purple hyacinths, with father’s eyes narrowing and his hand curling loosely into a fist as an uneven gait breaks the fragile silence in the air.

>“Your Highness, Prince Noctis,” father utters, tacking on a slight bow to the greeting. “Fancy meeting you here, out of all places.”
A warm, callused hand rests on your back and you almost flinch.

If Noctis could feel your heartbeat racing madly under all these flesh of lies and cracked ribs and punctured lungs, he doesn’t say anything about it. From the corner of your eyes, he emerges almost like a dream, all solid paleness under loose black spikes, heavy lashes lidding milky blue eyes. His profile is severe, hardly a smile decorating the usual cocky pull of his lips. You catch his eyes briefly flitting to meet yours, like he’s making sure you’re all right, before glaring at father again.

“I could say the same thing for you too,” answers Noctis, callous. “What brought you here, Quintus?”

Father, ever the poster figure for all feigned politeness, hides his snarl behind a smile. “Nothing special, just a father visiting his daughter is all. Yours, Highness?”

“Nothing special,” Noctis echoes, “just the future king visiting his future military strategist.”

And somehow, somehow you know you’re safe.

You’re safe here, right by your king.

If father is seething, he doesn’t show it. Hands behind his back, father straightens up as though he is about to deliver an edict from King Regis himself. “Your Highness, with all due respect, she is not the future of the Andronici.”

“Nope.” Noctis isn’t having any of it, shaking his head once. “When I’m king, I’ll do what I want. And if I want her as my strategist, then I’ll have her as my military strategist.”

Slowly, his fingers dig into your back like a testament to his statement. It doesn’t hurt, it doesn’t hurt at all. He can’t hurt you. He can cut into your flesh with a knife to carve you into ribbons and it still won’t hurt at all.

Faced with such overwhelming superiority from someone like the prince himself, father visibly deflates and resigns himself to his fate for the day. All he does is to mimic the bow he did earlier, an elaborate little flourish with all the robes he wears, and turns on his heel. Without even looking over his shoulder, father bids his farewell. “As you wish, Your Highness. Excuse me.”

Just like that, he’s gone.

And with him gone, it gets a bit easier to breathe. Just a bit.

Noctis’ hand presses in circles on your back and it hits you that you’re wheezing for air in desperation, clawing your front shirt, cold sweat beading down your temple. He doesn’t ask anything. He never does. He just stands there by your side, letting the trembles wrack your shoulders, and never leaves.

You are seven and you never breathed a word of the whipping. Byron, too, only has a defeated smile. He’s content with fetching your home tutor from the elaborate foyer to your study, serving tea and biscuits for break, and ushering said tutor homewards when the clock tolls midnight. He pulls the covers over your chest, plants a kiss on your scalp, and clicks off the lights. Come dawn, he shakes you awake, reads you the newspaper as you shovel in your breakfast, fetches the tutor from the foyer, serves tea in between breaks, and ushers him back home at the stroke of midnight.

A clockwork routine you established with his guidance, marking the start of your strategic demise.
THERE HAD BEEN SOMETHING ABOUT your disconcerting silence that disturbed him. Going about piling some tomatoes and lettuce and ham and cheese on bread for late brunch, munching through three bites before offering the rest to him. Rearranging the pillows in your collection, smoothening the comforters from your cupboard, laying them out in the sunny patch of your room. Lying on your side, hugging a pillow to your chest, gazing blankly at the skulls littering his shirt.

You were trying to escape by sleeping, he realises, but sleep eluded you out of fear for your rampant thoughts.

So now you’re left with entertaining all the mindless whispers clouding your head, replaying flashbacks like a highlight reel for your torment in the end.

It’s something he understands well. Too well, until it gets a little real for him to see someone like this too.

Once upon a time, a bearded king carried his son from his wheelchair to his bed, telling him gallant tales of adventure and friendship. Once upon a time, he promised by the sunset he’ll come for his son every day to read him books. Once upon a time, he left a figure of a carbuncle on his son’s bedside, guarding him from nightmares. Once upon a time, the young boy waited like the good son he is, holding on the promises of new bedtime stories. Once upon a time, the king stopped showing up. Once upon a time, the sunsets stretched longer and longer. Once upon a time, he cried and threw tantrums.

Once upon a time, he stopped waiting and started sleeping.

So he knows, he knows this isn’t going to work out.

Turning on his side, Noctis uncurls a finger and prods you in the shoulder. “Hey. Talk to me.”

A prod brings a question. “How much did you hear?”

“No much,” he answers, and it’s the truth even if your eyes are misplaced, they’re not on him, they’re on his shirt, staring abjectly at the glossy skulls clustering his neckline. “Heard someone talking shit about you, and it was definitely not that Byron guy. Then I saw your dad.” He shrugs. “Rest is history.”

You obviously heard him, but there’s no immediate reply.

Lying by your side like this, it’s obvious how much damage Quintus had inflicted on you over the years. His caustic words carried no warmth, almost like a stranger to his own blood. You allowed his words to shape you, to trample over your worth. How insignificant you are in Quintus’ eyes, reduced to nothing more than a means to his end. Disgusting. There’s no doubt you’ve survived the wear and tear of life, adapting to the situation as needed, but how much of you remained intact from the rest of the shards?

“Do you mean it?”

That came out of nowhere. Noctis blinks. “Mean what?”

“When you said I’ll be your strategist.” Eyes downcast, still gazing at his shirt. A small mumble. “Do you really mean it?”
“Well, you play a mean Kaliva, so yeah.” He shrugs. “You’re all strategies before heading into a
dungeon, always prepared even when Prompto screws up. Or, heck, even when I screw up. You got
this.”

His answer, no matter the blithe nature he injected into the statement, fails to elicit any reaction. You
aren’t listening. Or rather, you chose not to listen and instead, sought his hand. The first icy brush of
your fingertips against his calluses has him jerking away on instinct, but you’re persistent—biting
chill steals warmth around his wrist, and you’re bringing his hand up to your face. No, you’re not
looking at him, transfixed by the sight of his long and slender fingers, and it’s just oddly amusing to
him—

—right until you fitted his hand snugly around the base of your throat, your jugular jumping under
the pressure of his thumb, your skeletal trachea resting under his palm.

Like this, just like this, the difference is clear between you and him.

Where his neck is all fraught with lean muscles, yours is all soft and tender, pliant to the touch. With
just the right amount of squeeze, he could—

“The battlefield is different from a game,” you say, the weight of your words thrumming through his
skin, sending pinpricks up his arm. There is no emotion left on your face, a corpse picked clean by
vultures. “Father is right. I’m weak. I have no experience in combat so you can easily crush my
throat with your hand if you want, Prince.”

—and then it stopped being funny.

Noctis drops his hand from your cold skin and frowns. “Stop that. Look at me.”

There’s great reluctance in how you drag your eyes from his shirt, crawling up his clavicles in a slow
ascent, grazing over his bobbing Adam’s apple, trailing past his jawline, tracing over his lips,
brushing over his nose, and finally meeting him in an unblinking stare.

Noctis is not one who is emotionally attuned like Ignis, but he knows when something’s up. It’s like
the rare occasion where Prompto’s disconnected with the rest of the world, tuning out all the sounds,
lost. He’d finger his glove and wristband, a finger prying under the aged leather yet never fully
removing it, like he’s just toying with something secret. Staring into space, sometimes behind the
viewfinder, rapt in reverie. Only when the spell is lost, the magic is gone, he’d come back with a jerk
and glance around nervously, hoping Noctis noticed nothing.

Having you like this, it’s just. **Just.**

Noctis releases a sigh and lies on his back, trying to get away from the overwhelming feel of your
eyes bearing down on his. “If it’s training you want, come and work out with me and Prom. Gladio’s
gonna be there too. Most of the Crownsguard had their combat training since young, but since your
dad didn’t want you to join, ‘s probably why you didn’t get to sign up. Not too late though,” he
looks aside, “ ‘cause even Prom just started a few months ago. You’ll catch up.”

Your doubt couldn’t come soon enough.

“What if I’m not good enough?”

And his hand bopping your head lightly couldn’t come soon enough either.

That seems to shake you out of your silly stupor, and now you’re left staring at him wide-eyed—
probably also a tad bit offended at the undeserving action.
“It’s already December, idiot,” says Noctis, and catching the confusion still clouding your eyes at the apparent obvious statement, he groans at your obliviousness. “Two months since you declared you’re gonna be the new military strategist. If you’re not good enough for me, I wouldn’t even show up the second time around.”

Then your brows furrow, finally. “… oh.”

“ Took you long enough,” he grunts.

At least he’s distracted you from that destructive spiral for now, and you seem to be preoccupied with rechecking the truth in his statement by counting the weeks on your fingers. It’s funny enough to earn you a vaguely pleased look from him. Still, a small yawn manages to sneak its way past his lips and he drops back on one of your pillows, fighting the growing heanness on his eyelids. No such luck since your pillows came equipped with a sleeping spell. The drowsy droning of the Citadel’s central air-conditioning, paired with the comforting drape of your sun-warmed blanket, isn’t helping him either.

“Gonna take a nap,” he mutters, blinking slow. “Just too damn good up here. Catch you later.”

Ignis would’ve clicked his tongue in disdain at his atrocious napping habit, nagging all the way until it’s a lullaby to his sleep. But you’re not Ignis. You’re his accomplice, for he catches a glimpse through his sleep-hazy eyes of your body perching halfway over him, dragging the comforter over his chest, before dropping dead on your own end too. And it’s just nice like this, caught in between the stinging coldness of your room and the feeble warmth of the midday sunlight blanketing him entirely.

With a friend, his bed is less lonely.

With a friend, he doesn’t sleep alone anymore.

“Mmkays,” comes your sleepy reply, a small yawn at the edge of your sentence, “see ya too.”

A pause.

And then, just a quiet mumble, the last thing he hears before the world shuts down.

“… thanks, Prince.”

the bathroom is cold and lonely. you are cold and lonely. the world is cold and lonely. filled to the brim, bubbles frothing about, rich sugary scent in the air, you are cold. you are lonely. you are miserable. you are hurting. when being seven feels like seventy, it means something’s gone wrong. something broke somewhere and you stopped being a child and started being an adult. something broke somewhere and it’s squeezing inside until it’s hard to breathe but the tears don’t come.

pulling your legs to your chest, you rest your weary head against the tub. outside, footsteps approach the door, and you figure it’s probably byron again, already readying a towel for your exit.

“byron?”

he doesn’t answer.

between the gap of the door and the floor, you see a pair of feet. painted toenails dripping red. not byron’s polished oxfords.
you rise midway as the waters slosh about, hands gripping the edge of the porcelain until your knuckles turned white. Is that mama—

"—OH SHIT, I OVERSLEPT, PROM. Be right there in a sec."

You jerk awake with a start, swallowing a gasp of air. The ceiling comes into focus so sharply until you could separate faint amber light colouring the black marble in lush gradients, and the blanket’s gone cold just like the sun. Head pounding, heart racing, it takes almost all of your mental faculties to coordinate on one sole task: To breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. Inhale, exhale. Breathe in, breathe out. Inhale, fingers digging into the sheets, and exhale.

"Hey," you hear the prince mumble beside you, “sorry for waking you up. I gotta go.”

Go? You turn to him, head careening dangerously to the side like your neck’s gone broken until Noctis makes a face at that and reaches out to straighten your head right where it belongs.

“Made dinner plans with Prom and I overslept,” he tacks on a bit more explanation, already throwing the blanket off his body and stretching his legs. “Nap was too good though, couldn’t even wake up until his sixth missed call.”

“Dinner?” you echo, stretching your neck to look up. “With Prompto?”


Lonely.

What is this feebleness washing over you? This strange sense of desperation and longing and a voiceless sound resonating inside. Don’t go don’t go don’t go don’t go. Since when did you start wanting company? Since when did you start asking for more, and settling for nothing less? Since when did you start getting needy, greedy greedy greedy for the prince?

Deluded by his little rescue, aren’t you?

Noctis remains unconscious of your thoughts, as always. He doesn’t know what you know. Only wearing his trademark smile, the one with the lazy curl of his lips, with a hand braced on his hip. “Looks like someone didn’t start up properly. Yeah, the one and only Chocoboy.”

Prompto. Blond hair slathered in copious amounts of hair gel. A smattering of freckles kissing his cheeks, dotting over the bridge of his nose. Gold lashes framed the picturesque blues of his eyes, a window to his thoughts. Humming the chocobo theme song under his breath, bobbing his head to the imaginary tune. Prompto, the prince’s best friend.

“Oh.” You answer, slow. “Okay.”

He has to leave, you are aware of that fact every single time he steps into your world. Your room is not where he truly belongs. The prince has a life of his own, one he shares with his buddies before you latched along like a leech. Sucking off his attention, hungering his company. You know that very well, but fondness is a fascinating, yet utterly destructive concept. Your selfishness starts yearning for what isn’t yours to begin with.

The prince peers from you overhead.

He’s silent again. He’s always silent because he doesn’t talk unless needed. He’s always silent when
he’s thinking about something, all princely thoughts. You don’t know what cogs are turning inside his head until he scratches his cheek and says this:

“You wanna come with me?”

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

(´__´) i’m sorry for this chapter, i know it’s a little confusing for now, but i swear it makes more sense in the following chapters ;v;; / pls have faith in noctis & chocobros ♥ (and also in our protagonist who…accidentally…took a turn for the bad) ♥ if you’re wondering what’s the direction this story is taking, it’s definitely going southwards, but southwards for a good cause. chapters will increase in length, about 5-6-7k each, and the plot picks up absurdly fast in the next few episodes.

hopefully everyone will like how the story goes ♥ (kind of rly nervous about you readers’ reaction to this chapter, tbh, what do you readers think?) ♥ but we have good times in next chapter, midnight friendship drives and noctis & protagonist bonding! so without further ado, here are more previews for the next following chapters in the flowering arc ♥

PREVIEWS:
[10] He’s already walking ahead, heading towards one of the many lifts scattered in the Citadel, and you hear the pitter-patter of your sandals on the marble floor as you ambled after him.

[11] Adjusting his grip wrenches another obscene whimper from you, and it’s such a pity you’re a wrecked mess right now, not when he knows he can go tighter than that to make you shudder, pretty pink all over.

[12] “Hey,” Noctis murmurs, “got something for me from Luna?”


[14] It has Noctis slipping on his boots fast enough so he can get the hell out of here, far away from that unnerving stare, but just as soon as he has a hand on the doorknob,
Byron’s voice accosts him on the spot. “Then, at the very least, allow me to offer you a word of advice.”

“Nyx’s a senior member of the Glaive—Kingsglaive,” Gladio tacks on a bit of an explanation once Prompto goes bug-eyed at the new term. “Elite soldiers who risk their lives to protect Lucis, Prom. They’re war veterans out there, fighting to keep people like us safe in Insomnia.”

Yet, the image you cast against a backdrop of fire is one of love, a severe attraction that ran for many months.

“No creepy, just real dark. Here,” Noctis offers his arm to you, “just stick close to me.”

You must’ve appeared disheveled, sweaty, awful for a first impression, but he says nothing of it. “I’ve heard of you from my son. Received your papers, in fact.”

His cockhead’s beading at the slit, angry red and peeking from the hem of his elastic, and the waft of cool air brushing over his oversensitized skin has him biting his lip to keep it down.

❤ thank you for reading and sticking and commenting on this fic for nine chapters! you readers are awesome ❤
for all the emotional drama that happened, good times are ahead. we’ve entered the arc where rea-tan is going to start living a little! also it should be noted that prompto once mentioned he never saw gil before when you first start the game and stop by hammerhead, so it’s implied that insomnia has its own currency as well. i took the liberty to name their insomnian currency as credits (im crap at making currency names ugh)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**IT STARTS WITH A FRANTIC RUMMAGE** through your closet, rifling through each and every article of clothing you possessed. An assortment of shirts and pants, dragged out from the bags. Things that you never thought would see the light will actually see the light today, how about that. Byron’s stack of fashion magazines, ones plastered with Claire Farron on the covers, never taught you this. How does one go about dressing up again? How do you pair up the plaids and the plains? Or what about the patterns with the checkers?

Skirts over pants? Cargos over jeans? Button-up shirts? Or casual sweaters in case it's cold?

*This is an absolute disaster*, you groan inwardly as you hoist whatever seems casual enough for a night out—technically, your first night out to the city, to the life of Insomnia.

Minutes later, struggling through a properly fitted cotton shirt and putting one leg after another through a flowy skirt, you grab your purse and checked your credentials. ID, cards, wads of Credit and jingling coins, all set and ready to go. In your haste, you pass a comb through your hair to gather it aside before stalking off to a separate bag than the rest. This is where the rest of your unused shoes came to live, the carefully curated selection of wedges and kitten heels and sandals handpicked by none other than your fashionable butler.

Considering the practicality of the situation whilst simultaneously combating the growing excitement gnawing your nerves, your fingers slink through a pair of strappy sandals, praying fervently the entire ensemble worked out in your favour. Because. Really. Going out with friends. Together. You, and Noctis, and Prompto, for a night out? You, the denied daughter of Andronicus, setting your foot into the dizzying and dazzling nightscape, walking amongst the citizens? Living a life outside these four walls? Completely unheard of.
Yet, here you are.

Standing before the vanity, a gaunt reflection preens in the mirror. Almost unrecognizable from the ghoul in homely shirt and drawstring pants, a picture of a youth in a striped shirt with a chiffon skirt cinching her waist. Hair primly tucked to the side, falling in soft tendrils over the curve of her jaw, guarded by a single clip. Roses blooming on her cheeks, lips lightly parted to unveil a hint of teeth. Clutched in her hands is a decorative wallet, one that sees only its use when the butler comes around, and slung on a finger is a set of sandals, its tangle of ribbons draped over her wrist.

How strange.

She struggles to smile. Your cheeks hurt.

She averts her eyes. You gaze at your ransacked cupboard.

She inhales shakily. Your ribcage rattles at the action.

How strange indeed.

Emotions are wicked weapons in the hands of the untrained; they can hurt even its wielder. Today testifies your inexperience in handling remnants of your emotions despite having discarded most of them in your youth. Your lapse in judgment results in a whirlwind of emotions clouding your composure. Father’s constant berating, spitting out harsh insults to remind you of your place in society. Mother in the tub, her talented fingers spinning a knife on its tip, smiling her endearing smile.

White bread sandwiching a chunk of meat, dripping with dressing. Three nibbles and quelling an overwhelming urge to regurgitate, passing the meal to the callused hands of the prince himself. He picks out the veggies, eats, watches you, eats again, and watches you again.

A nap, two comforters, and—

—if you’re not good enough for me, i wouldn’t even show up the second time around

—a promise.

You’re good enough, he said. Swallowing away the dryness in your throat, because you’re good enough for him. If your king deems you worthy, that means it’s okay, right? That means you’re okay as you are, you’re okay where you are, and you’re okay just being who you are, right?

what makes you think you are worthy as the head of the andronicus

Because he said so, right?

what if he doesn’t mean it what if he takes it back in the end what if you’re delusional

Your teeth sink into your bottom lip at the thought. Because, truly, if he doesn’t mean it, then you’d rather—

A firm knock on the door is all the warning you get before the door creaks open, and Noctis’ fluffy head peers through the gap. “You ready yet?”

—fight the suffocating hands wrapped around your throat and stomp it down lest it crawls back up again. “Done, Prince. Gimme a sec, I need to grab my phone.”

Hands clicking off the lights to your bedroom, striding past the prince in a few quick steps, you locate your smartphone lying innocently on your worktable. No, your hands aren’t shaking as you
slip the smooth device under the zippered confines of your clutch. No, Noctis isn’t staring at your back, still standing where you left him. No, your heart isn’t in your mouth even when you tug the sandals and wrap its dainty ribbons around your calves. No, you tell yourself, you’re not delusional because this is real and every single second is as real as it gets.

Straightening up once more, you wrench the door open and allow yourself the momentary victory of gazing at the panorama of the Crown City’s dusky skies, an ashen grey with its edges heavily daubed in midnight black. Everywhere, the skyscrapers are lit in lights, all glassy sheen with warm streetlights mirrored in their reflection. You grip the doorknob tight, the metal biting into your skin. Soon enough, you’ll be wading through the streets and you’ll be breathing in the crisp night air, just like what all the books talked about.

Turning on your heels, Noctis is already lacing up his boots and standing up, brushing his hands on his cargos. Somewhere underneath the choppy ends of his lengthy bangs, his blue eyes are unreadable. “Let’s go.”

Let’s go.

Let us go.

Three words.

Those three words are enough to make you fight your wavering smile so it’d stick on your face as the prince closes your room behind him, stepping past the hyacinths.

Us.

Not only him.

Us.

interlude; the prince and his prisoner

HE’S ALREADY WALKING AHEAD, heading towards one of the many lifts scattered in the Citadel, and you hear the pitter-patter of your sandals on the marble floor as you amble after him. It still feels unreal because you’re chasing after Noctis’ broad back, your colourful reflection on the glass panels trailing after his dark figure, fingers pressing in a poke on his shoulder to tell him to slow down a little. He stops in his tracks, makes a face at you, but his pace definitely slowed down a little, just enough for you to skip beside him in one-two steps.

Yet, every brush of chiffon against your knee reminds you this is very real and here you are, standing beside the prince, waiting for the ornate elevator to arrive. A ding! and a shuffle of footsteps later, the red LED panel shows the descent from 56th to 55th, 55th to 54th, 54th passing through 53, 52, 51, like a timer counting the seconds to your freedom. G finally shows up on the screen and Noctis steps out, throwing a glance over his shoulder like he’s making sure you’re following him properly.

Of course you are.

Of course you’re following him properly, your feet moving on their own accord, skittering over the monochromatic marbling and catching up to his wide steps. The Citadel’s majestic lobby is empty, save for several staffs standing by the reception counter, sifting through papers and pen. Upon the
sight of the prince himself, they stand ramrod straight before folding into a bow, echoing a greeting for him. And Noctis, just casual, lazy Noctis, nods at their general direction as he continues down the aisle.

You wanted to laugh a little. Almost.

Because—really, it’s too surreal when only several months ago, Byron’s pulling your bag and you’re clutching your phone to your chest with glittering chandeliers shining on you and him. Gold pillars entwined with black marble, white accents refracting light. Gilded scrollwork and red carpets, rope barriers cordoning areas only Citadel staffs could access. A ceiling far up there and a space too big for you to fathom since you’re not trapped in a box of four walls anymore.

Here, right here, as Noctis walks past the bowing guards with an air of casualness that only the prince himself could command, you obediently fall into his every step. Curious eyes are on you, lingering a second too long for you to ignore, but they’re silenced by the very fact that you’re together with the prince and he’s throwing one or two looks behind him just to make sure you’re keeping up.

It doesn’t matter when the doormen pull the Citadel’s grand doors for him, fresh night air sweeping through the lobby.

It doesn’t matter when you fall into step right beside Noctis, sandals and boots descending the lengthy expanse of the staircase, a modern day depiction of watercolour fairytale.

It doesn’t matter when the valet steps up, handing Noctis the keys to his Audi, meekly opening the door to the passenger’s side for you.

It doesn’t matter when Noctis gets in from the driver’s half, shutting the door, starting up the engine with a push of a button, and—

“Hold on tight,” he drawls.

—you’ve barely fastened your own seatbelt when he eases the gas pedal, turning the steering wheel around the bend of the road and now you’re off into a foreign world together with him, right in this two-seater.

The guards have already opened the gates for him and he rolls past them with the rumble of his car, blue eyes trained on the road all the while. Twisting on the leather, you catch a glimpse of the sleek LED lighting the dashboard, displaying a street map of Insomnia on its elaborate console. He’s already over 90 mph, and the purr of the engine downright shifts into a guttural growl when he accelerates again, fingers drumming idly on the leather steering. Taking a sharp right away from the Citadel, the car speeds into an empty expressway, where the curving street hangs between glassy skyscrapers.

Underneath the incandescent flickers of streetlights, from the expressway’s vantage point, traveling at only a speed Noctis could handle, Insomnia is a blurry landscape of mammoth buildings against a backdrop of black. A world—his world—and you’re sitting right beside him, hands in your lap. You gaze expectantly at the opulence of the city, drinking in the adrenaline rush from the drive when Noctis throttles again, the decadent roar of his car going under your skin in pinpricks. Everything’s so fast, everything’s so beautiful, and everything’s just so overwhelming until it’s getting a little hard to breathe.

The prince expertly manoeuvres his Audi into another linking expressway, and the overpowering speed, paired with Insomnia’s fragile beauty behind this window, is enough to catch your breath. He
takes you past a tall, gaudy building decked in manicured trees, racing past the signboards and empty roads, and slowing down for the briefest moment to glance at your direction before revving the engine up to speed again.

There is a growing tightness around your throat again, like the hands snuck to wrap its sneaky little fingers around your neck.

You’re here in this car, with your future king, off to join a dinner together with Prompto. Isn’t it what you’ve always dreamt of? Sure, it’s just a little dinner between friends, sure it’s probably just Noctis pitying your wretched, sheltered life, but it’s your first time doing something like this. Something like going out at night with friends, a prospect utterly unmentionable a scant year or two ago. The benevolent prince extends this exclusive invitation purely out of the kindness of his heart, kindness you are taking advantage of. The prince with the car, whisking you off into a world beyond the meagre stretch of your fingers.

You are undeserving to be here like this, to sit by his side.

From the corners of your eyes, you catch Noctis sneaking a glance, and you return it with a questioning look. As though he’s scalded, he quickly focuses on the road again, gripping the leather tight. It’s a little weird how he’s gone silent all this while. Just like this, behind the wheels, you could map out the lines under his eyes, and the bony knots of his fingers.

You’d never taken a good look at him before. Sure, the newspapers and the Internet are chock full of his portraits. The tabloids are quick to print paparazzi shots of his private life, but nothing expresses a look so intimate like this. Nobody’s seen the small mole on his temple before, concealed carefully behind his unkempt fringe. His lips are thin, downturned, except the rare occasions where he’s mocking Prompto or yawning at Ignis’ incessant mothering. He’s all sleek lines the Astrals composed under a curtain of black, forming a pale beauty bearing the crown of the kingdom.

The car slows down when it’s his turn to catch you staring at him, and there’s obvious discomfort in the way he clears his throat, forearms fraught in veins.

“‘sup?” he nonchalantly asks, or tries to be nonchalant anyway. Nimble fingers flick the blinker to exit left, gliding down the ramp.

You don’t have to hide the slow slip of your lips curving into a smile. With him, you don’t have to hide your smiles anymore. Resting against the headrest, you draw a deep breath, exhaling quietly.

“Just hungry, that’s all.”

IT’S PROBABLY NOT A GOOD IDEA to bring you to a place like this, but it’s his favourite hideout with Prompto: A soba stall huddled by the arcades. Nothing like the hazy glow of the low lamps or the sleepy arrangement of simple furniture give off any air of posh classiness. Just good food served in large bowls, rich broth, steaming noodles, and fresh green tea to warm up the spirits; plus, the owner’s known them long enough to recite their favourites by heart. Prompto’s already sitting in one of the booths, waving him over by the side.

“Hey guys!” he chirps, letting you slide into the seat with Noctis in tow. “Dude, I can’t believe you made it out with Noct! Seriously, you need to tag along more often.” He hands you the menu and forgoes Noctis since they’re both regulars who already memorised the entire page anyway, twiddling his idle thumbs. “So, is this your first time out?”
Scanning the dog-eared copy of the menu, you take in the faded prints with a frown. “Uh.”
Obviously distracted by their varied selections, because the place serves some of the meanest ramen
and soba in town, and that’s coming from Noctis, the pickiest prince in all Lucii history. “Uh no…
not really, no. My first time out was with my mother.” You pause, wetting your lips, putting away
the plastic sheet. “But I was just a kid, so. Don’t remember much. My second time was with Byron
when I was about to move into the Citadel. That’s about it.”

Prompto hums sympathetically, nodding along to your tale. “Third time tonight, huh?

“First time at night,” you correct him with a vague smile gracing your lips, shrugging. “It’s a bit
overwhelming but kinda exciting.”

Prompto flashes you his cheesiest smile and leans in close, all conversational. “I get ya. But it’s okay,
take it easy, all right? We’re here with you.”

And the small smile gracing your lips grows bigger by a fraction. “Mhmm. Thank you, Prompto.”

As much as it’s all heartwarming like watching cute dog videos while procrastinating his
assignments, there’s no hiding the sullen grumble of Noctis’ stomach rumbling through the
conversation. Thankfully, the raucous clamour in the shop drowned it out; if not, Prompto’s sure to
bring this up even ten years down the line. Nudging you in the side, you tip your chin to study him
curiously, and Noctis taps on the menu. “Thought about what you wanna eat yet?”

That perks you up. Bringing the sheet to his face, your immaculately trimmed fingernail point at
some of the dull writings. “Dunno what’s good, Prince. Recommend me something?”

Geez, menu too close to his face much? He lowers your hands with a firm press of his own and you
might or might not have pouted a little—if the slight jutting of your bottom lip counts as something.
Propping his head with a palm to his cheek, Noctis casts a sidelong glance at your collarbones. “I’ll
just get you what I’ll have. You okay with green tea?”

“Tea’s awesome, zero complaints from me.” Your head bobs with every word, and it’s almost funny
how you’re trying to be all subtle with your eagerness, even if it’s starting to manifest
uncharacteristically in your behaviour. “Please and thank you, Prince.”

With that said, Prompto flags down one of the nearby waiters and a grinning man shows up, a paper
and pen readied in his hands. “Two bowls of tonkotsu ramen, one kitsune soba, and three green tea,
please.”

“Comin’ right up.”

The waiter shuffles away to slip a paper to the cook, and Noctis notes how you pensively stare after
his retreating back. Seconds later, you twist here and there in little tilts of your head, taking in the low
lamps dangling by a single wire, the rugged trim of the scratch-worn counters, the sponge sticking
out of their booth seats. If Prompto notices anything about your insatiable curiosity, he doesn’t say
anything. All he does is to share a cheeky grin with Noctis, eyes flicking back and forth in Prompto
Speak™, mouthing stuffs his way. Completely unintelligible stuff because Noctis can’t read lips,
damn it.

The moment you trail your finger over the grainy countertop, the blond pipes up. “So! You guys
doing anything good later?”

“No idea, I’m just following the Prince around.” You shrug. “No plans.”

Prompto hums at your answer, awaiting Noctis’. That’s obviously a trick question because Noctis is
pretty sure they only agreed on dinner since they can’t stay out too late; if not, Gladio’s gonna own their asses come tomorrow morning’s practice session, and he’d very much like to show his Shield a thing or two about respect, damn it. But Prompto’s got that glassy sheen in his baby blue eyes like a chocobo yearning for gyshal greens, rocking his legs nervously under the table, and it takes all of Noctis’ mental faculties to remember this is Prompto he’s talking about.

And turning down Prompto is one thing he never mastered even with five years worth of training.

You’re already looking up at Noctis with wide-eyed interest, almost the spitting image of Prompto, and he swallows whatever protests he’s gonna make. Because two against one is seriously illegal, and he should probably make a law to ban this travesty, goddamn it all.

“Nah,” Noctis grimaces, and he’s starting to regret it already when Prompto’s got that grin going wider than the whole stretch of the Citadel. “…what, there’s something you wanna do?”

And that’s obviously a go.

“Dude dude dude,” Prompto starts gushing in three different inflections, and Noctis barely rolled his eyes just ‘cause oh boy here it comes, “remember that horror-thriller movie I was talking about? The Blind? It’s already out and y’know,” he rubs his nape, tries on an abashed smile like he’s trying to win him over, “you’re my best buddy and all, and we always watch movies together, so I was wondering if you wanna tagalong with me to watch it tonight?”

Noctis arches a slim brow. “—wanna what?”

“‘cuz buddy,” Prompto ignores him, all elaborate hand gestures that make absolutely no sense in trying to reinforce his point with them, “it’s a real good horror movie and since you’re my best friend—‘like Noctis hasn’t heard of that one before, ‘—and you got her too, so we can all go watch it together. This is totally not a ploy just ‘cause I’m scared to watch it alone or anything, by the way.”

Right. Totally not a ploy, right.

Prompto’s used this tactic too many times until it’s starting to get all too predictable by now. High school had them scrambling for the cinemas as soon as the last bell rang and they watched their fair share of rom-coms, pseudo horror-thrillers, and space alien operas enough to predict what’s going to trend next season. But graduating high school and starting university courses is another matter altogether. If Gladio isn’t throwing Noctis down the practice mat, Noctis scours the Internet to see if anyone’s uploaded extra slides on his class—and snoring dead asleep is a given afterwards. If Prompto’s not expiring past his back-to-back part-time job at YaruKamera, he drags his feet for a quick jog around the park before dying on his bed come midnight.

So, by right, he is entitled for a movie night since it’s been long overdue, right?

Right. Just for old times’ sake.

“You like horror stuffs?” he hears you ask, and Prompto nods rapidly.

“Totally love ‘em. I can’t stomach some of the squicky parts so I just cover my eyes, but Noct’s pretty good with all the gory things.”

“As long as they’re not bugs, I’m good with that,” Noctis grunts. “Bugs are just—”

“—gross.” Prompto finishes his sentence for him, wholly in sync. “Totally gross. Can’t deal with their creepy crawly legs.” He’s already shuddering at the mental images he conjured, like it’s an apocalypse if Eos gets overrun by giant centipedes or a fleet of beetles. “No bugs for us, no-no. You
“Not sure, can’t really say. I don’t really have an opinion on bugs yet.” Tucking a hand under your chin, you seem to be contemplating more on the matter, and that’s kinda gross because Noctis is pretty sure he can’t go on thinking about wriggling caterpillars for more than a minute without getting nightmares about it. “To be honest, I didn’t get to go out much. I only know bugs on print, but never really saw things like millipedes and stuffs.”

“What about cockroaches?” Prompto outright shudders, a hand over his melodramatic heart, bless him. “Those little jerks are so persistent, Six should smite them. You can blast a whole can on ‘em and they’ll still walk away like it’s hairspray for their antennas.”

That gets you frowning. “Squish them, I guess?”

If the thought of green pus seeping out seems appealing to you, Noctis is more than ready to rest his forehead on the table. “No.”

And Prompto, best buddy Prompto is always there to share his sentiment. Wholeheartedly. Always backing him up, the true buddy he is. “Absolutely no. Gross, dude, gross.”

“Slice them?” you try again—and Noctis almost wants to flick you on your forehead because that’s completely unheard of. “I remember when Byron saw cockroaches on the floor. He’s real good with knives so…” you trail off, looking aside, “yeah, real good aim too. Just one slice and you get two halves with no mess—“

“Aaaaaah, stop, stop!” Prompto squeaks out, squirming in his seat with his hands clapped over his ears. “Dude, no! No way, dude, stop! I knew it that guy’s pretty off in the head but—dude, no. That’s so creepy and gross.”

As much as Noctis wants to share Promoto’s sentiment on how disgusting the imagery can be, he’s a little distracted by something else. Something incredibly transient, mentioned so offhandedly with your own lips.

Pretty good with knives, you said.

How could you talk about something so disturbing without an ounce of emotion? Like it’s a passing thought, nothing weighty at all. Sure, he might be overthinking it, but something doesn’t sound right to him. That or your sense of humour is a chart going off tangent. For someone who utterly despises bugs, Noctis totally doesn’t want to encounter a roach in his room ever again—save for unfortunate spells where his whole place is upturned like a junkyard with stale cups of Nissin fogging the air and Ignis is battling off an army of roaches armed with scrubbing gloves and wielding a can of spray—but slicing them is kind of next-level sadist thing.

They’re saved by the waiter showing up again, expertly balancing the three bowls in his arms and serving them steaming mugs of green tea. That seems to stop the sadistic spiel from your end since you’re distracted by Prompto bringing over your bowl of ramen, rich broth glossy under the mellow lights.

Breaking off his own pair of chopsticks, Noctis slurps up the noodles and tries not to think too much about it.

PROMPTO, THE GOOD BUDDY HE IS, books tickets for everyone. Noctis gets the feeling that even if he turns him down, Promoto’s gonna use you against him, rattling off how this is your first
night out with them and ‘Noct should be more of a buddy and let her experience more things, right?’ like that. In hindsight, you’d probably be okay forgoing the movie session since it’s already past nine and he needs to return you to the Citadel because you probably have some sort of undocumented law on how the universe works, starting with no shoes in your room. But there’s something about the way you’re walking that gets his resolve crumbling little by little.

For once, you’re not the slouching, sleepy child dragging yourself from the kitchenette to the worktable, rubbing your eyes with the back of your hand. Sick of the fluorescent lights, oversized shirt with its drooping neckline, cradling a mug of hot chocolate, a constant dreamy quality to your voice whenever you talked to him. Like you’re drenched in a reverie you never woke from.

Here, you are the tottering lady chasing after Prompto, who’s darting up Insomnia’s streets and pointing animatedly to the many signboards hanging near the crossroads. An inexperienced woman denied of the world, thirsting after its many sights and sounds, head bobbing along Prompto’s vehement babbles on Uniqlo’s fast fashion and how its ironic portmanteau of Unique Clothing is destroying Insomnia’s street fashion. Bathed in the prismatic lights melting off your skin, gaping at the on-screen ads, fingers trailing over chipped railings, for once, you looked alive.

It’s both a little funny and a little relieving to see you like this.

More like a human, and less like an android of the Andronicus.

Pocketing his hands, Noctis saunters up your side and watches how Prompto pulls you to one of his favourite camera shops, enthused with the work of detailing his part-time job as a photographer in one of the shops downtown. You gasp over the photos in his phone and he’s low-key abashed with your shower of compliments, pulling up one picture after another until he’s finished with his collection. Noctis only snorts when Prompto pockets his phone once more, rubbing his reddening ears.

Then they go up the streets a bit more until they get to the iconic Crown Crossing where all the broad roads intersect, with more LED panels showing ads and more colourful ads. BMW, Audi, Mercedes, all raring in competition. Vivienne Westwood, Bottega Veneta, Louis Vuitton, classy models flouncing on their tiptoes. Lucichrome’s spelled out in big, bold letterings over Crown 109, glinting silver under the streetlights. Tacked over one of the tiled walls, Caelum Via’s poster beckons passersby with its exquisite picture of a sun-drenched bedroom, promising an experience in a hotel like no other. Each and every mundane detail, Noctis knows you’re taking it in with an unseen nod, stowing them away inside that knotty head of yours, probably to be replayed on a later date.

The lights go red and the cars stop before the pedestrian crossings. You dart ahead, slipping between the throng of humans, and Prompto squawks as he chases after you, barely managing to catch you by the wrist before you’re off again, already at the other end of the road. He huffs at your small victory, scrunching his nose, and complains at Noctis that you’re too slippery—like catching a strand of ramen between chopsticks. And that little comparison gets you smiling wryly, prancing together by his side as Noctis slows down to let you catch up.

It’s kind of fun, just like this.

They show up at the nearby cinema with only a few minutes to spare. With everyone already full from their early dinner, Prompto flashes his phone over the ticket barriers and pulls you in by your hand. They search for the third hall, going up to the tenth row and trying to seat themselves in the centre. Being the impeccable gentleman Prompto is, he cites ten different reasons why you should sit right in between him and Noctis because ‘the movie’s really scary’ and ‘if you scream, Noct’s gonna punch you in the shoulder’ and that gets Noctis frowning a little because he certainly did not punch Prompto in the cinemas before—it’s usually Prompto who’s crying and clinging onto him for dear
Still, the lights dimmed altogether to signal the start of the movie spree, and thirty minutes into the intense build-up, Prompto’s already flinching in his seat. The VFX’s great, if Noctis wants to be nit-picky about the quality, and the plot seems bearable, if not a little clichéd since just almost everyone seems to be getting lost in the Duscae woods and there’s always that creepy caravan that just screams bad things are gonna happen if they stay overnight. Now he’s just waiting to see who’s the first sucker to die, placing his bets on the nosy man with the greasy face.

An hour later, Prompto shrieks along with the crowd when someone gets brutally disembowelled with a kitchen knife, curling up on his chair with his hands slapped permanently over his eyes. Even Noctis grimaces a bit as they showcase the explicit detail of the blind old man digging out a woman’s eyeball like it’s a golf ball stuck in a hole, sparring her no mercy at the tip of his spoon. The messy, gruesome spatter of blood caking the caravan is nauseating, an orchestrated madness with almost every corner of the screen doused in red.

While Prompto’s jerking at every sickening squelch of a metal bat beating into a body, you are calm. Disturbingly calm. Apathetic to the woman’s pained cries, blinking away at the sight of the blind man sawing her body to bits. There is no flinching at all, not even when he strings her up by her neck, choking her around the throat. In fact, your placidity is almost unnerving when you sense Noctis’ eyes on you, turning to meet him partway.

Over the expanse of your skin, painted in red, you are an image of quiet delirium.

Almost unbidden, Noctis drops his gaze to your throat, where the flushed flesh lays bare. If he thinks hard enough, he can recall how your jugular jumps under his thumb, and how easily his hand fits around your neck. And if he tries harder, he knows you’re warm enough to be human, human enough to choke with a squeeze of his hand, just enough for him to remember your frigid skin pressed against his, like you’re draining his warmth to make him yours.

His throat runs dry and he looks away.

"HONESTLY? I REGRET WATCHING THAT,” Prompto bemoans his fate, still holding his head in his hands as they walk towards one of the many parking lots scattered by the LR-Central Subway. It’s past midnight and the roads are emptier where they’re at, a hushed silence sweeping in the air. “Thought it was gonna be bearable but thirty minutes in and I wanted out. Out, like never coming back to Insomnia, burial by the sea sort of thing.”

“Was it that bad?” you ask, genuinely curious. As far as you watched it, the whole movie is tastefully done, given how short some horror flicks could be. “They covered the bases pretty well, if you ask me. The plot’s solid, and we didn’t get cheap cliffhangers at the end. And plus, they gave the blind man a good backstory to show how he came to be. Sure, there were some clichés like the whole ‘getting lost in forest’ trope, but then again, it is a movie.”

Prompto looks like he’d rather be anywhere but here. “Uh. Yeah. I dunno how you could just watch it like that. I don’t even wanna remember the whole thing. Gonna head home and bleach my brain out.”

He’s so honest with his thoughts, it’s almost adorable to see him like this. You shrug, letting him fall back. “Good luck with that. If there’s anyone who can do it, it’s totally you.”

Noctis, who had been walking ahead, comes to a halt in his tracks and glances over his shoulder at
the blond. “Prom, you’re taking the train home?”

“Yep, easier that way,” he chirps, thumbing over at the closest station. “Gotta go now, the sooner I get home, the faster I can pretend the whole movie never existed. See ya guys tomorrow!”

And with a big wave, Prompto crosses the street, his lithe legs carrying him immediately down the steep steps of the subway. He disappears behind a concrete pillar, leaving behind you and Noctis. This must be a common farewell without much fanfare between them, because Noctis is already heading towards his car, drawing out the keys and unlocking the sleek ride with a press of a button. His beautiful Audi, with its fractal of flowers for its sports rim, and the intricate arabesque patterning the sides. RHS 736, the number plate states, an exclusiveness afforded only by the prince himself.

You had to mentally shake yourself a little to realise he’s already getting in, and you’ve been standing there dumbly, all the while admiring the stainless silver finishing. Taking your own seat by his side, you close the door and pull your seatbelt with Noctis gently easing his car out of the parking lot. The easy glide of the wheels on the asphalt is almost hypnotic, lulling your senses with your head lolling aside, watching the lazy drift of the glimmering city blurring behind the window.

All this while, Noctis is silent.

It’s not a strange occurrence, for a lapse of silence like this is enjoyable. He doesn’t pursue any topic relentlessly like Prompto, and spoke only when needed. At most, he’s content to leave you to your thoughts, though there is a certain wariness in the way he rests his eyes on you. Silent, dissecting you inside out, tearing you apart only to put you together again once he achieves comprehension.

“Sleepy?”

Over the thrumming purr of the engine racing down the empty expressway, the prince finally breaks the silence. You glance over just in time to catch the interest in his eyes, and they linger on you for a few seconds before looking straight again, focused on the highway. Sitting up, you glance at the dashboard’s clock and bite back a yawn. “Kinda, just a little bit,” you admit, borderline whisper.

There’s amusement lining Noctis’ voice at your small confession. “Get some sleep for a bit. I’ll wake you up when we get there.” You haven’t missed the small smile on the edge of his lips as he tightens his hold on the steering and revs up the engine to speed down the highway faster. “I don’t drive much since it’s Iggy’s job, so I take naps when he’s behind the wheels. But I kinda enjoy nights out like this.”

While the offer sounds tempting, just a nap surrounded by things that put you at ease—the humming of the engine, the blurring lights over on the streets, the silent companionship from the prince, there’s just something about it that keeps you awake. Just something small, something incredibly insignificant to others, but it means the whole Eos to you.

Leaning your head to the side, you cast him a hazy look, trying to fight off the seductive whispers of sleep in the leather seat. He definitely saw it when his smile turns lopsided, like he’s amused with the sight.

“I dunno, Highness,” you mumble, drooping a little, “I just thought that it’s such a waste if I fall asleep. I want to see this day to the end, because it’s too good to be true.”

Noctis doesn’t answer.

And, honestly, he doesn’t need to anyway.

His comforting presence is more than enough to remind you this is real, this is very real.
Minutes of his driving pass by, and the exhilarating speed remains breathtakingly beautiful as Insomnia deliquesces behind the glassy windows. Leaving behind the city you adore, and the memories you made. The way Prompto bounces on his feet, guiding you under stained glass domes and wrought iron gates. The delicate laces adorning mannequins in the shops, a handbag in its hand. How the prince slurps up his ramen in a very unprincely way.

All too soon, the Citadel looms into view and Noctis slips off the ramp through the opened gates, bringing you to the long stairway before the imposing double doors. He shuts off the engine, getting out. A valet opens the door for you, and Noctis circles around his car as you fumble out of your seat, straightening up after yourself with a shaky yawn. Try as you might, even if you want to deny you’re sleepy, the yawn is solid proof enough that you should march yourself right to bed and call it a night. Noctis gets the idea and beckons you to follow. Content enough to be led around, you meekly trot after him through the doors and into the icy confines of the Citadel again. The receptionists are long gone by now. All that’s left are you and him, standing before the elevators, waiting for it to arrive. And when it does, you’re yawning again, rubbing your eyes this time, struggling with putting one foot after another. You don’t know whose hand it is that pressed 56, but the lift floats upwards and just like that, he leads you through the winding hallways again, retracing the steps he takes to your room.

Yawning for the nth time again, your overworked muscles strain with the effort of keeping up. As fun as it was, the excitement burnt you out faster than you thought. Noctis throws the door open, putting a hand on your back and slowly guiding you in. “Get some sleep, you look like shit.”

The prince really has a penchant for telling you look like shit, but a witty comeback is lost amidst all your yawns and you grudgingly obey him. Lights clicked on, sandals slipped off, you’re pressing your toes on the pricking chill of the marble again, standing in your workspace once more. A dimly lit Insomnia spreads before you, separated by the glass panes. It’s a picturesque panorama you used to marvel over and over again, but what used to be hopeless yearning morphed into a brilliant dream. The sight itself dissociates you from reality, knowing well that without the prince, you couldn’t have made it out there. His compassion knows no bounds. Truly a prince worth the fights you fought against father, just so he’d be your future.

Noctis still stands in your doorway, hair all mussed up like the usual, but it manages to fall in flattering layers around his face. Dark eyes brush over your entire body; you can tell he’s searching for something, but because it’s him, you find yourself not minding that much. He’s seen you through your cracks, picked you through the pieces. There’s still a lot more to you he hasn’t pried, hasn’t dislocated your limbs and popped your joints.

If he does, the secrets you kept will sully his hands.

As long he does not ask, he does not know. That is your endgame. Willing yourself to meet his eyes, you hold your breath. “Thank you for today, Prince. I really appreciate it.”

And Noctis, just casual, lazy Noctis, rakes a hand through his hair and turns away. His voice is thick with sleep, but you can’t miss the weird little smile there. A weird little smile he gives, for he knows nothing of you. “Yeah sure. See ya tomorrow.”

Tomorrow.

It’s a promise.

[tbc.]
90 miles per hour is about 145 km/h :’( noctis is trying to crash with the protagonist just so they’d ascend the astral plane together for unlimited naps 24/7. they live happily ever after in the afterlife, the end.
	hank you very much for the overwhelmingly kind responses from you readers! I love reading everyone’s kind words and encouragement for this fic to go on <3 the plot is going to get even more bizarre, starting in the next chapter as things get morally dubious. (side-eyes the preview) (✧∀✧)/

PREVIEW:
Adjusting his grip wrenches another solid gasp from you, and it’s such a pity you’re a wrecked mess right now, not when he knows he can go tighter than that to make you shudder, pretty pink all over. You’ve stopped struggling against him, making desperate, high whines—sounds that he doesn’t know you can make. You’re always so impassive, so aloof, so discreet with your emotions. Seeing you unhinged like this riles him up, gets this itch wanting to be scratched, wants to push your buttons until you break.
flowering: the prince of pain

Chapter Summary

In which Noctis should realise everything gets freaky, *fast.*

Chapter Notes

(*)

eh. things get morally dubious and dark from this point onwards since we’re moving through the plot faster.

**WARNING | asphyxiation**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

flowering

HE WRAPS HIS HAND AROUND your neck and relishes in your gasp. Shoving your shoulder into the bedding, pinning you in place. You like being held down like this, don’t you? He knows you do. You are starved of touch, aren’t you? He knows you are. How pliant you are, malleable to his liking, trailing after his steps in desperate eagerness. How you bare your throat to him just as easily, as if asking him to leave his marks there, bites and bruises and fingers alike.

He tightens his hold by just a *fraction* and it has you keening, breathless. His throat goes dry at the high-pitched sound. Why does it feel like home when his thumb squeezes your jugular? Maybe it’s because your pulse thrums under his finger, like it’s trying to burst out of your skin, making him feel alive. Raw, just like this. Heady buzzing in his head, drunken with control. Free to take, take, and *take* whatever he desires from you, and he knows you won’t fight back, you can’t fight back, you’re too weak to fight back.

Is that what it is?

He doesn’t even care for the answer anymore, not when he swings a leg over your body and straddles your hips. Just like this, he towers over you, he dominates you. Pressing heavily on your body, making you still. On this floor, spread on the sheets you loved, you’re a broken, helpless mess. That’s what you are, just a broken, helpless mess without him, without your king. Your teeth catches your bottom lip in a desperate struggle but he feels a laugh rising from him when it’s weak, oh-so weak, like reeling fish strung up on the line. Cold fingers seek his wrist and circle him like a manacle, but you’re powerless when his free hand traps them over your head. Stretched like this, choking under him, a feverish flush spreading from your cheeks to your chest, you’re a breathless beauty writhing because of him.

Adjusting his grip wrenches another obscene whimper from you, and it’s such a pity you’re a wrecked mess right now, not when he knows he can go tighter than that to make you shudder, pretty pink all over. You’ve stopped struggling against him, making debauched, high whines—sounds he
doesn’t know you could make. You’re always so impassive, so aloof, so discreet with your emotions. Seeing you unhinged like this riles him up, gets this itch wanting to be scratched, wants to push your buttons until you break.

You said it before, that he could crush your neck if he wants to, right?

What if he wants it?

What if he wants to see you crushed under him now?

It feels so good when he squeezes experimentally and elicits a gasp that’s borderline indecent. Is that a moan? That’s a moan, right? You’re arching your chest under him and tears run freely down your cheeks, but he’s in a freefall right now and it feels too good to stop, too good to forget about. How did he live without this before? Without having a ragdoll like this, for him to use, for him to abuse? You’re readily mouthing _prince prince prince prince_ like it’s a reverent prayer and he’s your god, and it feels so fucking good when he’s numb like this.

Someone knocks at the door.

And, quite suddenly, you’re not there anymore. It’s not the Citadel. It’s his bed. In his apartment. Dark curtains pulled over windows, hardwood floor littered with last night’s clothes. He’s gripping his bolster too tight until his knuckles are white and sickly green veins emerge under pale canvas. Cold sweat matting his bangs to his forehead, shirt plastered on his back, damp. His head feels funny like someone’s planted those thoughts the night before, and he’s not sure if he’s lying down or sitting up on the mattress.

Another knock, and another persistent knock.

“Noct? Get up. You’re late.”

Noctis draws in a shaky breath and looks at his hand. It feels empty without your neck in it.

**HE KNOWS HIS STRIKES** are on point today and Gladio’s praising him, calling him the Prince of Pain in jest, but somehow that gets him all the more worked up and he parries a _little_ too hard until Gladio’s bug-eyed, launching a hasty kick to his open side. _Hah_, Noctis saw that from a mile away and throws his sword backwards, digging it deep in a well-loved crevasse near the high ceiling, and there’s the familiar gut-wrenching sensation of the Crystal’s magic yanking him backwards, warping him towards safety. Hanging off the ledge like this, he knows he’s safe as Gladio circles the floor, a predator awaiting a prey.

Well, the tables have to turn today, that’s for sure.

It’s time the prey becomes the predator.

He launches his sword at Gladio’s direction and his Shield blocks the blow with his broadsword, but Noctis is limber, dodging with a well-timed backflip to launch another assault from the back. He hears a quiet _fuck_ from Gladio and can’t fight the growing grin on his lips—checkmate, sword readied behind his Shield’s head. Resigning to his nearly bloody fate, Gladio lowers his sword, dropping out of his combat stance. And when he turns, he turns around with unmistakable pride glowing his eyes, like a dad seeing his son graduate or something equally sentimental like that.

“You really are the Prince of Pain, huh Noct?” he teases, ruffling Noctis’ hair. “Good job.”
Hell, Noctis hates it when someone messes up his hair, not that it’s in any good shape after that intense training session, all mussed up like this. Swatting Gladio’s hand, Noctis wipes away new beads of sweat on his forehead with the hem of his shirt. “Duh. I’m always good like that.”

His ego is going to be the death of him someday, and Gladio knows that much. Still, well-acquainted with Noctis’ Ravatogh-sized ego, Gladio chuckles and heads to the side, where he’s prepared water bottles for both him and the prince. He throws one Noctis’ way, cracks open one for himself, and pours the whole thing down his mouth before wiping off the excess with the back of his hand.

“If we trained like this every day, you’d be ten times better by the time your break’s over,” he points out, to which, of course, Noctis scoffs.

“Hah, you wish.”

Gladio shakes his head again, the solid grin on his face slinking off in seconds. And when he gets that kind of expression going on, Noctis knows his Shield saw right through him again. “All right, spit it out, brat. What’s got you all worked up? Never saw ya into practice this much before. Hit your head or somethin’?”

Had it been that obvious? How he fought Gladio like he fought the thoughts marring his head? How he gripped his sword and tightened palpably like he gripped your frail neck breathless? How he huffs at every parry and block, sweat dripping from his hair to your skin, streaking your face, your cheeks, like they’re your tears? He grits his teeth and guzzles down the bottle until it’s emptied, quashing the plastic to throw it later outside. Gladio’s still eyeballing him, wary, even if he remains at a distance. He’s definitely not going to let this go, not until Noctis talks about whatever’s been bugging him.

Having the tables turned against him again, Noctis drops on the floor and stretches his legs, trying to brush it off casually. “Was just thinking about her.”

“Oh.” Says Gladio. An oh. Not just an ordinary oh, but a long, thoughtful, drawn-out oh. Doesn’t sound like anything he usually says at all. He doesn’t move a muscle, and Noctis is pretty much glad he doesn’t, because Gladio doesn’t clarify which ‘her’ he’s talking about, probably since he already knows which ‘her’ he’s referring to—and it’s definitely not Lunafreya. “What ‘bout her?”

As much as the dream is messing the hell out of him, there’s something else he promised you, on a warm afternoon somewhere between the sheets—definitely not in that kind of sense—and he knows he has to make good on his word. Noctis ducks his head when Gladio’s searching his face for answers, opting for some appropriate cooldown exercises. “She said something about being weak and stuff.” Weak, weak with his hips over yours, bearing down on your helpless little struggles. Noctis flinches at the intrusive thought, and stretches to his toes to edge it away. “Since she’s gonna be the military strategist and all, she’s got to have some combat experience at least. Maybe some self-defense stuff like what Prom has. You wanna teach her?”

Gladio’s got nothing against training girls, that much is obvious. Thanks to him, Iris is pretty kickass at a tender fifteen, already owning the strength of two teenagers and a half, enough to cripple a battalion of boys her age. Marshall Leonis is always too busy with the King’s direct orders to actually manifest within the Citadel’s walls himself, so he’s out of the game. Paperwork, meh, Gladio can sort that out with you later. Weapon selection, well, he supposes you can pick something you like. So it doesn’t surprise him when Gladio harrumphs and crosses his arms over his chest, already smirkling in that familiar way.

“As long as she doesn’t mind getting her ass handed to her, I’m good.” He agrees, giving him a challenging look. “She needs some muscle not only in her brains but in her arms. Kid asked this from you?”
“Yep.”

Noctis knows his answer’s curt, too curt, and Gladio’s obviously waiting to hear more. But he’s got nothing left to say, just dematerialising his sword with flickers of blue, and that’s the end of it. He hoists his bag, rummages through the contents to shovel out a clean shirt, cargos, and socks, slings a towel over his shoulder, heading off to the adjoining shower room. Whatever that Gladio wants to think of his request, he doesn’t really care. Not when his reflection in the mirror is a sweaty mess, shirt rucked over the muscled expanse of his abs, clavicles glistening moist, and his hand gripping the towel tight. So tight, until his knuckles are white and—

—he stops right there, dumps the entire thing on the counter, stomp right into a cubicle to twist the tap open. A spray of hot water rains overhead, hits him right in the face and the burning sting feels so good on his overheated skin. Noctis throws his sticky shirt over his head followed by his pants, tosses them aside in a sopping mess, grabs a bar of soap and scrubs himself raw. Raw, like he wants to forget how you’re twisting under him, his hand around your neck, beautiful bruises blooming on your skin.

_Shit._ That was not how wet dreams go. If he’s damn well hormonal again like some teenager, he should at least be half-hard by now, remembering the overtly erotic traces in his dream. The way you made soft, needy whines in your throat, head tossed back on the sheets, baring your neck for his teeth. Sucking on your bottom lip, bleeding red.

But he’s not even halfway hard yet, and he’s sick all over. Sick like that’s not him, that’s not his thoughts, that’s not his hand causing you pain.

Something’s gone wrong somewhere, probably him, and his stomach flips at the thought.

Choking you. Holding you down in your place. Thrashing under him, _weak._

And you liked pain as much as he liked giving you pain, just like the Prince of Pain he is.

**numb.** the mechanical pencil digs into your flesh, piercing it red. but nothing comes to you. not a cry, not a flinch. numb. that’s all you are now, numb to the servants, numb to the world. why smile at the instructor when father’s paid him into silence? there’s no more reason left for you to smile at anyone, so why should you _feel?_ father hates it when you feel, right? it’s better not to feel anything at all, better to drown your thoughts to become better than before. better than what father wants, better than what the world needs you to be. better enough until you are finally the best; only then, nobody will contest to your rights anymore.

you drop the pencil and let it clatter off the table, cracking when it meets its untimely end on the ground. leaning deeply in your chair, hands pressed tight on your face. breathe in, breathe out.

why is it you’re breathing but you feel like you’re not? what does it mean to breathe but not to live? why do the tears come but they do not fall? breathe in, breathe out.

_dinner will be in ten minutes and byron will leave it outside your room, for he knows you’re busy gorging yourself on textbooks and formulae. he knocks once, says a few words, and leaves to avoid disrupting your attention. that’s the standard routine he established within a few short weeks. but your eyes are blurry and the black letters clustering your glossy pages are just ants traveling across a white desert, a never-ending trail of word after word after word. details on the unfinished dam near cape caem make no sense, and the stacked equations sitting to your left are waiting to be reduced to integers. the tears are still there and they prick your eyes._
breathe in. hold. breathe out.

byron knocks at the door, once. that’s your cue for break. breathe in, hold your tears, breathe out. the chair skitters when you rise and you head to the door, wrenching it open. only, there is no byron. there is no tray of food resting near your feet. there is no smile, no motherly nagging awaiting your dismissal. all you see is the barren hallway and its gaudy wallpaper with no human in sight. were you imagining things in your delusion? no, you heard his knock loud and clear in the startling stillness of your room.

you twist your head, left and right, eyes searching the oil paintings and ornate lighting for answers.

then, it comes to you in slow successions: the perfume of lavender and baby powder, of summer and sweat, of her hand in yours, lingering in the space where you stand.

your stomach curls and you shove a fist in your mouth to silence your cries.

**THE MORNING AFTER HAD BEEN ALL RIGHT.** The hazy glow of yesterday night’s dream still hasn’t left you, lazing at the back of your thoughts. Each memory comes accompanied by the slow drawl of Noctis’ words, languidly tracing his fingers over the sleek leather of the steering. He seeks your companionship like a friend, never judging your denied days of childhood freedom, and chose to wrench you out of this prison. At the end of the dream he returns you to your chambers, seeing you to your slumber.

Somehow, all those little details seemed so precious to you. One of your very first memories with your friends, one you wouldn’t trade in for anything else. Making your morning dose of hot chocolate, setting aside butter to thaw, spritz bottle readied to lave over your flowers, you’re halfway through your room when the doorknob turns.

By now, you’re already accustomed to people coming and going through your door, entering and exiting your life just as easily. There’d be the prince and his messy mop of hair, damp and smelling clean from some fancy soap. He’d run his fingers through his dark spikes, a habitual action ingrained over the years of trying to tame his unruly hair. The uncertain blues in his irises shift to darker, gunmetal silver when he looks at you, and it sets you alive knowing he’s looking at you this way because he acknowledges you’re beside him, and you will be beside him for all the years to come.

The words almost tumble from your lips like a surprise greeting to catch him off guard, but it’s not a pair of faded pants striding into view.

It’s a vision of whiteness, a tailored suit accentuated by silver buttons, bearing the crest of a dragon pinned on a lapel.

Prim ponytail over his shoulder, ruddy eyes glistening red under the sunlight, proper leather shoes and gloved hands. He enters and doesn’t leave. Locking the door behind him with a subtle clack, he removes his shoes and socks in three precise motions, making his way towards you. There used to be a smile on his face, always with a smile and barely frowning, but his expression remains indecipherable. It’s an expression you’ve seen before, worn only when he comes bearing grave news. Regardless of his transgression, regardless of what transpired between him and you, regardless of his disobedience towards his mistress, he stays loyal to his task.

A dog always returns to its mistress at the end of the day.

And you know better than to ask.
Retreating to your chair with him tailing obediently behind, you sink into leather and cross your legs. Hands in your lap, straight-backed, holding your chin parallel to the ground.

He kneels before you, a symbol of his subservience, head bowed low.

“Status report on Niflheim, Byron?”

They’re words you’re long used to reciting. Words that, when uttered, bring news of utter chaos, madness, an empire thrust into the peak of magitek advancement. While Lucis remained free from war for more than a hundred years of peace, peace makes people forget about the pain. And Niflheim never forgets about the pain, not even once. Their greed has them sinking their claws into Tenebrae, having annexed Accordo many years ago. And, if Lucis isn’t careful enough, Niflheim will soon rake their claws over the fertile lands, claiming each citizen as their own, body, blood and soul.

Byron raises his head and you gaze into the bloodied waters of his eyes.

“Regarding Percival Fafnir, my father,” he spits out the title like a bone lodged in his throat, “rumours have it that he’s defected to Niflheim. Unsurprising, considering how cowardly he is, though I’m amazed it took him this long to realise he has no place in Lucis anymore. The Informant made no further mentions on this, so I’m afraid the trail has gone cold for now. But I’ll continue looking into it, if…”

You nod, feasibly pleased. He doesn’t need to say more, not when you know he’s waiting for your permission. “Granted.”

“Much obliged, milady.” Byron remains kneeling even as he lowers his head in deference, uttering words of gratitude over your express consent on his private affairs. “Now, secondly, here is a nugget of information I received from The Informant. It’s something much like a rumour, but I believe there are reasons why you should pay attention to this particular bit.” He pauses, waiting for your rapt attention, and resumes with a sigh. “He hasn’t seen it yet, but the Imperials have been tense as of late. Security’s been a tad bit tighter around certain areas, and they say they’ve begun building a new weapon. Or maybe they’ve long built this weapon, but it’s only now they’ve started showing active signs of testing it out for completion.”

A new weapon? That has you sitting up in the chair straighter, fingers steepled. The threat is clear in his words alone. “Something greater than the MTs?”

“That it is, milady,” he reaffirms with a nod, exhaling with a shudder in his breath. “Whatever it is, it’s something big. Zegnautus Keep has seen more soldiers guarding its perimeters from below, and more and more people keep disappearing. Mostly villagers, those inconsequential to the empire. Frequent security checks into Gralea, train spot-checks, stuffs that make it harder for people to keep living there. Now, I don’t know if this is true, but we should be careful. Quintus knows nothing of this, milady, for I am yours alone. And I’d loathe to share with him this information, knowing he’d doubt my words if I come bearing no proof.”

That’s true. Father’s allegiance runs deep with Lucis as an Andronicus, a pride he refuses to downplay. But he’s always been a sceptic when it comes to sorting out the truths from the lies, fishing out the thread from the tangle of wires. Rumours without concrete evidence hold no interest to him, and he’ll easily dismiss them with a wave of his hand. But you’re not father. You have Byron by your side, the last of the Fafnirs who’s sworn his allegiance under your name. Byron is yours and yours alone, every strand of hair, every molar of teeth, every finger on his hands. All yours, not father’s.
Turning in your chair, you cast a long look over Insomnia as Byron stays put, waiting for your further command.

The skyscrapers are still there, clustered between buildings and expressway. The people are, undoubtedly, going on with their usual routine, eating noodles from stalls and competing against each other in arcades. It’s just yesterday you darted through the streets, Prompto pulling you along, laughing at the posters of Kenny Crow near the subways. A day of peace just like yesterday, something that the people are living for, something Niflheim can steal away from Lucis in just mere seconds if they wished so. The empire will crush the kingdom sooner or later, and Lucis will be powerless to stop it.

What will be of this kingdom’s fate when the empire finally has its way?

Father can’t stop them, you know he can’t. As much as you despise the strings he tied around your wrists, he still holds substantial power over Lucis’ military affairs. Granted the army’s been dissolved even the years before King Regis rose into power, having absorbed their men into the Crownsguard, there is still a small faction reserved for the trying times of war. Small, pathetic fraction of militia who are severely incompetent when compared to Niflheim’s innumerable MTs. To think they’d win a war against the empire is to let Eos be robbed of its Astrals. They can’t win this war, not with the way they are now.

More people will suffer, that much is obvious even to your untrained eyes. NGOs denounced how King Regis became cowardly in the face of Niflheim’s might by keeping only the Crown City safe with the help of the Crystal, truly a carbon copy of his useless predecessor. Outside Insomnia, smokelike rumours rose even without fires. Daemons roam the roads at night and monsters retaliate by prowling in packs, according to the data Byron crunched in his reports. Hunters fight for a pretty Gil, but the demand will soon outgrow the supply. When the hunters are tired and the people are scared, who will they turn to?

Now, the cherry topping Niflheim’s madness is this: The new weapon they are developing. After its completion, like a child with a new toy, the empire will surely demonstrate its might right in the heart of their nemesis. Nothing will be left for salvaging, the brutes they are. They readily rend their swords through their own kind if it meant prospering their empire. It makes you click your tongue in derision as you play out the scenario in your mind.

The King is weak, the people hate him, and Niflheim is smiling. What an unhappy ending indeed.

A growing tightness seizes your throat, and mother’s hands are back again, wrapping slim digits around your neck.

Something blurs in the back of your head, and everything feels so hazy, misting up. Everything. Everything but Noctis, the prince of the kingdom, the future King of Lucis. Your future king. If I want her as my strategist, then I’ll have her as my military strategist, he declared right in father’s face, never backing down to defend your right to the title. If you’re not good enough for me, I wouldn’t even show up the second time around, he said, right after bopping your head with half a smile on his face.

You’re good enough.

This is real.

Everything is real and you’re good enough for him.

Your jaw tightens and you suck in a deep breath to steady yourself. You are a weak, insignificant
child of the Andronicus, but you dream big and you always want want want more. You are not a
tragedy waiting to be pitied by others when you have grown claws of your own. You’ve fought
father your whole life and you’ll fight a whole lot more if it meant keeping the prince safe.

Noctis knows nothing of this, knows nothing of the throne you’re sitting on, built high upon the
corpses of others. He knows nothing of the bloodied trace of your fingers when you close mother’s
eyes, kissing her forehead once in farewell. He knows nothing of the empire’s trap, always
remaining ten sure steps ahead of Lucis’ wobbles. He knows nothing of his fate. All Noctis knows is
his best friend, Prompto. Ignis’ inexhaustible book of puns, punctuated with Gladio’s big barking
laughter.

You have to protect him.

That is your duty as an Andronicus.

Just like father, protecting His Majesty King Regis, his duty as an Andronicus.

Quashing all your feelings, you turn to Byron, a hard edge lining your jaw. “Here are my orders to
you, Byron. Listen well.”

He knows. He knows you too well by now, all the years of his fingers through your hair, braiding
your locks, bringing your hands together in his, pressing sticky kisses on your scalp, pulling the
comforters over your chest. At thirty-three, Bryon is still as upbeat as his handsome nineteen-year-old
self. Only the light wrinkles around his eyes betray his age, but they never dulled his skills, not even
the years blunted the edge of his knife. And you trust him enough with this order, just like the ones
he executed before.

Licking your dry lips, you utter words you’re long used to reciting.

“Dispose the current informant you have and find a new one. Leave no trace behind. Find me new
information on Niflheim as soon as possible. And be sure not to neglect your duty to the family;
come back home once it’s safe, just in time for father's tea at four. Don’t let him suspect anything.”

And Byron, always gentle, always kind, finally smiles.

THERE WAS A MOVIE he’d seen before, something on the CRT TV Byron stole from the
second-hand shop in the back alley. On its static-flecked screen, an actress recited a line that
resonated with him so deeply, even over the years. Damaged people are dangerous, she said,
because they know they can survive. A bottle of beer in his hand, draped over a mouldy cushion, he
presses a hand to his face and tries to stop the tears. Tries, because he knows he can’t stop, he's in
too deep with this shit already, and Insomnia’s no better off than Duscae and its greasy plates in the
sink. Everyone looks at him funny just because he’s too fucking pale, and he only knows how to talk
with his fists than his mouth.

He remembers exhaustion in his debauched bones, surviving off expired bread and soggy veggies
from the streets.

He remembers iron cuffs around his wrist, maybe about that bike he stole some few months ago or
that man he stabbed last week.

He remembers someone at the rusty jail door, seeing the police standing straight and saluting him
noiselessly.
He remembers Quintus extending a hand to him, reciting *Byron Fafnir* with that snakelike tongue of his.

He remembers his job as a Fafnir, as the killers contracted forevermore under the Andronici, signed in blood down the decades.

It’s probably what Percival’s trying to escape from, sick of the blood crusting the walls, sick of being on the run when everyone’s setting bloodhounds loose on his trail. Can’t even damn well settle down with a pretty wife heavy with a child without getting scared of every shadow crossing the walls. Always running, always lying, always killing. Maybe his mom’s the same too, tired of the fuck-up Percival is, tired of the Andronici and the noose for her necklace, so she packs her bags and leaves one night. He doesn’t care for her because she obviously doesn’t care for him either.

So who are you to him until Quintus puts your feeble hands in his bloodied ones?

Probably someone equally deserving to be immortalised as a portrait painted in blood.

You cross the expanse of your workspace, pressing a hand on glass panes overlooking the Crown City. He knows he should be leaving to carry out your edict with pride, but his legs are unwilling to leave. Caught by the vision of his mistress in all your lovely loneliness, wishing for the world beyond your touch. Perhaps underneath the grotesque beauty you’ve become, underneath the maggots feasting on your flesh, you are but a lovechild seeking warmth from others.

At five, you’re the very patron of innocence. Now, you’re twenty, ripe with sins.

What a marvellous little murderer you’ve become, too beautiful and too broken for this cruel world.

So beautiful, he can’t stop smiling at your sorrow, for he’s shaped you with his very hands.

His little monster, and his alone.

**ONLINE.**

Noctis turns on his bed and kicks the annoying sheets off his feet, letting them tangle elsewhere. King’s Knight background music is muted, and all he hears is the buzz of the air-conditioning droning overhead. It’s late afternoon, too late for him to lounge around in bed, but Prompto’s busy with his part-time job, Gladio’s off training some newbies, and Ignis’ suffocating in more council meetings one after another until the man can puke blue by the time it’s over. All that’s left is Noctis, his half-eaten cup of Nissin, and the game in his hands.

You’re online, he realises, because his friend screen says so. He’s been staring at it for the past few minutes, looking at your pixelated Kaliva brandishing his staff several hundred times in a row. Sure, he could march right up to your room after training and demand you to play through some raids with him, but.

It’s not a good idea.

Not when he’s distracted like this.

None of this is your fault. Absolutely none at all. He’s the one with the freakish dream and he’s the one who can’t keep his head in the game. Maybe, maybe if he wants to be nitpicky, you started it by willingly putting his hand around your neck—but now the idea’s gone ahead and glued itself to his brain, and Noctis just wants to scrape it off with a fork just to get it to go away. It’s frustrating. It’s
not him, yet at the same time, it’s frustrating how much he wants to dig his fingers into your flesh just to know what it feels like to make you whine.

Touching you felt natural, felt just right. It started with the innocent brush of your knee against his, escalated with his playful nudge on your shoulder, and reached the summit with your cold hands fervently wrapping his fingers around your neck. The calluses on his hand knew the tight knots on your back and his hand learnt the delicate curve of your collarbones. With every brush of ice from your fingers, he melts it with a tight grasp of his hand. You never resist him, seemingly meeting each and every casual touch of his with an indifferent stroke of your own. And that’s dangerous.

For now, it’s probably good to put some distance until this whole nonsense dies down.

Probably.

Because it’s just a dream.

And dreams never make sense.

A thumb hovering over your Kaliva, Noctis memorises his newfound plan for the week and taps on your message button, bringing up a transparent blue box. A message’s fine, right? A message’s better than seeing you face-to-face. At least you won’t see him spacing out when those pesky thoughts ghost over again. You’re much safer there. Much, much safer from his hands. In seconds, Noctis keys in a few letters on the keyboard and presses send.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: MIDNIGHT
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: hey wanna go raid some high-level dungeon?

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

(°(°_3(°_5°)5°°)°) intensifies even more in chapter 15.

i know this chapter’s a lot to take in and so many things are happening, so thank you for reading! 8) things only get deeper with more and more chapters because h e y, don’t we love political and familial intrigue? at this point, everyone is starting to look so sketchy, poor noctis & friends. also with the recent release of king’s knight, does that mean i have to rewrite the entire fic. aaaa. im sorry. i don’t think im gonna rewrite the king’s knight parts :/ let’s just pretend the game works that way for this fic. also for the readers who came from tumblr, welcome! <3 i’ve updated my tumblr’s fic masterpost that you can find here so that it’s easier to navigate.

side note, i have a very important question to ask you readers: would you prefer the protagonist to be the usual standard (y/n) so that you can insert a name of your choice, or would you prefer for the protagonist to be named instead? i don’t really write or read reader-inserts (this is my second reader-insert fic tbh) so i’m not sure what’s the standard everyone would prefer when reading reader-insert fics. i’ll let you readers decide if you’d prefer y/n or a named protagonist! :3c do let me know what you want, so we can decide on something everybody will like <3
“You think they kissed or something?” Prompto stares wistfully into the distance as Ignis rolls his eyes, scraping off the carrots and working on the cucumbers now. “It’s Noct, and knowing Noct, he’s. I dunno. I don’t think he’d make the first move. But if they didn’t kiss, then why’s Noct acting so weird these days? Maybe she confessed to him or something?”
flowering: method in madness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

flowering

A SINGLE BEEP ALERTS YOU quicker than expected. Clicking on your shared Moogle Drive, a white moogle pirouettes endlessly as it begins synchronising files into your desktop. One by one, a slew of pictures and scattered documents bearing codenames appear while you skim over the files with a frown. Some of the original dates on the files indicate they haven’t been updated since its conception, but some dated as earliest as this week. You certainly never questioned where Byron obtained such sensitive information, not when you’re the one commanding him to commit crimes out of necessity. If anything, you’re thankful for his felonious background.

Clicking on the first picture brings an image of a document laid on a banged-up table, hastily snapped using his phone. A little bit blurry and grainy, but otherwise still legible. Rough lines on the paper show a sketch, something resembling a huge—you tip your head to the side—beast? No, it resembles nothing of a beast. A parasite, perhaps? No, a parasite looks nothing like this either. Whatever it is, the butchered depiction of a creature is there, strapped up with pencilled contraptions on its limbs.

Scrolling through another picture, and another picture, and another picture, seem to be reiterations of the first discovery; only, the difference lies in the level of graphic mutilation. A misplaced garula’s head on the skeleton of a machine, or a sabertusk all stitched together with mechanical arms, everything is so bizarre until you rub a thumb over your temple to see past these manic machinations.

The flood of documents stop sometime after you perused the fifteenth—or was it the twenty-fifth image? No matter. It stopped just as abruptly, signalling the end of Byron’s session. Now you’re left alone with all these unnamed monstrosities, trying to cobble together a clearer image for conjecture.

Feeling the small beating at the back of your head giving way to larger thumps, you leave your worktable and allow yourself the comfort of a ten-minute break. Hot cocoa usually dispels all migraine, or so what Byron taught you, hence you set forth with the mundane task of withdrawing a cunningly painted coeurl mug and dumping some hot water in it. Once the comforting scent of thick chocolaty goodness wafts through your room, you retreat to your station once more, knees drawn to your chest.

On the desktop, a sketch of the grotesque monster stares back.

You take a slow sip of your drink, eyes on the drawing, letting its warmth wash over your nerves.

Many confidential documents of Lucis, snippets of what Byron snapped from father’s study over the years, had shown increasing concern over Niflheim’s unmanned army of MTs. But these documents are keyed differently from Lucis, perhaps delivered fresh from the Imperial Laboratories itself. One can’t help but to wonder if The Informant’s covert infiltration culminated in these files harvested from their hands; that certainly explains all these technical jargon decorating the text.

Another deep sip has you sifting your thoughts how one sifts through flour: To combine them with your many theories. Niflheim surely found some use in these fascinating experimentations of theirs; that much is the undeniable truth. No matter how cruel it might seem, they are brilliant in their insanity. They hesitate not to shed every last bit of humanity, donning the skin of a daemon instead.
Without the common human norms governing their actions, they are gods over their own existence, free to do whatever they want, whenever they please without worrying about the humane semantics of repercussions.

Perhaps Niflheim’s infantry grew in strength only because they are able to embrace madness as a whole.

You down the drink and set the mug on the edge of your table sharply.

Byron will be gone for several more days, staying out of contact until it’s safe for his return, standard agreement between you and him. Once he returns, you suppose he’ll be expecting clever conclusions from the daughter of Andronicus. You can’t let him down, can you? There’s never enough time for anything you’re working on, always chasing after your studies, always chasing after your dreams, always chasing after your father. You suppose living in the Citadel leaves you lax in the soul, forgetting the essence of what you are, deluded by the delirium of friendship with your newfound friends.

The prince—Noctis will be safe if you foresee this imminent threat.

On automatic, you click your music player and selected *Gnossienne* under Satie, allowing the heavy notes to reverberate through the empty chamber. Mother’s hands are around your throat again, and she whispers into your ear.

Sometimes, madness is inevitable.

**there you are again, slumped** over the desk, fast asleep. he’s nagged you on this before; poor posture, difficult breathing, awful, just awful—but you are unrepentant, slaving over your books until sleep knocks you out. past 4.00 a.m. when everyone’s snoring, the house of the andronicus is as still as the dead—not that anything is worth living in here, save for your presence. he’d been well engrossed in deep sleep himself until his erratic body and its distorted circadian rhythm jostled him awake next door; now, here he is, standing by your table, watching you nestle in the circle of your arms.

long fingers flick off your study lamp, shutting your computer and withdrawing your textbooks. rough papers are scrunched in his hands, a broken mechanical pencil by your feet is disposed, and all that’s left is to bring you to bed.

he’s done this before, countless amounts of time in fact. tipping you backwards and hooking an arm under your knees, hoisting your body into his embrace and carrying you to your room. your head automatically seeks the crook of his arm and byron smiles. touch-starved, aren’t you. laying you on your mattress, he takes great care in shucking your shirt off your feeble frame, fingers lingering over the bones under your growing breasts. cracked lips, dry hair, everything serves as a testimony on how you take measured steps in your bodily destruction.

you are hurting, yet you want more of this pain.

how wretched.

he won’t stop you from doing what you want, even if you wind up destroying yourself; rather, it’s admirable for a nine-year-old to learn her worth in this decaying society, clawing her way through these wicked adults tromping on her future. it goes well with what he has in store for your future as an andronicus. byron pulls up your sleepwear and draws the sheets to your shoulders, pressing in a
silent kiss on your forehead. warm, so warm. a fever is well underway now, so it’s best for him to include two tablets alongside morning breakfast at six later.

your mattress creaks as he perches on the edge, studying your restless slumber.

from a killer to a babysitter, how laughable. the underworld had long left him alone, now that he has the chain of the andronicus loped around his neck. that’s certainly a mess nobody wants to get involved in, so they cleverly steered clear of his path. big boss quintus had surely extended his gratitude to the police, to the yakuza, to the mobs and their men for their undue kindness in forgiving byron for his turbulent past. and they, too, had long learnt to swallow the vomit quintus served, unless they wish to have inspector general horace visiting them past office hours to convict them for their crimes.

something behind him clicks—too loud a sound in this deathly stillness—and byron straightens up, staring straight at your bedroom door. ajar, only the slightest gap left open like someone’s been spying on him, on you. heavy footsteps follow, someone’s fleeing the crime site. well, that’s not right. if he had his daggers holstered, he could’ve launched a knife before they got away. no matter.

by the time byron reaches the door, everything is silent once more. only the lingering trace of a perfume gave away its identity.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: bored

TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: ?
MESSAGE: What’s up?

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: everyone’s training. gladio gave me time out cuz he said i suck. he sucks.

TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: Aww
MESSAGE: There there, Prince. I’m sure you don’t suck. Try again? You can do it better with practice. You’re strong.

AWW? That’s weird, he’s never heard such a sound from you before. Trying to imagine you, nestled in your sheets probably, holding up your phone to your face with an aww gets him frowning faster than expected. Is it a soft crooning aww or is it one of your infamously monotonous aww? The one with the monotone sounds possible with how impassive you are—but then again, you’ve learnt to laugh and you’ve learnt to smile with him, so who’s to say you’re not softly crooning aww with your cheeks all curving with your smile, just a daub of softness colouring your usually vacant eyes?
Right, that settles it. You’re definitely crooning that *aww*, that’s for sure.

With that image in his head, Noctis lets himself smile and keys in a reply.

```
TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: lol
```

```
TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: ??
MESSAGE: What’s up?
```

```
TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: nothing. wyd?
```

```
TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: ???
MESSAGE: What is WYD?
```

Noctis snorts under his breath. Okay, so maybe the snort came out a little louder than expected and Gladio’s shooting laser beams from the distance because Noctis is supposed to be ‘repenting’ over his ‘godsdamned mistake of keeping your side open’, or so what he said. Ignis appears to not have heard the snort, though he’s wiping off sweat from his wilting spikes and looking increasingly weary as Gladio clocks in punch after punch, trying to drill some basic hand-to-hand combat into their ‘collectively scrawny asses’. Prompto’s already flat out dead from the fight, his corpse disposed by the shower, and nobody’s allowed to collect his body for mourning—at least Noctis tried and Gladio chewed him out, so Prompto can’t accuse he’s a bad friend.

Angling his body away from the Shield, Noctis presses in another reply.

```
TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: wyd = what you doing
```

```
TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: Oh.
MESSAGE: Nothing much. Reading reports again. Normal stuff. You?
```

Right, you’re always working on something or another with your thesis. The sleepy, lazy genius of the Andronici who aspires to become his military strategist. Fighting against your father, fighting against your fate, you’re always fighting against whatever the Astrals threw your way. Even pinned underneath his weight, you’re fighting to get away, teeth catching on your bottom lip, bucking up
weakly against his hips—

—stop.

No.

Noctis wills the image from his head and stares at the hard muscles lining Gladio’s back. Throat dry. Right. Some water should fix that. Magic tingles on his fingertips, like the pins and needles one gets after sitting too long, and he conjures a sports bottle from his inventory of knick-knacks. Emptying half of the content, the bottle disappears in translucent shrapnel of blue, crackles of magic dissipating from his forearm to his hand. He’s still not good enough at this whole magic thing, what with wrap-striking repeatedly like some of the senior Glaives, or pulling and putting things into his Armiger, but it’s like what you said: He’d get better with practice.

Coming from you, it’s an advice that’s definitely tried and tested. A doctorate at twenty when he’s still fumbling with attuning his inventory into his Armiger—sure, they’re two things on opposite ends of a spectrum, but it ultimately boils down to this: You’re always honing your intelligence to become the very best at what you are, while he’s just. *Y’know.* Just Noctis, a prince of a kingdom with a dying dad, having to attend the final semester of Lucis U come January. *Just that,* and nothing like your sheer brilliance of academic papers and citing journals from a scholar or another.

That gets him feeling worse than ever, and it’s enough that Gladio kicked up a fuss about seeing him in shit shape when comparing his performance with some mathematical chart he’s got in his head.

Noctis drags a hand from his hair to his face, tasting the salt from his skin on his lips.

You’re weak, and he’s strong. That much is obvious. Physically weaker than he is, yet emotionally hardened by the turmoil in your life. But the strong always has to protect the weak, an echo of his dad’s reminder to him. He’s going to be the future King of Lucis, and he’s expected to shoulder everyone’s burden of purging an Eos riddled with disease—the Starscourge. Like what the old prophecies scripted in the Cosmogonies, he’ll purge the world of its illness, the True King of Light amidst the darkness veiling the world. He has to get stronger—stronger than Gladio, stronger than the Glaives, and stronger to protect everyone. Strong, strong enough until he can prove to Niflheim the new king is not to be messed with.

Pulling himself from the ground, Noctis glances at your unreplied message and types in a reply before shoving his phone in the pocket once more.

```
TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: getting back to practice ttyl
p/s ttyl = talk to you later
```

“YOU THINK NOCT’S OKAY?” Prompto, with all his conspiratorial whispering again, hunches over the counter as Ignis carves a carrot in clean cuts. “I mean—Gladio’s pissed at first, sure, because Gladio totally majored in Getting Pissed Off In Ten Secs Flat—but Noct picked up after he got chewed out, right?” His voice drops, almost hard to listen between the rapid knocks of knife on board. “Just so you know, Noct’s been *reaaaaaally* out of it ever since that night. Think something
happened?”

Ah yes. That Night. The gist of That Night™, according to Prompto, is that Noctis kidnapped you from the Citadel and took you out for some jolly good fun in Insomnia. Together with Prompto, you slurped up a healthy serving of ramen, chatted about Lokton cameras and Claire Farron’s appointment as the official brand ambassador of Louis Vuitton, and liked The Blind—all bits of gore and grisly murder included. While Prompto doesn’t exactly detail what happened until Noctis resorted to such, well, dramatic grounds of action, what he does know is this:

“You think they kissed or somethin’?” Prompto stares wistfully into the distance as Ignis rolls his eyes, scraping off the carrots and working on the cucumbers now. “It’s Noct, and knowing Noct, he’s. I dunno. I don’t think he’d make the first move. But if they didn’t kiss, then why’s Noct acting so weird these days? Maybe she confessed to him? Or maybe he caught the feels? Like they’re totally crushing on each other but they’re totally pretending they’re not?”

A farfetched theory, one with absolutely no concrete basis whatsoever. Ignis has seen him through various emotional fits and breakdowns over the many years they spent together. Furious tears made its debut in Noctis’ earliest years when King Regis broke his promise in the form of sunset illuminating an empty chair. Disgruntled despair is a recurring theme throughout high school heydays when Ignis froze his card to curb excessive expenditure at the arcades. And Ignis’ personal favourite: A week of cold silence and spitting glares from Noctis as a direct result of Ignis’ severe tongue lashing to get him to clean up after his act as the Prince of Lucis.

So, no. Confessions and kisses are ruled out, as the symptoms of love would’ve manifested obvious enough for any of them to comment on it, Ignis always being the first one to pick up the distress signals.

When he presents his disagreement on the matter, Prompto frowns and cups his chin in deep thought, always prepared with a rebuttal cross-referenced from rom-coms. “Okay, scratch that. Let’s just say they didn’t have some awkward confession scene gone wrong—but if nothing went wrong, then why’s he acting like this? This thing’s been keeping me crazy ‘cause I don’t wanna end up saying the wrong thing and in case something did happen, Noct’s totally gonna relegate the middleman part to me if he needs to make up to her and we totally know how it’s gonna end up. We’d be having fireworks,” he shrugs, “except it’s gonna explode in my hand.”

In the midst of checking the results of his lime-steamed fish, Ignis pauses. “Now that is a good question. Why indeed?”

“That’s why I said That Night™ totally had something to do with this.” Prompto huffs, slumping over the marble. “It’s been close to a week and we barely even game together with her anymore. Noct’s either only raiding with me and Gladio, or.” He makes some artless hand gestures, probably drawing something in the air that only makes sense to his inventive eyes. “With her, y’know? Exclusively with her. Probably. Heck, I dunno if he’s even raiding with her anymore. Doesn’t that sound weird to you? So Noct but kinda Noct?”

Ignis steals a quick look at the anticipatory gleam in Prompto’s eyes. “Noct quite Noct, I’m afraid.” Prompto flashes him a grin from the counter. “Who’s gonna make fun of Noct if not his squad, yeah?”

An apt summary of their friendship indeed, one that has Ignis’ prompt approval. “Precisely.”

Withdrawing a small plate, he deposits a sample of the sauce on the melamine and sips. Herby and tart to his tongue, thanks to the tang of the lime and garlic. Excellent. He caps the fish to let it steam
for a few more minutes and turns to the counter once more, fashioning a bowl of salad that will surely be forgotten by the end of Noctis’ dinner. Oh well, at least he made an effort, an effort that will surely never be mentioned by the prince in the upcoming years. At least it’s sizeable enough for him and Prompto to enjoy.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Ignis starts, and no, he’s hardly ever wrong, “but you have her in King’s Knight, yes? Why not ask her straight away? Theorising like this hardly helps solving your problem, if you haven’t noticed.”

Prompto groans, long and exasperated, like someone’s stuck a knife through his chest and propped him up to die for the second time today. “Iggy, no. That’s just. Wrong. She and I, we’re close, but not that close. If Noct’s standing like two meters away from her, I’m probably running to them from five miles away. That kinda feel, you get me?”

“Surely you’re exaggerating.” Ignis turns away from tossing the salad to select a glass bottle, dousing crisp greens liberally in olive oil. “While she’s certainly fond of Noct, she’s fond of you as well. Surely she’ll understand the nature of your query given the right phrasing. You’re merely concerned for Noct’s wellbeing, that’s all.”

“Dunno, this feels like some bro code I can't break, man. He's totally gonna be on to me if I bring her up in one of our conversations. I don't have a choice but I don’t wanna cross the line.” Again with that shrug, all life drained out of Prompto as he fixes Ignis a brooding stare with his chin on the countertop. “C’mon, what d’you think, Iggy? About this whole thing?”

Ignis affords a smile at that, chucking some sliced cherry tomatoes in the heart of the greens. “No comment.”

“Figures.” Prompto snorts. “Cryptic Iggy as always.”

*Cryptic?* Ignis breaks into soft laughter.

Cryptic isn’t what he’d type in his resume, seeing that the choice of word will certainly result in raised brows. Rather, he’d prefer to wait until the time is right to confer his judgment on the matter. What good will it be for him to raise alarms when none of them saw any suspicious activities from you? Upturning the Royal Archives led him to a dead wall. Discreet conversations with longstanding maids consequently ended in tattling. Quintus excised your existence cleaner than bleach to colour, resulting in your small show of rebellion against your father just to serve the prince.

He isn’t fond of suspecting those Noctis regard dearly, but it’s outlined in his job scope ever since he turned six, holding Noctis at the age of three. The accident robbed Ignis of a sunflower child and returned him broken in wheelchair. Tenebrae came and went, the late Oracle couldn’t heal a smile long forgotten, and Niflheim stole the very last thing Noctis held dear: His companionship with Lunafreya went when they slew the Queen.

Everyone wears pain differently and it shows when Noctis deliberately extracted himself from society, a textbook recluse. Nothing’s left of a toothily grinning prince at three, dragging mud all over the front foyer just to draw stars. All they had was a shell waiting to be filled with what they saw fit; memories that didn’t matter, therapies that made no sense, and apathy that had no end. Progress was scarce enough to be counted on a single hand. It took King Regis, Ignis, matrons and maids many long, hard years to get Noctis to where he is now, to eat, to smile, to laugh, to *talk* with another human being. When Prompto came along and breached the gap Ignis couldn’t penetrate as a Royal Advisor, but as an *outsider* unbound by duties, it was as though he breathed life into the shell they had.
And now you appear before them, almost a copy of Noctis but not quite similar in substance.

What Noctis enjoyed in the form of unrestricted socialising following King Regis’ wishes, you were denied. A recluse not by choice, but by circumstances. The adage like attracts like speaks much more than Ignis possibly could. Just like that, Noctis connects with you on scales others couldn’t, on tones others wouldn’t understand. Your background matters little to him, just like how Noctis wants his background to matter little to others. Even if Ignis makes his suspicion clear for Noctis to note, by now, it is surely too late. Slipping from one ear through another—or worse, escalating into one of those fights again. And Ignis knew better than to risk what little he had.

Granted, he could always kindly refer to the Glaives to prod deeper into the subject as they always run background checks on those within Noctis’ company, but that’d certainly tangle certain metaphorical cables knitted tightly to the Andronicus. As discreet as they may be, Quintus had outdone them with twenty years worth of experience in hiding your existence. No, Ignis would rather keep this to himself until the conclusive climax. If you proved yourself as an independent body working solely for Noctis’ own wellbeing, then he supposes he’ll throw you a large party at the end of it. If, by grim chance, Quintus is the puppeteer and you are his marionette, then.

Setting the salad aside, Ignis turns the tap and gets the warm water running, washing his hands and washing his heavy thoughts clean.

“Good things come to those who wait, Prompto,” he reminds the blond, soaping up his digits. “Let Noct do as he pleases for now. He’ll come to a decision sooner or later, no matter how late it will be. Now, run along and get him to wake up. Dinner will be ready soon.”

And Prompto makes a sound that is neither in agreement nor disagreement with the statement, backing away from the kitchen with great reluctance. “Geez, you always give me impossible jobs, Iggy.”

Ignis only chuckles, all smiles.

A FRIENDLY BARK WAKES HIM UP and Noctis jerks awake with a start when a warm paw rests on his bicep. Round, amber eyes peer at him expectantly by his bedside.

_Umbra._

The name comes to him just as easily as breathing, and Noctis sits up against the headboard faster than anything else could get him to wake up. Umbra barks again, intelligent eyes setting curiously on Noctis’ bedhead, inspecting the unruly spikes. As one of the Messengers from the Astrals, who knows what it thinks of the fuzzy mess, only stopping short of nagging him due to a distinct lack of voice. Ah well. Doesn’t matter, Umbra probably thinks it’s cool anyway, ‘cause that’s just how dogs are. Noctis reaches out and pets its head all the same, Umbra nuzzling into his touch like it usually does.

“Hey,” he murmurs, “got something for me from Luna?”

Umbra barks its affirmative, bopping wet nose against his palm, eager as always. Some things never change—not that it’s a bad thing. Things that never change are good. Things like, for example, his relationship with Luna. That never changed, no matter the miles separating them, no matter the years wedged between their ages. Luna is a constant in his life, much like how one always expects a moon in the midnight skies. She’s always there for him and she never goes away, watching over his every step with a prayer resting on her lips.
Retrieving the well-worn notebook from Umbra, Noctis dusts over the gilded curls of sylleblossoms on faded red leather. A single blue sylleblossom is pressed into a page, kissed by a wax seal. A notebook he trades with Luna over the days that grew into months, and months that bloomed into years. Fingers flip through the pages, going past awkward scrawls of their earlier writings, finally resting on the last page Luna wrote. A sticker is fixed in place, one of the many things Luna would usually include while penning in a sentence or two, or a paragraph and more.

It’s nearly New Year.
And New Year ushers in good tidings.
What good tidings do you have,
Noctis?

He smothers a chuckle at that. Eloquent Luna as always, that never changed too. What sort of good tidings indeed? Resting his head against the wooden headboard, Noctis searches the recesses of his mind for something new. Luna’s already updated on how his dad gifted him a customised Audi for his twentieth birthday, detailing how the lacquered panels boast the Tenebraean swirls in silver, attaching a picture of him posing with his latest ride while he was at it. She obviously liked it, since she wrote a full page before returning the book to him. But that’s already old news and nothing remotely interesting jumps out at him, now that he thinks harder.

How about his previous term at Lucis U?

Just as immediately, Noctis makes a face. *Nah,* nothing about that sounds cool. She definitely doesn’t need to know how he almost ran late for all his early morning classes until his dean just had to reshuffle his classes for afternoon slots instead. Not that he’s a bad student with grades collapsing faster than bad market stocks—he just can’t seem to wake up in the morning on his own, unless Ignis trumps into his apartment for a solid wake-up call. The minor improvement in his schedule made a large impact though; his grades are at an all-time high and—well, he digressed.

Scratch that.

How about his Revenant weapon in King’s Knight?

While she’s still under strict house arrest thanks to Niflheim disallowing her even the smallest mercies of a smartphone, she had been gladly keeping tabs on him and his King’s Knight obsession. Sometimes he’d print out screenshots of how the game works and how he’s kept Ray Jack as his main character, and then she’d point out the similarities between Ray Jack and him. A knight and a prince, how fitting. Okay, so maybe he projects himself a little on Ray Jack, but yet again he’s digressing because the only reason he got his Revenant weapon is thanks to a certain Architect of the Andronicus.

Definitely crossing that out twice.

How about that little moment when he successfully kicked Gladio’s ass in training?

Noctis nods to himself, already fetching a ballpoint pen resting on his side table and clicking it. Umbra gives an eager yip, tail wagging at his decision to write. *Right,* so the story goes that he got all the more worked up that morning, more than eager to vent his frustrations in training against Gladio, thanks to a disturbing dream involving a certain Architect of the Andronicus—

—and that’s a no.

How about that one time he totally ruined his first impression in front of someone’s dad—
—yeah, that’s your dad, the insufferable man serving his dad, that’s just great.

Who is he trying to kid anyway? Almost everything he’s been doing in his life involved a certain stagehand, going by T.A. in academic journals with a penchant for doctorates. You. You and your sleepy little shrug, lazily picking at the loose threads of your shirt, humming in a note that is distinctly monotonous whenever he waits for your reply. You and your love for sleeping, sharing your blankets on sunny afternoons and tugging the comforters up to his chest. You and your smallish smile, almost as though you’re afraid he’ll chide you if you smiled any wider than that.

Defeating a drawn-out groan, Noctis drops his pen and lets it fall on his mattress. Umbra nosed it, looking up with eyes just probing for answers. In search of a distraction, Noctis buries his hand in Umbra’s luxurious coat, carefully rubbing behind its ears, lulling it to rest.

How exactly should he describe you? Enigmatic, that’s for sure. You’ve been with him for two months now, and soon enough it’ll be a full three-month friendiversary with you. To date, you gave him no names from your end, content enough to be called The Architect or That Quintus Guy’s Daughter or even Quintus’ Whatever, Gladio’s current nickname for you. No names, no birthdays, nothing personal. It’s probably proof of how little you trust him with such sensitive information, and that bit itself should’ve annoyed anyone in their right mind since that’s not how friends treat each other.

But somehow, no, he’s not even remotely annoyed with your fragile faith in him.

If you hid metaphorical skeletons in your closet, sure, Noctis supposes he has some skeletons of his own too—just that he’s sure to wipe his browser history after each session. And Ignis probably has a whole basement of skeletons, if Noctis were to scrutinise his Advisor’s odd behaviour at times. Who knows what he’s writing in his little black book anyway? Could be a hit list for all he knows—and he’s digressing again. Whatever. Anything you’re comfortable with telling him, he’ll take it from you the same way he took it from Prompto. Bro, dude, buddy—everything. Friendship is a two-way thing, and not many people get that.

People are all keen on winning the prince’s attention, but who is willing to learn the prince’s heart?

You came to him out of nowhere, a fleeting rumour whispered among the Citadel’s helpers. Your presence is nothing more than a ghost’s, stowed in the higher floors within four white walls. You leave no evidence of your life, nothing traceable to the lineage of the Andronici. Yet, you still offered him everything you had, meagre as it is, fighting against your father just to become the next in line to serve him. Everything, just everything you own is his. From your charmless wit to your unparalleled intelligence, down to your shabby shirt and fragile neck. You have faith in him as your one and only King, as much as he has faith in you as his one and only military strategist.

No matter what, you are now a constant in his life, and will soon be a constant in his life forevermore.

Something stirs in him and Noctis makes a grab for the pen once more. It glides easier on paper this time, leaving behind a trail of ink to name your elusive existence.

I don’t know her name, but she calls herself The Architect.
Pretty weird for a nickname, right?
Some people called her The Ghost™ because they never saw her but they heard her, and—

—one page of hasty scrawling turns into two.
IS IT MORNING ALREADY? Judging from the gradual ascension of the sun, peeping between the cracks of skyscrapers and blanketing the Crown City in its mellow rays, it’s definitely morning. A little past dawn, but certainly not too late in the afternoon like what you’re used to. You’d never be up at this godforsaken hour unless you’ve set the alarm last night, but then again, you’re pretty sure you slept at 5.00 a.m. after digesting the information Byron uploaded into your Moogle Drive. And that’s two days ago, two days worth of late-nighters and overdosing on hot chocolate and humming along to the latest song update in King’s Knight startup.

So what was it again that roused you from your slumber?

The click of your door, right. Someone breached the private confines of your personal bedroom, and only one person could do that: Byron. Back so soon? You’d hate to disappoint him, but after trudging through the images and coining together term after term to justify the monstrosities’ collective existence, you came nowhere close to a conclusion. Perhaps you’re not as mad as Niflheim’s engineers—and that’s a bad thing because if you’re not as mad as them, then you certainly can’t hope to resolve this mystery in the end.

While Byron the Killer is a man constantly chasing after time, Byron the Babysitter can certainly wait three more hours for you to resume your sleep, right? Right. With that said, it’s easy enough for you to drop dead on the bed once more, prematurely aborting the mission to get up.

“Heh, so this is what Specs feels like when he’s trying to wake me up.”

Unless you’ve gone senile, Byron the Babysitter definitely doesn’t sound like that.

“Hey, c’mon, it’s morning.”

A hand grips your shoulder, tugging with enough force to turn you over from the pillow. Sheer exhaustion ingrained into your weary bones morph into abject horror in record time. Noctis towers over your bed, hair slightly damp, smelling like his usual fanfare of fancy soap and laundered clothes. If you aren’t already blinking the sleep away from your eyes, you would’ve thought of this as a dream. Blinking three more times doesn’t help with anything; it only gets Noctis to snort in disbelief, the hand from your shoulder removing itself—only to muss up your morning bedhead.

“Sleepyhead,” he teases, but there’s no bite in his tone. “At least I can brag to Iggy I’m not the worst when it comes to waking up now.”

You would’ve made a face at that if you weren’t busy stifling a yawn, palm pressed over your mouth. The Astrals are surely having the time of their lives, turning your life into a morning sitcom at the expense of your dignity. Not that Noctis hasn’t seen you waking up from naps before, but this is on a whole new level. Waking up from nap means minimal disaster of tangled bed sheets and cramping neck, but waking up from sleep means rucked shirt, fluffed up hair, and the dreaded morning breath everyone suffers from. Ugh. Talk about embarrassing.

What makes it worse is when Noctis appropriates your bedside, the mattress yielding under his weight. And then he lowers his head, trying to peer at your expression.

“C’mon, get up. We’re gonna be late.”

Oh, Six, no—you smack a hand over his face before he gets too close—and he yelps.

“Shit—what the—!?"

Okay, so maybe that’s a little too hard and Noctis is rubbing his nose, wearing the most wounded expression you’ve ever seen. Some part of you is apologetic because the prince does not deserve a
palm traveling to his face, nailing him right in his nose at full speed, but another saner part of you goads yes yes yes, go away, go far far away, faaaaaar away until I’ve brushed my teeth. From the looks of it, the latter is winning by a mile. No mercy, absolutely no mercy at all until you’ve salvaged what’s left of your dignity, starting from your toothbrush.

(Maybe if you’re feeling charitable enough, you’d apologise to him at the end of the day, but now’s not the time. Now is the time to rescue yourself from this sticky situation. Gotta grab the opportunity when his defense is down.)

Sitting on your haunches with Noctis distractedly muttering every expletive under his breath, you crawl on your bed, knees dipping into the plush mattress one after another. Bypassing him, you swing your legs from the bed to the ground, where cold marble burns your feet in familiarity. You don’t really want to wait for Noctis in case he gets up to something again, so your best bet is to grab the towel and flee before this boss battle ends with him nailing you in the head with a pillow or something equally painful.

Only when the bathroom door remains a solid barrier between you and him, your final defense against LVL99 The Angry Prince, you accept the reprieve of sighing and slumping with your back to the mahogany. That was downright terrifying, with how Noctis showed up out of nowhere after disappearing for days. At the crack of dawn, no less! Isn’t the prince supposed to be a sluggish creature of the night like you? What’s he doing up and about when the sun’s barely getting out of bed? Is this some sort of betrayal against some unspoken pact you formed between you and him?

From the other end, you hear Noctis calling out, albeit muffled by the door. “You better not be sleeping in there, you hear me?” And then he tacks on a little bit of something, exasperated. “You’re definitely worse than me when mornings come up…”

Worse? You huff, rolling your eyes. He’s not the one who’s up all night, studying one picture after another and trying to make sense of nightmare-looking creatures from Niflheim. Not that any of it is his fault, really, because it’s your job to keep him—and the entirety of Lucis—safe from harm. Morning breath be damned, this calls for some big shots.

“That’s not what Ignis told me!” you retort, knowing full well he surely heard you from the bathroom. “I’ll tell on you, I swear I will!”

“Wha—you little…” you hear him rapidly approaching your door, and thud! there it is, he’s got a fist on your door, testing your last form of defense from The Angry Prince’s onslaught of attack. You reflexively cowered from the blow because Noctis is strong and some part of you felt stupid for belatedly realising wow Noctis is that strong? “Ugh, Iggy and his big mouth. Just—just go and take your shower, you’re really gonna make us late. C’mon already!”

That finally catches your interest. And why are you late with him? To where exactly? He mentioned it twice in a row; even your sleep-addled mind didn’t miss any of that. “Late? We’re going somewhere, Prince?”

“I,” he starts, deliberately slow, “am going downstairs. To the training room. And you’re coming with me. So if we’re late, I’ll make sure Gladio kicks your ass too, ‘cause we’ve got about fifteen minutes left.” Then his voice drops wickedly low. “Get to it.”

Gladio. Fifteen minutes. Training? Finally? Yes! Punishment? No! That gets you squeaking and sprinting faster than ever to the shower, tripping out of your shorts and shirt, jumping under the spray of hot water, praying to the Astrals you scorned for a sliver of mercy.

And Noctis might or might not have laughed at the sounds, but you can’t hear him that clearly over
the shower anyway, so—eh, well, *whatever.*

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

apologies for the late update! _(:'3 was out of the country for a while for work and work hell is too real.

thank you so much for everyone’s overwhelming response in the previous chapter! ♥ i’ve definitely taken every comment on ao3 and messages on tumblr into consideration! many of you suggested either writing y/n or writing in a way where it refers to your name, so i’ve decided to do a mix of the two where i’ll try to avoid mentioning the need for your name to appear as much as possible and write it in reference to your name if needed, and if it rly calls for it, i’ll switch to y/n (used very sparingly) since i do agree with the readers that it rather disrupts the flow of the story.

KeybladeHero also kindly pointed out that there’s an extension that can be used to change y/n into your chosen name on your computer, so I did a little digging and it’s called Interactive Fics that you can find [HERE](#) so if you readers regularly read Reader-Insert fics on your computer, you can easily install the extension on your browser to automatically replace y/n with your name of choice. I tried it out myself and the result is pretty surreal seeing my own name there, spooked me out for a sec. :D Thanks a lot, KeybladeHero for bringing this to attention, you truly are the hero the readers deserve ♥

now we move on to the next chapter :D thanks for sticking around and reading, dear readers! everyone’s comments and encouragement and kudos are the best, bless ya’ll ♥ hope you guys will find $20 lying on the ground out of nowhere ♥ please excuse this absolutely-not-proofread chapter and any errors you might find, i’m gonna go crash for some sleep.

PREVIEW:

*You lick your bottom lip to divert the thought, ducking your head when Noctis drops his gaze to the flit of your tongue, staring at your spit-shiny lips. All traces of sleepy blue are erased, waxing interest in its stead. Interest that you are unwilling to entertain, lest he demands your thoughts.*
flourishing: child of cosmogony

Chapter Notes

WARNING | murder

hi guys, heed the warning tag for this chapter. do feel free to skip out the entire section beginning with “you see, i don’t like mess”, you won’t miss much except for murder. just minor descriptions of violence, nothing too heavy in this chapter yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

flowering

what happened to mother? you can’t say, for you do not know.

she fades into a distant blur, one of the many paintings hung in the halls of your head. sometimes, your mind is a treacherous friend playing tricks on you. you’d hear her last scream, hidden behind a door. you never dared to open it; if you do, you know you are intemperate, letting your feelings best you at this game for two. so mother remains, at most, locked behind the door. schrödinger’s cat, both alive and dead at the same time.

should you ask byron to quench your thirst?

no.

father’s lesson is still etched on his skin in long, raised lines you memorized under your fingertips. twelve on his front, five on his arms, and many more on his back. you’ve ruined him, you know. the remnants of these angry red lines have faded off into pale pinks on white over the years, as though branches of cherry blossoms bloomed on his skin. something so grotesque shouldn’t be so beautiful, even as you gingerly run your fingers across the patterns. whenever you do, byron stiffens under your touch like he’s afraid you’d dig your nails into the hatch welts.

he doesn’t know your touch is reverential, each brush an apology too late to be given.

and the lingering guilt in your heart paves way into something else.

“YOU AND NOCT REPENTED YET?”

Gladio is a merciless master. In this training room, he is the commander of the battlefield. Noct being a prince doesn’t mean shit to him, as long he knows how to dodge a blow and barrel into safety behind the Shield. Hardy as he is, he’s still got a weak spot somewhere in his heart when the feral glint in his amber eyes softens, coming across you and Noct, sitting together on your knees after getting banished to the farthest end of the hall. Your expression is certainly sorry enough, having repented to Hell and back as you rub your raw knees, and Noct is. Well. Kinda still working on the whole ‘repenting’ part.

“I can do three hours,” Noct grits out, deliberately cocking a brow in challenge. “You up for it?”
And Gladio’s casual smile morphs into something along the cynical lines of you little shit.

Just as quick, your hand flies out to smack him square in his bicep with an affronted, “Prince! Stop! I’m already sorry enough that I’m late…don’t drag me into this.”

Noct’s answer is a light elbow to your side, his grin taking on a criminal edge. “Your fault. Three hours should be good, hmm?”

“Spare me…I can’t even feel my legs anymore, is this normal?” Gladio catches your murmurs buried by your face in your hands. Your voice is certainly apologetic and he knows you’re not the type to piss him off on purpose, but Noct is just the devil sitting on your shoulder. An unrepentant, filthy devil wielding a trident for a spork.

Noct smirks, flippant. For some reasons, he looks oddly triumphant of himself, like he’s reveling that he can last longer than you. Which is technically cheating, in Gladio’s books, ‘cause Noct’s got years of punishment to back his credentials—and this is only your first day, for crying out loud. “It’s only normal when you can’t feel anything from waist down,” Noct says, his smirk turning savage. “If you can’t feel your legs, that means you need one more hour.”

There is a high note tucked somewhere in your following groan. “No, stop, please. Gladio, I’m sorry I’m late, I’m sorry I made His Highness late, I’m sorry we’re late—“

Honestly, you’re kinda pathetic like this.

With all due respect, you could still be King Regis’ illegitimate child or secretly some poetically forgotten Astral and he’d still think you’re pathetic. All the years you’ve been doing with your books developed none of your muscles. Gladio squints a little, hoping to find something to prove him wrong. Nope, not an inch. Ah well, he can’t blame you, not when your situation’s a bit weird like one of those stereotypical romance novels of noblewomen held captive since birth, just waiting for roguish warriors to rescue them. And now that you’re all ‘rescued’ by none other than nth-time Champion of Punishments, Prince Noctis, well—now what?

“Suck it up,” Noct drawls, lips all lazy smiles. “You’ve got 54 more minutes to go.”

Mumbled between your fingers, you resign your fate to the greedy prince. “Gods, I—I’ll do my best, Prince. I think.”

That gets him gloating more than ever, always a sucker for people obediently obeying his command, feeding his Ravatogh-sized ego. “Good.”

Well—now, Gladio guesses, it’s high time to put you out of your misery. “All right, knock it off. Noct, quit bullying the new kid on her first day.” He claps his hands, subjected to a moody glare from the little punk ass prince since Gladio obviously ruined his fun. “Architect guy, listen up: First rule, don’t be late. Noct can demonstrate what happens when you’re late, since he’s pro at this.”

And Noct, the pretentious prince who thinks he’s hot shit, rolls his eyes. “Seniors are pros anyway.”

“Whatever.” Gladio’s way beyond holding up the conversation every time Noct gets all mouthy, being the smart-ass he is. He only holds up two fingers for emphasis. “Second: Don’t expect me to go easier on ya just ‘cause you’re a girl, got it? I’ll adjust your training regimen to start off with the basics, like building on your stamina and strength and flexibility. Nothing too hard, just somethin’ to get those muscles to work. Work hard and you’ll be as good as Iris in no time. All clear?”

You head bobs up and down fervently, wide-eyed. “Got it.”
He nods his approval. Good. You’re off to a pleasant track record if you keep this up, since you’re obviously preinstalled with strong self-discipline, ignited by your own initiative to better yourself for Noct. You look like a decent student in the long run, already managing to survive through two hours on your knees—and then there’s Noct, who’s already stretching out his legs and attempting to massage some life through them. He gets you to unfold your legs too, receiving all pained grunts and suffering moans when Noct taps your thighs, just being the asshole he is. Provided you don’t follow Noct’s bad influence, Gladio supposes you’ll survive through your training regimen with all your limbs intact.

…which brings him to rule number three.

“Third rule.” He clears his throat, drawing your attention to him once more. “If Noct’s being an ass, just punch him.”

“So if you’re being an ass, she gets to punch you too?” Noct asks, sounding all the more impressed with himself for thinking that up. “’cause I’m pretty sure it goes both ways.”

“Can it, Prince Charmless.”

Little Prince Charmless scoffs at the injustice, nudging you in the rib, even if there’s an awkward reddening of his ears. Yep, he’s trying hard not to show Gladio’s jibe got under his skin, but the proof is right there. You only emit a long-suffering sigh, burying your face deeper in your hands. Nope, too damn late to escape your fate if you’re looking for a way out. Once someone gets involved a little too deeply with Noct, they’re usually stuck in the ride for the long haul, and then some. Noct, the very definition of guiltless and unrepentant right there in the dictionary, hasn’t shown you the fullest extent of his arsenal of assholery yet—oh, Gladio can’t wait for the day you’re gonna be moaning into your hands again as you lament your fate to the Astrals, ’cause the good stuff is just starting with a bang.

“All right, kids, enough of that talk.” Gladio thumbs over his shoulder where the steel brackets display an array of daggers, swords, broadswords and polearms masterfully crafted from hardwood. “Noct, go do your warm-ups. I gotta have a little chitchat with our resident Architect right here. Now scram.”

Oddly, Noct doesn’t move. He’s regarding Gladio coolly under hooded blue eyes, arms crossed. “About what exactly?”

Unfazed because he’s the bigger person around here, both literally and figuratively, Gladio whistles low under his breath, sassing Noct’s huffy arm-crossing thing. “Didn’t know I needed His Highness’ express permission to talk to her.”

“Yeah,” Noct asserts, like the sky is blue and chocobos can’t fly and you’re all his. “I brought her down here so she’s my responsibility.”

Responsibility, what was that again? Gladio feels his eyebrows shooting up fast enough to launch into outer space. Noct being irresponsible is an ancient prophecy everyone and their grandmas heard of, but Noct being responsible is definitely not written anywhere in the Cosmogony, nope, not even a little footnote tacked at the end of the last page. What is he, some sort of feudal-era dad marrying off his daughter or something? The absurdity of the mental image gets Gladio chuckling a little.

“Responsibility is a big word, Noct, gotta be careful with that,” he points out. “You sure you wanna take responsibility over her paperwork, about two or three whole stacks of ‘em?”

That gets Noct decolorizing faster than expected and he’s all too happy to jump to his feet. “Gonna
go get my warm-ups done. See ya.”

And that’s that. Noct betrays you just as easily, stalking off in the direction of the weapons. Gladio’s chuckling dissolves into barking laughter, colouring Noct’s nape with that same awkward red from earlier. Dropping on the polished floor, he snorts at Noct’s direction. “Heh, he freaks out on the big stuffs all the damn time. Chickens out the moment someone says the R word. Don’t let it offend ya, kid.”

“Not offended at all, don’t sweat it,” you answer, plain. There’s a bit of an improvement though, your tone is no longer as monotonous as a machine, sometimes ending in a breathier note, or dropping significantly whenever you’re distressed. None of that robotic rubbish whatsoever, probably thanks to Noct’s constant meddling in your life. “I know His Highness is a busy man, even if he looks all irresponsible. I just wanna be there to support him and the kingdom. It’s my duty as an Andronicus anyway, so it’s no biggie.”

Gladio huffs under his breath and scratches his cheek at the bit on the Andronicus. And that’s another matter altogether when it comes to your lineage. “Yeah… about that, I wasn’t joking about the paperwork. We’ve got whole stacks of them, standard security stuff on your background.” He sees you readying a rebuttal, all the more ready for your responsibility, and he holds up a hand to stop you from going further. “Hold your chocobos. Your situation’s a little difficult than the rest of the usual stuff we’ve got. Y’know what I mean?”

Of course you do, he knows you’re smarter than the average brat out there. The placidity in your eyes is deceptive, gazing unflinchingly into his. With each syllable, your lips curve, adopting a change in your languid lilt. “I’m aware of my unique predicament. I’m always doing things behind father’s back anyway, so it’s not a surprise if he finds out sooner or later. He can’t stop me.” Almost to yourself, your eyes trail aside and you murmur, “He’s long lost the power to control my life the moment I came to the Citadel. He knows he’s losing this war I waged. We’re now playing against time, that’s all.”

That’s—well, a little unnerving to hear.

Slack-jawed, it takes a moment for Gladio to dissociate the groaning, moaning mess curled up apologetically earlier from this conniving creature splayed before him. All lashes lidding low, examining a raveling thread on your thighs with the apathy of a queen, despite having uttered words an average twenty-something wouldn’t dream of a lifetime. How easily you switch depends on the matter, going from the ungainly girleen into this Machiavellian lady in mere seconds. As much as you paraded yourself as a harmless being, there is no denying the Andronicus inside.

And the Andronici are some of the most impersonal, inhumane nobles serving the Lucii Kings.

Gladio shuts his mouth with a hard click, getting his head in the game. He leans forward with a look meant to daunt those who’ve heard of the Amicitia, but you remain unconcerned. “What makes you so sure you’re gonna serve Noct?” he presses on. “What if your dad overrides your decision to become the next head of Andronicus, kid? You got backup ideas ready?”

Something about your illusory indolence feels off, gets his gut feeling roiling inside. “I already have plans in store,” you say. “Don’t worry about it. I won’t involve His Highness in my own mess, you have my word.”

Always answering things in a vague, roundabout way like what Noct complained when he first came across your existence, huh. Unless he resorts to brute force, he doubts he can wring anything from you without breaking an arm or two. Or ringing alarms somewhere else in their pentagonal friendship cycle. Still, as long as you’ve got Noct’s wellbeing as the number one priority in that
pretty little head of yours, you’re entitled to your own secrets. You can deal with Quintus however you deem fit, since it’s your domestic problem to begin with. Stepping into someone’s familial crossfire isn’t exactly outlined in his job scope as Noct’s Shield anyway.

Putting an end to this, Gladio pulls himself up and points at you to stay. “Well, your document’s gonna be highly confidential stuff since we’re working against your dad here, so I’ll just bring it up to my old man, Clarus Amicitia, in case you don’t know who he is. Be prepared if he wants to meet you.” He pauses, then finding it appropriate to tack on a grin just for the sake of fucking around with you. “Personally.”

He doesn’t expect you to laugh but you do, a small, high sound that catches him off-guard with the brilliance of your smile.

**LATER ON**, Gladio chances a glance at your sealed envelopes. All six stacks bear the same name, marked at the top right hand corner in a careful cursive. *Andronicus*, and nothing more.


Seated behind his impressive desk, against a curtain of crimson, he is the very picture of an imperator. Well, Byron supposes people do call him Quintus the compeller for the very same reasons. Standing near a suit of armour, Byron pours some gourmet tea as he tries to tune out Quintus the same way he tunes out a scream: by stabbing until the scream turns to squelches. He fashions his expression into one of apathy when he brings over the tray, setting it on the edge of the carved desk.

Quintus does not wait for him to usher a cup at his direction; he takes as he pleases, tinkling china against china harshly after a deep sip. “What good will there be for a true king to emerge when Niflheim is more than ready to snuff us out come tomorrow? Rather than worrying about the impending darkness, I’d rather if His Majesty would renew his efforts on reestablishing the military.”

This, Byron inquires with careful curiosity. “Reestablishing the military, sir?”

“He believes it to be futile effort.” Quintus clicks his tongue, ridiculing the king’s trite choice of words. He sets down his teacup so sharply until it chips at the edges. “I respect him but I beg to differ, as this is a matter of life and death. Our people are dying outside the old wall. Daemons, mts, monsters, you name it, we have it. Dissolving the military and rebranding it as the crowsguard is a foolhardy move executed by none other than the late king Mors’ father. Are the people beyond the walls not the people of Lucis as well? They, too, deserve the lavish sense of security Insomnia affords. If we cannot provide them the crystal’s protection, then we can surely offer them the reassurance of our military’s strength, no matter how little we may have. By ignoring their plights, by letting the imperials run free on our lands, we have abandoned them—no,” he bellows, tensing, “we spat on their faces.”

Interesting, Byron hums under his breath, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his sentiment. Quintus seems content enough to continue his spiel of spite after refreshing himself with polishing off the last of his tea, and it has Byron all too pleased to pour another cup.

“The Kingsglaive may exist to handle our external crises, wars, riffraff, but tell me: how will we survive without them? Those serving under our banner are none other than commoners with an aptitude in magic—they live outside the walls, yet, the king forsakes their villages, their tiny towns,
just to keep insomnia safe. if we do not protect them, who will protect us once the last glaive dies? no,” quintus shakes his head, fingers laced tightly together, “i will not stand for this any longer. what my ancestors have failed to finish, that is to grant the outsiders equal rights to safety and revolutionizing their technology, i will strive to accomplish during my reign as the head of the andronicus, down to my very last breath.”

how moving. is this the very same man who left his speech on byron’s skin in long, red lines? spoken like a true man of the battlefield, one who operates insomnia the same way one operates a cadaver. he is attempting to reanimate lucis’ corpse by removing its decaying internal organs and swapping them with cables and switches. all the problems infesting lucis will be systematically tackled in stages, starting from the advancement of the army, right until the protection of its people. yet the problem lies with the king and his councilmen, and it is an obstacle quintus cannot resolve without challenging the king himself.

one cup turns to two, and two turns into three. with each cup, byron finds his thoughts swimming deeper and deeper until the dregs are all that’s left in the pot.

“YOU SEE, I DON’T LIKE MESS.” Byron begins, all conversational as he pulls latex gloves over his hands. The elastic snaps when he ensures they are snug around his wrists, and he smiles in satisfaction. “Whenever I see something messy, I get migraine. Long, horrible migraine, like someone sawing my brain. Do you ever feel that?”

A muffled cry.

Byron’s eyes crinkle into crescents at the pathetic sound. “Wonderful, I’m glad you understand. You must forgive me for my crude methods, of course, because it makes for easier cleanup when I’m done. Saved me from another migraine, good chap.”

There is a certain container wedged between blocks of steel that Byron calls his own. Nobody comes to these abandoned industrial dumpsites because who wants to deal with all the acrid stench and squelching maggots underneath their boots? Rusted cars missing their engines and wheel-less trucks are stacked one atop another, a brown stream of waste constantly seeping through decaying bags. Noxious fumes permeate the air, a permanent reminder of his origins: The streets, the sewers, the tin roof for Percival’s hideout and moldy, peeling walls.

Plastic crinkles under his weight, step by step to the table.

In here, everything is clean and white. White plastic tacked to the metal walls, white plastic over steel surgical trolley, an array of knives with white handles arranged in too-straight line. White is easy to stain. He’d know this very well, of course, since he’s been blessed with the very same whiteness. White is beautiful, pristine, the very shade representing purity. Yet, with just a fleck of colour, white stains.

Another muffled scream, and Byron raises his head.

Strapped on a rickety wooden chair, a weasel-looking forty-something man appears to be struggling in his binds. The Informant is trying to escape. Oh dear. He can’t have that, can he?

“It is ill-advised to escape,” Byron breathes out, tipping his chin. Too stoic, too blunt, and too smiling. “You know I’ll come and find you wherever you are, and I’ll make it more painful in our next meeting. Please, for your own good, stay quiet. I dislike rowdiness.”
Goodness, that gets the man thrashing more than he expected, the cloth gag barely muffling all the please and no and stop stop stop stop. Eyes almost bulging out of their sockets, sweat raining his receding hairline, he looks at Byron in what seems to be a mixture of contempt and terror. Really, he should decide on an emotion and channel it properly instead of delivering this half-assed excuse of an expression. Even his apathetic keeper managed better than that.

Byron heaves a heavier sigh, shoulders drooping at the sight. Something pulses faintly at the back of his head. “I gave you your warning, and you chose to disregard it. Very well.”

In theory, cleaving a human involves a body and a knife. Two simple objects readily found anywhere with varying levels of difficulty. In practice, it gets a little more complicated than that. It starts with the selection of tools, finding the best fit for the job. A screwdriver is to stab as an axe is to decapitate. But before all the excitement turns his nerves into jitters, he wants answers. And he wants them now.

“There is a certain dog I’ve taken to feeding, you see, for it is such a wretched, pitiable thing until I can’t bear the sight. In return, this dog carries news for me from far and wide. It’s been the utmost help, of course.” Byron reminds him, latex fingers squeaking over the stainless steel of the trolley. “However, I realized that this certain dog keeps running with his tail between his legs between two masters. A dog certainly has to be loyal to only one master, don’t you think so too?”

He catches the man vocalizing a quiet fuck from his throat.

Ah yes, bingo. Byron’s smile is painfully static as he traces absentminded circles on the tray, watery greys in his eyes turning molten steel. “You didn’t think I’d catch on, did you?”

More cursing, and the man thrashes harder, shaking like he’s got a seizure from just sitting in a chair. His perspiration is rank and Byron has half the mind to skin him just to get rid of the smell, but playing with food is very bad manner for a butler like him. Everything has to be done with clean precision, since he loathes leaving a mess behind.

“How long have you been in this business again?” Byron poses a rhetorical question, knowing the answer better than the man himself. “More than two decades, am I right? You’ve clearly underestimated the people you worked with. They might’ve not noticed your transgressions, but,” he bends at the waist, staring straight into the ruddy redness of the man’s eyeballs, bopping him lightly on his grimy nose, “I did.”

The Informant howls in his face, shivering, tears dampening the gag around his mouth. Awful sound, Byron can’t imagine what it’d be like without the handy cloth muffling his cry. The man breathes hard through his nose, lapping into hysterical fits and kicking his bound limbs as if they’d come loose like a charming soap opera on the television. It’s useless, he knows that much, but maybe he held a faint hope in his heart that Byron’s overlooked something critical in a moment like this, like the knots are loose or the rope is frayed at the edges. Hope, he can keep hoping all he wants before Byron cuts his life out of him.

Straightening, Byron considers his choices, alternating glances between the knives. Should he go for the standard kitchen set, or the heavier butcher’s piece? Of course, each tool comes with its pros and cons. One is delicate, suited for carving initials into skin, and the other holds only one purpose: To hack meat into cubes. Coming to a decision, he hums and selects the latter. Cold and hefty in his hands, the perfect weight in its build. He runs a thumb over its blade, letting it glint under the fluorescent light.

Please please please stop is scattered between pleas for mercy and cries of apology, and the poor soul might run dry from tears if he keeps yowling like this.
Unfortunately, that is not an answer.

“Careful,” he cautions, lifting the blade to the light, examining its make under blinding whiteness. “The more you cry, the harder I’ll make it for you to die.”

As though Byron’s warning is a hammer to his chest, The Informant heaves and sputters, choking under the gag, swallowing all the noises he made with great effort. The container drops into silence, an overall improvement to the situation, save for stifled sniffling. *Good.* He likes it better this way. Dropping to his knees, Byron casually drags the knife up the length of the man’s feet—ah, he’s gone ahead and flinched from the cool metal, and now the knife nicked itself right in his flesh. Blood wells up and runs down the plastic. The Informant whimpers, biting off his cry in desperation.

“Have you heard of the death by a thousand cuts? No? That’s okay. Here, I’ll show you, though—“ Byron stops short with a soft laugh, “mine will contain a slight variation to accomplish my mission. Do forgive me for being unable to stay true to the original.”

A butcher’s knife is not meant to saw through meat. There’s no harm in trying anyway, so Byron sets to work. He drags it up and down across the little toe like he’s playing a violin, streaking steel in scarlet. At the back of his head, someone screams. A mindless hum, so he ignores it. The flesh gives way so easily under his ministrations, slowly but surely, and soon enough, there’s a satisfying friction once the blade reaches the bone. Here, Byron supposes, is where his experience tells him to hold enough pressure just to get it to yield. Tedious job, murdering someone. Wouldn’t recommend it to anyone searching for a pretty Credit.

Putting his bountiful knowledge to the practice, Byron grips the hilt tighter and applies just enough pressure with every push and pull of the knife. A raw scream, eyeballs rolling back, jerking with every grate. *Please no* is back again, this time punctuated by heavy sobs tearing out of his chest of how *I’ve got a wife and my kids are gonna starve without me* and bla bla bla, Byron’s heard this shit before, heard this too many times on the dull phonograph, seen the heavy wife scolding two scoundrels drawing on one of the many walls near the squatters, and then she gathers them into her arms with a weary sigh and—

—*a satisfying crack,* and the little toe rolls on the plastic.

Oh. He must’ve applied more pressure than he thought. That won’t do.

*Fuck it hurts* rips from the man’s throat, *Martha Joseph Alvin* is recited as final prayer, and Byron feels the pulsing in his head budding into the beginnings of a migraine and why does the damn man care so much for his family when Percival never gave a fucking shit whether Byron’s got anything left in his hands? No fucking mother to coddle his cries, no fucking father to catch his back, no fucking friend to care if he’s not breathing six feet underneath Duscae, turning into fertilizer for the wildlife. Nobody gives a fucking shit about him, not even Quintus, not even—

He raises the knife high and brings it down, a butcher and his meat.

Crimson all over the plastic, such satisfaction, but it’s not enough. Half of a foot is on his chopping board, the white of the bone peeking through meaty red. It’s not fair Byron’s going through this shit alone. Should he amputate the man just so he’d suffer Lavinia’s fate in *Titus Andronicus*? Cleave off his tongue, sever the joints of his arms and legs, leaving only his torso behind? Someone should suffer the same fate, shouldn’t they? Someone tangled too deeply in the Andronici’s mess deserves to live through the very same tragedy, don’t they?

*Yes,* he decides in morbid fascination, they should.
The knife is raised high once more.

**WHITE, TOO, CAN BE CORROSIVE,** just like acid.

:o'er rotted soil, under blighted sky a dread plague the wicked has wrought. in the light of the gods, sword-sworn at his side 'gainst the dark the king's battle is fought. from the heavens high, to the blessed below, shines the beam of a peace long besought. "long live the line, and this stone divine, for the night when all comes to naught."  

*cosmogony: 15:2, nadir.*

YOU ARE SORE ALL OVER thanks to the brutal beating of your first day. So sore from your third rep until you marvel at how dedicated Noctis can be, never breaking out of his stance as he took on Gladio in training. By the time you’ve wrapped up your set of push-ups, vision blurring and head spinning, he’s still parrying Gladio’s unforgiving strikes, quicker on his feet to match Gladio’s hulking brawn. He bursts in and out of the fight—warp-strike, he calls it—as flickers of magic drift around him like shards of broken mirrors, illuminating the floors in fractured blues.

Now, seeing him sprawled over the stretch of your bed sheets and comforters, he is an entirely different being from the aggressive prince prowling the training halls. Here, he is the lazy prince, one who conquers sixty percent of your land and demands more than fifty percent of your pillows. A conqueror through and through. If you listen hard enough, you can hear a small buzz in his breathing. His beautiful, expressive eyes are closed, dark lashes a stark contrast against his porcelain skin. Arm half-raised over his head and another resting on his chest, the comforters long gone and kicked off his body, tangling around his ankles.

Limber limbs, agile body, an unrelenting strength.

Your king is a pretty, pale prince, all ink spattered on snow.

Sitting up halfway, you unravel the twists and turns of his comforter and gently draw it over his body, letting the familiar heaviness cocoon him. It falls in the dips between his legs and arms and neck, but you’re careful enough to smoothen the fabric in all the nooks and crannies to ensure nothing’s exposed. It won’t do to have him catching cold limbs in your workspace, hindering all his princely progress if he falls ill. You’ve barely finished tugging the comforter over his feet when he shifts under you, rustling the sheets.

“Mmmh?” A voice thick with sleep. Noctis struggles with holding up his head, the hand over his hair catching a long yawn. “What’re you doing…?”

Patting the finishing touches to his feet, you drop onto the last forty percent of your land with your pillow. Comfort can be subjective when it comes to layered sheets playing the part of a makeshift mattress, but Noctis hasn’t complained thus far. The thought has you burrowing deeper into your own nest. “Nothing, Prince. Go back to sleep.”

Sleepy as he is, he still studies you how one reads a menu, head all full of delicious thoughts—and perhaps still basking in the afterglow of delicious dreams. The beautiful blue of his eyes are the skies across Galdin Quay, resting heavily on your face. So beautiful, you catch your fingers almost
touching perfection. “You sure it’s nothing?”

No. You lick your bottom lip to divert the thought, ducking your head when Noctis drops his gaze to the flit of your tongue, staring at your spit-shiny lips. All traces of sleepy blue are erased, waxing interest in its stead. Interest that you are unwilling to entertain, lest he demands your thoughts. “A thousand times yep.” Shoving your discomfort into the distance, you turn your back to him. Face buried in your pillow, you await suffocation to claim you into slumber. “Gonna get some sleep, see ya.”

“Hey.”

Noctis is saying something, inexplicably intent on preventing you from having the last word.

You pretend you’re fast asleep, emulating an even breathing just to get him to stop. What other choices do you have left? This is bad. You should sleep. Sleep always rids you of your apprehension the same way Byron rids you of your nightmares. Sleep should soothe your aching calves and twitching thighs, a restful balm meant to rejuvenate those who are weary. Sleep should distract you from this—whatever it is you’re thinking, whatever it is the prince wants to do with you.

“Hey,” he tries again, a touch louder this time. “Your hair is in my face.”

You give a start—really? Only to realize a second too late that he’s nowhere near your hair, nowhere close enough to breathe down your neck. What he’s looking for is the startled jerk just to see if you’re awake, and you fell for it. Drat. Knowing he’s bested you this time, you clear your throat and tighten your hold on the pillow. “Turn the other way round then, Prince.”

“Don’t wanna,” he says, voice gone quiet. “You turn around.”

That’s unfair. That’s unfair because he knows you can’t say no to him. Who are you to deny what the prince wants?

Resigning to your fate for the second time today, you finally turn again. Noctis is still where you last saw him, lying on his side, the comforter you pulled hanging off his shoulder. It gets your fingers scrambling for your own, tugging the weighty cotton over your head, leaving only a loose gap around the edges of your face. Trying to find something to distract you from thinking about the weight of his gaze, or the lazy drag of his eyes from your lips to your neck. Trying to string a sentence or two about something—anything, as long as he doesn’t look at you like this.

After a while, he snorts inelegantly. “You look like an egg.”

A what?

“An… egg?” The words are already out from your mouth before you’re consciously filtering them.

Noctis mimics what seems to be wrapping his head from a blanket of air, a live demonstration of his meaning. “Yeah, an egg,” he explains matter-of-factly, dropping his hand to the sheets once more. “Y’know, hard-boiled egg. That stuff. Your comforter’s all white and your face is just—”

“—the yolk,” you finish for him, almost incredulous, almost borderline wanting to smother him under your pillow if you could. Here you are, worrying if he’s read your thoughts, and he comes up with this? “Really, Prince? An egg?”

“Yep.” Remorseless, curling his bottom lip, nodding all the same. “Got a problem?”

Incredible. All you can do is to gawp at him, wordless. An egg, really? An incredibly specific egg—
a hardboiled egg? With your face for the yolk? Precisely at that point in your life, you realize Noctis can be quite trying at times. Is that why Gladio was grinning all morning long? Just waiting for you to be suckered into his same experience? You’re not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing, seeing how your morning routine tumbled into a disaster with him by your bedside, hauling you to an unannounced training session, and then tapping your thighs when you experienced excruciating pins and needles from sitting on your knees for too long.

If today’s a sneak preview for your future, who knows what’s in store many more weeks after?

Trying to gain a semblance of rationality, you nod—then shake—before settling on a nod again. “Yeah. Yeah I’ve got a problem. Your comment failed to crack a smile on the Egg Queen's face. That was ineegscusble. Good night, Prince.”

“What.” Noctis deadpans, obviously not expecting that to backfire on him. “Want me to snap a pic for proof? You gotta see it to believe it.”

Yanking the rest of the comforter over your face, you decide it’s best to spend the rest of your evening with a nap.

“Go to sleep, Prince. If you'll eggscuse me, I bid you a very good night.”

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

this chapter isn’t particularly my favourite and a few things felt awkward/misplaced, but i think my editing skills have gone down the drain and i couldn't particularly make anything work. (´Δ｀) i’m sorry sometimes my writing just goes down under and doesn’t wanna come back up. i’ve been awake for the past 31 hours now and i’m absolutely planning to pass out after this.

but yes, thank you for still sticking around and reading this update! and thank you for sending in messages and asks on my tumblr about my current job, even though i couldn’t reply much on time (especially with the asks) while i was away abroad. it’s been really nice chatting with some of you readers and you kind anons as well ❤ i’ll be called for another flight sometime soon seeing how november/december schedule is really packed (holiday season actually stands for…horrible season), but i’ll still do my best to have a consistent update (or update you readers on the status on my tumblr).

i hope life treats you well ❤ here’s a preview on the next chapter!

PREVIEW:
As usual, Noctis doesn’t seem to exist in the equation. Not that he’s surprised, he’s long classified Byron as one of those cynical bastards thriving on treating others as though their collective intelligence is on par with five-year-olds. Scoffing under his breath, Noctis folds his arms over his chest and follows you this time around, letting you lead the way to your room. Byron is all fancy bows as though he’s mocking Noctis for some reasons, throwing the door open with an exaggerated flourish and shutting it behind him once they’re all safely inside.

°• ✧٩(๑° ̀͛° ʔ ๑°)۶ ✧°• ° and also just because i was editing chapter 23, have a super-future
You wanna tell me what it feels like to have someone else on top of you?” Noctis murmurs.
flowering: the beginning of the end

Chapter Notes

W A R N I N G | forced regurgitation in the first flashback

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

flowering

YOUR MORNING IS DIFFERENT NOW. What used to be late mornings and hot cocoas evolved into the prince barreling through your door and shoving you awake. Well—shoving is a hyperbole. A heavy, unpleasant weight presses insistently on your shoulder, tugging in minute yet persistent action that makes it hard to ignore. Once or twice, you might have swatted his face by accident, and he might have chewed you out for that. Isn’t Noctis supposed to be a creature of morning sleep-ins whose ecosystem revolves around the bed? Ignis certainly had his selection of stories on how unpleasant it can be to rouse the prince from his temporary death.

The systematic start to your day begins with rubbing your eyes and trying to understand why Noctis is shouting at you and yanking you to the bathroom. Something about a Gladiolus—a flower? Whatever. Grumpily dragging your feet across the hundred-mile stretch, you pause to work out another yawn as Noctis groans from behind. The prince sure is loud, you note, as you resume your pilgrimage to the terminus. Rubbing your nape, you snag your towel on the way, shutting the door behind you and effectively halving the sound pollution by a startling fifty percent. Sunlight streaming through high windows helpfully supplements the automated lighting in your well-lit bathroom. In here, pockets of warmth linger where the air-conditioner fails to reach.

In fact, if you think about it, right behind this door is also a pretty decent spot for resuming your nap. Your soul is as weary as Noctis’ exasperated sigh coming from the other side, and your eyeballs need the rest before they shrivel into raisins. All the years you spent on staring right in the face of a computer is starting to show, especially with how you dozed off after checking through the hundred-something photo in your Moogle Drive. Those pesky Niflheim prototypes are starting to get to you, even though they’re pencilled sketches for now. What’ll happen once they come to life? Peskier, perhaps. Slumping heavily against the mahogany, you rest your head against the door and allow yourself to close your eyes—

“You better not be sleeping in there, you hear me? You want three hours sitting seiza again?”

—and jerk awake.

Crap.

Snatches of memories flicker before your eyes like a highlight reel before your imminent death, of the solemn promise of pain in Gladio’s amber eyes, of raw knees chafing on hardwood panels, of Noctis tapping your thighs and planting pins in its wake. And that’s just because you were late by seven minutes on his watch. Who’s to say he’ll be more generous with his punishments this time?

Double crap.
NEEDLESS TO SAY, sprinting all the way to the training hall is a bad idea, dashing with a mad start as soon as the lift dings at G. Theoretically, you understand what running is and how to execute the action. Performing it without years of practice, however, is a different matter altogether. Are your sides supposed to squeeze with this much of pain and is your vision supposed to blur like someone’s pasted a filter over your eyes? The prince is a far cry better runner than you even if there is certain strangeness to his style—an awkward bend of his knees and a stranger twist to his hips. Maids echoing their morning routine squeak as he flits past their laundry trolleys and the guards barely manage to salute an after-vision as Noctis sprints past their posts.

You’re obviously not Noctis, so you’re the one stuck presenting all the apologetic, sheepish looks their way, trailing after the prince from behind.

By the time the finishing line is in sight, a lengthy corridor with only a broad double-door at the end, Noctis picks up his speed by twofold, flings a dagger, and splinters into fragments of mirrors—only to burst through the doors in a flash of blue via kicking them down with a ragged shout. “Time!”

“6:29 a.m., with only two milliseconds to spare!” Gladio returns Noctis’ shout with one of his own, mildly amused with half a grin on his lips. Only, when he seems to spot you lagging from behind, he discards the grin altogether. “Uh. Better catch the kid before she faints, Noct.”

Faint?
What?
Oh.

It’s a bit of a delayed reaction when you reach the training hall multiple seconds after Noctis slams through, but something black munches around the edges of your already blurry vision and your chest hurts. Physically hurts. Hurts so much even when you inhale raggedly, shuddering with the action. Lungs burning and head tightening, all that and more. A strong, muscled arm hefts your midriff before your legs give way and it’s a wall of broad chest pressing you close, a distinctly large hand—much larger than the prince’s familiar touch—rubbing circles between your shoulder blades. Sagging against this—this cottony muscle tee and face pressed into the crook of his arm—is that his armpit?—your eyeballs roll back into your head.

Gladio’s chest rumbles with his grunt. “Well, shit. Kid, you need a lot of work in you.”

The darkness closing your eyes seems to agree with him.

**what will it take to kill you?** to torture you numb through routine, swallowing fifteen facts on what the kingdom hopes to learn from solheim’s great war of the old and regurgitating them on paper? you run your fingers over the creases under your eyes, vessels bursting in your eyeballs, washing them a watery red like byron’s. splashing your face with cold water helps with nothing save for reminding you that reality remains constant at your suffering and nothing save for all the proud a’s dotting your results. nobody cares. your tutor doesn’t care. father doesn’t care. you don’t care. does byron care?

maybe he does. maybe he doesn’t. it’s schrödinger’s cat all over again with byron erasing mother’s
existence, his hand holding yours instead of her painted fingernails tracing over your palm. he’s
gentle like mother, he smiles too much like mother, he worries too much like mother, he nags too
much like mother, and he—oh mother, your face is in your hands and your cheeks are wet and your
throat is tight, but the tears do not come, not anymore. you’ve eviscerated them into body bags,
remember? yes, yes you did, that’s why your tears are empty.

where has mother gone? she disappeared better than a magician’s third-rate performance, leaving
you with her songs and her perfume as remnants of her memories. these four walls witness your
existence but the statues do not acknowledge your presence, and father is all too happy to pretend
you do not exist, you are not his daughter, you are never an andronicus. what if you never fought
against his wishes and became the docile daughter he dictated? never disagreeing with your fate,
made off as another man’s arm-ornament by twenty? will you be doted by father? will he finally
breathe his yes on your name? will you finally be happy?

oh mother, mother. if only she’s here with you. it’s because of her you’re like this, you’re the shoddy
excuse of an andronicus. it’s because of her you’ve grown dependent on her existence, finding her
breath as the oxygen to your lungs. it’s because of her you’re shivering before the bathroom sink,
damp hair matting over your forehead, plastered over your cheeks, flushed nose and ruddy cheeks.
it’s because of her byron’s scarred beyond salvation, a broken man you glued together with your
tears. it’s all her fault.

your fingers ghost over your eyebrows, running over your sticky eyelashes, grazing down your
cheeks.

it hurts.

it hurts inside.

you need to get it out to fix it.

you shove your fingers down your throat as deep as they’d go.

SOMETHING SMELLS GOOD. Like freshly laundered sheets drowned in a healthy dosage of
fabric softener. A lovely, powdery scent you’ve smelled before. Where is it? Oh, it’s pressed against
your cheek, how convenient. Is this your bed? No, it’s certainly too hard under you, like a floor of
some sort. It must be your workspace again with your pillows and blankets Byron sun-dried after
restocking your cabinet. But what’s the awful racket back there? Wood clattering against wood,
manly grunting and even manlier shouts? Did you fall asleep with Tekken 7 running on your TV
again?

Throat all scratchy when you groan, you twist on your floor as you bury your face into the
comforting scent. Here is good. Here is where the thick blanket smells best, all too familiar at the
back of your head. Just like this, with a looping background noise for distraction and something that
smells good like clean soap and wonderful detergent, you could fall asleep within just a few seconds.
And who exactly is policing you from sleeping, right? Nobody. That’s right, nobody.

You give a small sigh, one born out of contentment, and dig your fingers into the plush fabric. Feels
good and smells good, just how you like it.

Oddly, the background noises have stopped, almost abrupt.

“Uh.”
“Go wake her up.”

Voices. You’ve been hearing these familiar voices a little too much lately, one that is a distinct baritone and the other, a sultry tenor.

“No way, you go.”

“Responsibility, Noct. Forgot about that already?”

“Fine, fine, I’ll go.”

The floor vibrates under you—and that’s strange, marble isn’t supposed to vibrate unless subjected to incredible amounts of weight. Something akin to a grey shadow drapes over the insubstantial darkness of your closed eyes, and then there’s that awfully stubborn thing digging into your shoulder. A small push and pull with the very same persistence as this morning. Gods, can’t you just get some well-deserved and undisturbed sleep? Analyzing all those Niflheim documents will be the death of you. At least you’d like to clock in an extra hour before getting ferried into the afterworld by Etro’s divine grace, where you can sleep for the rest of your after-death.

No such luck and the hand on your shoulder ramps its intensity.

“Hey, wake up. I know you’re up.”

Who’s to say you’re awake when you haven’t opened your eyes? That’s right again, nobody. You nestle your face as close as possible to the blanket as if you aren’t close enough, fistig the fabric tight. No one is going to wake you up, and that’s final.


That gets you blearily opening your eyes to confirm the authenticity of such outrageous claims—and it’s not your blanket, it seems to be some sort of folded clothing placed under your head to support your posture. Oh. Owlishly, you blink once or twice, taking in the velveteen blackness contrasting your blanket’s whiteness. But its scent is so divine, just like something you’re used to smelling—

Someone makes a grab for the folded pile before you even had the chance to react, pulling it right into the safety of lean forearms with a head attached to the body. The prince. Noctis. Right, he’s staring at you and you’re staring at him while rubbing your eyes just to get the sleep to go away.

“Mine,” he clarifies as if justifying his actions, dubious blue eyes peering closely underneath sweaty bangs. “My jacket. In case you’re still not, y’know, awake yet.”

That explains the familiarity of the scent. Hair damp and fresh clothes, Noctis visited you before, smelling strongly like that jacket of his—or rather, any article of clothing he wore, whether sweatshirts or sweaters or whatever. Huh. It’s too bad, really. You kind of liked that fancy scent of his. Unthinking, you reach out to snatch the jacket right from his arms, bringing it to your face as you slump on the floor once more. “Not anymore. Good night, Prince.”

Gladio’s bellowing laughter almost muted the undignified noise Noctis makes, and you crack an eye open just to muster the scariest glare you could manage. Doesn’t seem to deter Gladio’s uncontrollable chortling while Noctis just makes the feeblest impression of trying to look disappointed at you—and failing miserably at that. Really, if they knew of Niflheim’s machinations and the private documents encrypted in your Moogle Drive, you’re certain their smiles would be wiped clean in just seconds. Still, you can’t complain. Magnanimous Noctis granted your desire of wanting to be stronger for his sake, so letting him down isn’t listed anywhere in your long-term goals. You just have to find some way to adapt to this ruthless roster, that’s all.
Drawing his jacket into your lap, you rub the sleep away from your eyes for the umpteenth time and attempt to seem vaguely organized in your bearings. “Mmkay…I’m up, I’m up.”

“You’re up, riuight,” Gladio teases you, approaching Noctis and dropping to sit cross-legged in a haphazard triangle between you, him, and the prince. “Good thing you woke up. Ya scared the shit out of Noct when you passed out on me.”

Something about that has Noctis bristling. “Did not. Prom fainted before, remember?”

“Yeah, but not from running,” Gladio counters. “That runt’s a runner, not like this squirt. Kid needs to train more on her stamina,” he adds knowingly, eyes lingering on your face, “and probably get some more rest too. You sleeping all right? You look like shit.”

You’re rather convinced that line’s patented by the prince since he’s already told you twice before. Now Gladio too? You suppose your drab appearance never improved their impression of you as the hopelessly sleepy child of the Andronicus. Maybe a new haircut or a fresh change in your wardrobe should do the trick. Mentally filing away a list of new shopping errands for Byron to enjoy once he returns from his murder spree, you stifle a yawn. “Not really. Working on stuff. Don’t usually get some sleep until 5, to be honest.”

While Noctis is ogling you like he’s waiting for a punchline to a joke, Gladio all but whistles low at your reply. “Look, kid, if you’re really serious about doing this training, you need to get some proper sleep. Runnin’ on less than an hour’s worth of rest is only gonna make you suffer in the long run. What if you accidentally hurt yourself during some exercise? You can’t get away with pulling all-nighters to do your thesis ‘cause physical training is different from mental training. Cram that in your head.”

The underlying severity of his words rings clear in the hall, emphasized by the taut set of his jaw and his closely knitted brows. You know. You know he means well, but there are things they won’t understand. It’s not about your thesis anymore, nothing on scavenging the remains of Solheim’s technology for Lucis’ prosperity. Without the right strategy, you couldn’t aspire to best them, Niflheim and father alike.

No complaints. Swallow it down and stamp it out. You brought this upon yourself.

“I understand,” you sigh, resigning yourself to a rueful nod. “Sorry, I’ll do better next time, I think.”

You earn Gladio’s approving grunt by way of his large hand coming up and tousling your hair. It almost feels like how an older brother treats his sibling, and you momentarily marvel if this is what being his little sister feels like.

“Don’t look so glum, kid, at least you realize your mistake. Just don’t pull this kind of shit again, all right?” he warns, adopting a softer tone, eyes crinking around the edges with his smile. “Now that’s all cleared up, I need to talk to you about other stuffs. Next week, we’re deciding on your weapon.”

You perk up under his hand, blinking. “Weapon?” you echo dubiously as if the word itself slipped away from your lexicon out of lacking usage. “My…weapon? As in—that weapon weapon?”

“Yep. I’m more of the broadsword and shield kind of guy, the tank in the team,” he quips, then jabs a thumb to the brooding prince. “Noct’s an all-rounder since he can use all sorts of things. Polearms, daggers, swords, shields, crossbows—“

“—and firearms,” Noctis finishes with a guilty rubbing of his nape. “Trained with loads of stuffs ever since I was a kid. We’re pretty well balanced since we’ve got Prom covering the range with his guns,
while Specs is our dual-wielding dagger guy. Now that he’s getting the hang of polearms, that makes him the pole dancer of the team.”

Said with an unflinchingly straight face, you’re unsure if you should take his word for it, or pass it off like it never came out of his mouth in the first place. Because the hazy images formulating inside your mind is starting to take the solid shape of leanly toned legs stretching up the impressive length of a fixed pole, and you don’t know if that’s a good idea in case those pictures automatically blemishes Ignis’ reputation the next time he comes around. Thankfully Gladio snorts in chain reaction, sparing you from your mild mortification.

“He’s gonna hand in his resignation form if you crack that joke in front of him,” he points out.

“I know.” Noctis finally cracks a grin, apparently pleased with himself. “Good thing he’s busy huh?”

“Cheeky shit.” Gladio makes a derisive sound in his throat, shaking his head in disbelief. “Anyway, kid, don’t sweat it for now. We’ll just focus on your training this week and add that to your menu in the next one. We still need to attune you with Noct’s magic too, that’s one more thing you’re not gonna look forward to. Think about that.”

Your fingers begin to worry the hems of Noctis’ jacket, lips pursed.

What a tight schedule this is going to be. Rearranging everything in your head is already enough to make you wonder where you’ll be slotting in all the extra hours to unravel Niflheim’s conspiracies; now you have to worry about your weaponry and magic training as well. This won’t do. This won’t do at all. Your old schedule requires a complete overhaul, routines long obsolete should be disposed and a new one conjured in its place. One that takes into account of your intensive training, investing major hours in studying the empire’s escalating movements, and making time for brushing up on your thesis just to make sure you’re not falling behind on your progress. Every second you spend determines life for some, while every second you waste is an execution for many.

Will you actually have time to breathe by the end of it all? You don’t know.

Becoming someone worthy of the prince’s council is trickier than you initially thought. You had already anticipated that succeeding father’s position would require someone of unparalleled intelligence, embodying the person who sets the chessboard rather than the player directing the pawns. Yet, father’s reluctance made it all too difficult, thwarting every progress you made. Back in the mansion, he would’ve banned all training instructors if Byron as much as implied the idea. Weapons, hah, he’d scoff. If you were a son, then he surely would’ve been enthused with the prospect of drilling you into the next Andronicus worthy of the king’s entourage. Blades, clubs, chains and daggers would’ve been an arsenal readily equipped in the mansion. You would’ve been able enough to bench-press thrice your size, would’ve learnt swords like they are an indispensible extension of your limbs.

But.

A daughter, what more a fighting daughter, is of no worth to him.

“You still listenin’? You’re spacing out on us.”

It then occurs to you that you haven’t made any response for a while, undoubtedly throwing them into a moment of suspense as if the barrage of information overwhelmed you. “Right,” you clear your throat, bringing your eyes to meet Gladio’s heady stare. “Yeah, was just thinking, sorry. I’ll do my best.”
What you’ve asserted doesn’t seem to hold any weight to Gladio. Molten ambers are still trained on you, soundless, and one second lapses into two. Two seconds become three. There it is again, he’s staring you down the same way he did yesterday, searching for something in you that reassures him of your dedication. Whether he’s found it or not, after a whole five seconds, he breaks off the uncomfortable eye contact and jabs you in the forehead.

“I know,” he breaks into a grin when you rapidly scrub the spot where his fingernail dug into your flesh. “Noct’s not gonna be around for long, so you gotta make sure you learn as much as you can from him this week.”

*Not going to be around for long?* What does he mean by that? The strangeness of the statement must’ve made some sort of quizzical expression flit past, for Noctis fidgets uncomfortably when you turn to him for answers. “Really, Prince? Where are you going?”

“Back to uni,” he says, voice unusually thick. “Final semester’s going to start soon, so.” He shrugs, lamely ending his statement. “So yeah.”

Oh.

*Right.*

Lost in all the haze of spending your afternoon naps together with him, trading texts via King’s Knight, wedged in Insomnia’s midnight life deliquescing behind the wheels of his Audi, Noctis is still a student of Lucis U, a diligent prince attending his classes together with Prompto. The Astrals suspended you in this dream together with him, and now it’s time for them to reclaim what they lent you. You had, simply put, forgotten about it. He has his own fate to govern as an heir to the throne, leaving you on your own. He’s never yours to begin with.

No—you’ve grown too dependent on him.

You’ve seen how dependency destroys you.

You’ve seen how you grew dependent on the prince the same way you grew dependent on mother.

How she destroyed you will parallel how he destroys you.

*but it’s all right, isn’t it? he’s your king, isn’t he?*

There is sound logic in that. You fought fate and you fought father just for the throne of the Andronicus. You’ve always been on your own, haven’t you? Always the friendless Andronicus, corpses making your bed, mother’s blood caking your lips, hands dyed a shade of sin. Once you are truly the queen governing the household, you will be bestowed the raiment of the royal council, donning it with the very same pride father dons his, prostrating yourself for the king—for Noctis, your one and only king.

*yes, your one and only king*

Noctis trusted you the same way you trusted him.

In turn, you should allow yourself to depend on him the same way he will depend on you.

*so, it’s all right to continue this way*

It is?
Yes, it is.

There is fulfilling comfort in the frail reassurance you give yourself. Little lies you spoon-fed just to make you believe what you want to believe. Just to keep yourself going for another day, and another, and another. It’s what kept you going, it’s what kept you breathing long enough to stay alive. Being needed is far better than being denied. Father devalues your existence, but the prince takes care in brushing the dirt off you just so he could get a better look. As long as Noctis needs you, as long as you believe he needs you, you will live.

Warmth blooms underneath cracked ribs and rotting lungs, something that seizes you with nausea. A foreign feeling you struggle to name even with the words you devoured over the years. This nausea is exquisite in its pain, taking root in the desolate garden of your heart, never to leave again.

A certain nausea you associate with Noctis.

“We’re losin’ you again, kid. Sheesh. Noct, take her upstairs; I don’t trust her to go through the hallways without passing out somewhere and freakin’ out some maids. Go.”

Gladio’s grousing eases you out of your thoughts, and you try very hard to pretend the ache no longer exists when Noctis finally looks your way.

**it is said that, in the beginning, the six fought side by side with mankind. even so, the deities themselves seldom appeared before mortals, and instead sent loyal servants to convey their divine will to the oracle. these servants are known as messengers, and they number twenty-four.**

**cosmogony; the hexatheon and their divine host.**

**THERE THEY ARE AGAIN, just you and him, trudging through the halls after Gladio exiled you from his sight. Minimal conversation as always, a recurring motif whenever he rouses you from sleep. Half-slouching, rubbing your eyes, you meekly trot by his side, yawning every now and then. In this setting, it’s easy to pretend nothing’s going on. Just two friends strolling through the Citadel under the morning light, returning to their respective rooms. Passersby are unmindful of their presence and nobody cares enough to stop and stare. Only, the story doesn’t quite go like that.**

Whenever they made their appearance, the manservants fold into a bow, never raising their heads until he passes. The guards are no better, saluting straight until Noctis disappears around the corner, then easing once more.

Does it disturb you? He imagines it does. Maybe a little, just that you never spoke up about it. He catches you making eye-contact with them—sheer accident, really, but their questioning gaze lingers too long until you willed yourself to look away. He’s not sure if he imagined this, but your elbow brushes against his forearm once or twice, then three more times until he’s sure he’s not imagining things. You’ve inched closer to him, almost closing the little gap in between.

Uncomfortable, yeah, he gets that unspoken message. It’s one of the reasons why he moved out in the first place, arguing with his dad and Clarus and Drautos and Cor on why he wanted to be independent as a teen, while Ignis and Gladio simultaneously doubted his ability to stay independent for long without accidentally dying of malnutrition along the way. Just that—the people here, they’re
too impersonal—too statuesque for his liking. They live and breathe with, “Your Highness,” readied on their tongues even if their eyes look right past him.

Does anybody care about him, not him as the Prince of Lucis, not him as the King of Kings, but him as just Noctis, that twenty-year-old guy who’s stuck in university?

Noctis toes the plush carpet squished under his boots when you falter to a halt, pressing up for the elevator. Save for Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio, he hazards a no. Not his dad too. Probably too busy doing kingly stuffs like he usually does until his own son gets neglected for an entire kingdom. A king pushes forward, accepting the consequences and never looking back, that’s what his dad used to say. He pushes and pushes and pushes forward, and forgets that he left his son behind.

But hey, maybe you care too. Maybe, he’s not sure about that since you never openly shared your thoughts with him.

“So,” he starts, almost biting on his tongue when you glance at him because he did not mean to vocalize that thought out loud, but it’s too late when you’re already tilting your head to the side, waiting. “Uh.” Think, think, think. “My jacket.” Right. He points at the black velveteen draped over your arm, his favourite with an expansive behemoth embroidered in vivid threads, then stuffing his hands in his pockets to give them something to do. “You wanna give it back?”

“Jacket?” you repeat, again with that detached voice, one that definitely signals your mind is elsewhere again. Taking one good look at the clothing, you seem to jump under your skin before hastily holding it out, nodding. “Yeah—yeah, sorry about that. Didn’t mean to steal it. I just kinda like to sleep while hugging something or,” you shrug, the ungainly action closely mirroring his, “y’know, burying my face in stuff. Yeah.”

You always seem to be hugging a pillow or two, no lie in that, it’s no wonder his jacket became the hostage of the day. Tucking yourself right into a nest of pillows, blankets, and comforters, you’re content to let the world pass behind tightly shuttered eyelids. But what’s going on in that head of yours? What are you thinking about? What are you doing on all the days you spent without him? Sleep, he thinks, since it’s the only thing you like. Maybe you like to be cuddled too? Since it seemed to fit your nature, what with your whole pillow thing going on.

Noctis catches his thoughts before they stray any further, guiding them back to the conversation in hand. “Don’t sweat it.” Or so he says, snatching the jacket and swiping his clammy palm down the front of his pants. Today’s workout is making him sweat harder than he thought. “I get that. A lot,” he adds when you’re openly questioning him. “Prom does that too. His bed’s so full of stuffed chocobos, he could beat your pillow collection.”

He meant it as a joke, or just something to erase that placid lethargy seizing you all over. But all he gets is a nonplussed, “Prompto did seem like that kind of guy with tons of plushies,” as the lift dings its arrival. It’s not until he prods 56 on the console that he gets some other response from you when you squeeze into his side, all bleak. “There’s something comforting about hugging something, you ever felt that before?”

Funny. Now that the conversation’s turned to this, he can’t even remember the last time he hugged something—or rather someone. Does it count if his dad was the one who lifted him out of Regalia, hugging him tight in his arms? With that bristly goatee brushing against Noctis’ cheeks when he’s pretending to be asleep just so dad would hold him longer? He gets carried into his bedroom and tucked right under the sheets with a kiss on his forehead, safe and sound from nightmares. At 20, it’s too distant a memory now, but it’s still his favourite.

Noctis ignores the way his heart sinks when he’s trying to decide whether it’s just plain melancholy
or childhood nostalgia that’s abruptly weighing him down. “Yeah, kinda,” he finally relents, scratching his cheek. “It feels. I dunno. Okay, I guess.”

Your throat makes some sort of scratchy noise he can’t interpret, then the world goes silent.

_Great._ He’s probably killed the mood with his noncommittal reply, more dead than a zombie. You’re still silent and while that’s an extremely common thing between you and him, something about this feels a whole lot different than before. _Different_, but he can’t put a finger on what changed and what stayed the same. Your shoulder’s digging into his bicep and strands of your hair are kind of ticklish on his skin. That elbow of yours is rubbing on his forearm, but the warmth from your skin spilling across the back of his hand is making him stay. Just you and him together in this lift, a space too stuffy and a silence too overbearing. Same thing, but a different concept. Stewing in the thoughts impolitely letting themselves in his head, Noctis attends the funeral for this dying conversation before letting it go in peace.

The lift dings again at 56, successfully diverting him away from the oppressive silence in this metal deathtrap. Noctis keeps his strides even and unruffled as he leads the way, sewing his mouth shut tight lest he starts something stupid again—like asking why you kept burying your face in his jacket as if it’s an oxygen mask. _Later_, he tells himself that lie, later he’ll ask you about it. Slow and steady, he turns around the final corner of the northwest wing where your room awaits, only to stop short.

That white butler is there.

Byron.

Bowl-sized blossoms in his hands, expert fingers are tender in tending to frilly petals, all radiant pinks and powdery yellow hearts crowding the vases. Their footsteps echoed loud enough to alert anyone of their presence, but Byron doesn’t let up from his menial task. Meticulous in his pursuit for perfection, he goes through one blossom after another. Once the arrangement satisfies him, he dusts off his gloves to turn on his heels.

“Peonies, milady.” Byron smiles, tight-lipped, hands behind his back. Almost as if he isn’t guilty of shattering your heart many days ago with his unfeeling accusation of how you aren’t able to love. “They wish you happiness and prosperity, a fitting theme for this week.” Faking a cough and quite purposely avoiding Noctis, he gestures at the door. “Now then, shall we have some tea together?”

As usual, Noctis is nonexistent in the equation. Not that he’s surprised, he’s long classified Byron as one of those cynical bastards thriving on treating others as though their collective intelligence is on par with five-year-olds. Scoffing under his breath, Noctis folds his arms over his chest and follows you, letting you lead the way to your room. Byron is all fancy bows like a mockery of some sort, throwing the door open with an exaggerated flourish and shutting it behind him once they’re all safely inside.

You toe off your sneakers and Noctis has half the mind to do the same—except, should he even be here?

You don’t seem to be distraught with Byron’s appearance anymore, none of the pained look reflected in your eyes whatsoever. Out of the kindness—or weakness—of your heart, you probably forgave your butler sometime ago. And Noctis kind of gets that since he had catastrophic cold wars with Ignis before. More than half the time it was unanimously agreed that his immaturity started the fight in the first place, though it usually ends with Ignis surrendering and making amends even when it wasn’t his fault. Your dynamics with Byron probably translates to something like his and Ignis’—except Ignis isn’t half of a bastard like this full-fledged asshole you have right here, something Noctis should be thankful for.
Maybe you and him are more alike than he thought.

Or maybe that’s just him reaching for straws?

“You look like a man who’s just heard his beheading announced, milady, what’s wrong? Nightmares in your sleep again? Would you like me to stay with you for the night?” Byron jests by the kitchenette, clicking the electric kettle on and bustling about with making himself a pot of tea. A pot of tea with three cups, judging from all the clinking porcelain. At least Noctis is indirectly getting acknowledged, for now, so he takes the cue to unlace his boots.

You cough, a universal signal of discomfort, heading to your worktable with Noctis in tow. “No thanks, too old for that now.” You wave for him to seat himself wherever he likes, so Noctis takes up the armchair adjacent to yours. After clicking through your computer, you tidy the unnamed hardcovers on your desk to make space, stacking them aside. “Just been busy reading some stuffs. Kinda need to catch up on some sleep since I’ve been neglecting it.”

Having absolutely no place in this conversation, Noctis appropriates his best impression of a sulky teen and leans deeper into the chair, eyeballing your butler as he putters about behind the counter.

“Goodness, milady, please get enough sleep,” Byron exclaims with absolutely no ounce of surprise, nope, even if his choice of words makes him sound like he’s ready to dramatize an entire play right there. “What did I say about overworking yourself, hmm?” Hoisting a silver tray, he brings tea over and makes sure to serve you first and foremost, then pouring some for himself, and intentionally leaving Noctis last. “After tea, it’s off to bed with you, no buts. Drink up.”

Lifting the steaming porcelain to your lips in unison with Noctis, he catches your eyes and your lips give a faint twitch, as if telling him to put up with it for just a few more minutes.

Right. You certainly haven’t forgotten him, so that’s a relief.

Noctis experiments with a sip of the fragrant tea, something with a fruity aftertaste in its mix but not entirely disagreeable with his tastebuds, and sets it down again. “Yep, straight to bed with you,” he finally finds his voice, causing Byron to huff a little. “I don’t wanna see you online on King’s Knight too, got that? Sleep. No more fainting on Gladio tomorrow morning.”

In retrospect, maybe he shouldn’t have said that, for Byron fixes you a look so lethal it could cut a glass in clean half.

“Fainting?” Byron repeats, this time looking directly into his eyes. None of that evasive bullshit anymore, all stern redness motting pewter greys, an antithesis to Noctis’ deep blues. “You do mean she fainted as in one with all the collapsing of her knees—“

“—yep, that kind of fainting,” Noctis cuts him off, reveling a little because Byron doesn’t seem pleased with the interruption. “She wanted some training, so I took her to the training room. Just some light stuffs for now, nothing heavy.”

Steely eyes slither from Noctis to reach your own, digging for the answers you hold in your mouth. You cock a brow in challenge. It’s a dare. But one does not simply dare the predator without expecting retaliation. Byron recoils with the sinuous fluidity of a snake seconds before it lunges for its prey. He seizes your chin in his hand and whoa, that’s a scene straight out of Gladio’s romance novel right there, what with his thumb subtly digging into your cheek, holding you in place. There is a caged animal within him, smiling a smile with too many teeth in it. Overturning the dynamics of a lady and her butler into a master and his slave.
“Milady,” he breathes, each word a severe deliberation behind its selection, “what exactly are you thinking? Or were you not thinking at all to begin with?”

Noctis doesn’t like that. Doesn’t like the tone he’s using on you, doesn’t like the way your eyes narrow and your jaw tightens, doesn’t like how your fingers rake across the wood. He doesn’t like any bit of it.

Before he gets a word in edgewise, you’ve gone ahead and removed Byron’s hand from your face with nary a force behind your action, setting it on the table carefully. “I want this, Byron,” you say, unflinching even when your butler’s smile turns plastic. “I need this. I can’t stand being weak anymore. If I want to succeed father, I need to have some experience in combat. Gladio promised to make me stronger, and I intend to see it through. You’re forbidden from stopping me. It’s long overdue.”

There is obviously more barb on Byron’s tongue that he hasn’t unleashed, words that might hurt you, words that might crush you the same way he did weeks ago. However grudgingly it may be, your butler seems to remember his place the moment you explicitly forbade him. Good, Noctis likes it that you’ve got a backbone when it comes to shutting him down like this. At least you don’t let Byron push you around, even if he could easily disarm you with his solid build alone. At least you know what you want, even at the expense of Byron’s loyalty.

Knowing there’s no other way to make you submit to his demands, Byron takes a calculative turn.

“Was it not enough, milady?” he tries in a softer note meant for a man to coax a child, sweet promises that might never be fulfilled. “Everything—everything I’ve done for you, it wasn’t enough, was it?”

As soon as those words left him, Noctis is suddenly all too aware of how the air seems ten times chillier when nobody’s tampered with the setting. And it’s not just him. You have degraded into the unfeeling shell he first met many months ago, content with sipping your tea and watching over Insomnia from your throne in your room. The vacant glaze in your eyes finds a room again and so does the monotone in your voice.

“No,” you shake your head softly, even if your voice hardens. “I want more.”

More of what? What’s not enough? He feels like he just got caught up in a massive crossfire like parents arguing in front of their kid—and if this is what it feels like, it’s definitely not a nice feeling at all. Nothing made sense and all he’s getting are more questions than answers.

But with your words comes certain finality to the conversation. That’s the end of that, and none should bring it up. Byron seems to understand that much. He picks up his own teacup and busies himself with polishing off the entire content in one go. A restrained act. He inhales. Exhales. Infrahas. And brushes some of his fringe out of his eyes. “As you wish, milady. Let’s put this aside and get you some rest. I want to see you on the bed. Now.”

The tension in the air saps away, swirling into dust. You sigh, finally finding a common ground to agree with. “Mmkays.” Letting your chair drag behind you, Noctis catches your eyes again and you pull your lips into a grimace, rubbing your nape. “Thank you for walking me up here, Prince. Good luck with your training, okay? Don’t push yourself too hard.”

Once again, you’re a human. None of that apathetic drawl or that hollowness in your heart that he can’t seem to bury. Like the fight never happened scant seconds ago, you carry yourself light and breezy—or you’re pretending to be. It’s probably not a big deal, but it’s getting harder and harder to convince him what you’re hiding isn’t worth his probing. No now—later, maybe. Later, when he
figures out what buttons Byron pressed to put him on edge, _later_ when he comes up with an idea why he doesn’t want to see you unsmiling again.

“Unless Gladio pisses me off again, I won’t,” Noctis remembers to snort, all boyish arrogance that Ignis has long since given up trying to rid him of it. “You worry about yourself and get some sleep. G’night.”

Your slight grimace shifts into a smile for him, feasibly reassured. “Okay, good night.”

He lets you retreat into your private bedroom—well, not that private considering the number of times he trespassed before—and once you’ve closed the door behind you, he gets to his feet and cracks his neck. Leaving training for too long will only get Gladio hounding his ass with extra ‘sparring sessions’, so it’s best if he scrams. And as much as Byron’s still an asshole, at least the guy made him a drink.

“Right. I need to get back.” He cranes his head to the exit. “Thanks for tea.”

“Let me see you to the door, at least,” Byron offers, but Noctis is already plodding his way there, brushing him off.

“Nah, I can see myself out.”

Byron has a finger under his chin, half-lidded eyes studying him, all white lashes like the claws of a cat. “Ah,” he says. Monosyllabic, a thoughtful sound underneath its curt nature. It has Noctis slipping on his boots fast enough so he can get the hell out of here, far away from that unnerving stare, but just as soon as his hand lands on the doorknob, Byron’s voice accosts him on the spot. “Then, at the very least, allow me to offer you a word of advice.”

Advise him? The genuine incredulity to the offer stops Noctis right where he stands, gaping like a fool. He’s sure Byron’s got nothing to offer unless he’s offering tips on how to one-up Ignis and the dagger for his tongue. That could probably work. Then again, deliberating the way Byron perches at the edge of your table, his ponytail trailing down his back, a leg braced against your chair, _that_ gets him to stay, mostly curious of what he’ll get out of this anyway.

Slowly, Noctis tenses and readies himself. “What?”

Evidently satisfied with how he’s lured him into this—whatever this is, Byron runs a finger over your computer. His smile withers, growing dispassionate with each passing second. “Please don’t hurt her. She may be foolish with her feelings, she may be blunt at times, and she may be weak without help, but she is all I have.” He stops, each word a wound on his body, and starts again. “Do take care of her for me. That is all I ask of you, Noctis.”

It sounded like the standard passing-of-duty speech a superior delivers to his underling if one scrutinizes its contents. Only, there’s obviously more to it than that. Noctis isn’t as stupid as Byron wrongly assumed. “…what do you mean by that?”

Byron only tilts his head back, a laugh both soft and sweet falling from his lips.

“I, once, looked at her with the very same look in your eyes.”

[tbc.]
1) before we get too deep and lost into the whole byron and noctis shenanigan, just casually throwing it out there that the next chapter is chapter 15. and you know what 15 means.

2) and also in case anyone’s going ??? wtf byron???, chapter 23 will answer (some) of your questions!

3) what do you guys enjoy doing on rainy days? :D

thank you very much for everyone’s generous comments and kudos! they’re truly a delight to read, and i love every bit of everyone’s enthusiasm, encouragement and kindness! sometimes when i get stuck on a bit of a writer’s block, rereading your comments and messages leaves warm feels and motivation to keep me going. 8’) even if that means writing well into 3 am and heading into office with eyebags, so be it.

PREVIEW:
“Ohhh boy, I’ll go grab The Bucket™ real quick,” Prompto groans, dragging a hand over his face as he scrambles to his feet. Met with your confused gaping, he only finger-guns your way and flits from the circle, rushing towards the showers. Cue clanging sounds, startled jumps, and epic sounds of scuffling before the blond emerges with a steel bucket dented at the side. He sets it down in front of you coolly, much to Nyx’s amusement.
HIS MORNING IS DIFFERENT NOW. Different, as in Noctis doesn’t have to drag himself out of bed at 5.30 just so he’d make it to Gladio’s training session on time. That and he doesn’t have to struggle with rousing the cat from her nap, which is a codename for waking you up and getting a swish of claws in return. These past few days taught him how to dodge unpredictable attacks better than his Shield ever did. Ignis checks up on him at 7.30, giving him more time to grumble about the too-damn-early Contemporary Management class that’s only available at 8.30 only on Mondays and Wednesdays. Noctis picks up on his dull routine of brushing his teeth, yawning under the hot shower, shucking on whatever shirt and pants combo he can locate in his closet, and hauls his backpack with another yawn.

The ride to Lucis U has Ignis filling him in on the council updates, boring stuff that has him yawning four times in twenty minutes of morning traffic, and manages a bleary nod once his Advisor sees him off at Block B. As a senior, most of the fresh-eyed juniors gawk at him the moment he strides through the hallways, scanning the doors for BU 3-1. He’s the prince, he kinda gets that a lot, not that anything’s changed over his entire lifetime. They don’t care about him past his title, and he doesn’t see why he should care either. Noctis occupies the seat farthest from the board, saves some space for Prompto, and checks up on his planner. If it’s up to him, he’d never get himself something as posh as leather-bound, but this was all a conspiratorial gift by none other than Ignis in final hopes that it’d instill some orderly sense into Noctis.

But did it work?

*Probably*, seeing how he had his final timetable scrawled in one of the front pages in case of discrepancies—

—oh.

Prompto’s not taking this elective with him. *Right.* He signed up for Media and Journalism since he figured his photography skills would come in handy, babbling all about it when they were filling up the subject registration form last semester. That kind of sucks, now that he thinks about it. If Prompto’s not here, then he can’t steal naps when the lecturer’s not looking. And he can’t skim through the lecture notes Prompto’s jotted down amidst all his lazy doodling. *And* they can’t coordinate where to grab their lunch because Lucis U’s menu dates back to M.E. 358, all sloppy mashed potatoes and premature beans on every other day, ugh.

Shutting his planner, Noctis slumps over his desk as the other students begin to file in. Some are vaguely recognizable faces, like that guy with the mohawk or that girl with a birdlike laugh, while rest are an assortment of squashed noses and sharp jaws and droopy eyelids, people who recognize
him from afar, people who never approach in the end. There is an unspoken line drawn between
them and him, separating the prince from its people.

Chin on the scratched desk, Noctis slips out his phone and puts it on silent, knowing the misery of
abandonment all too well.

hey

morning noct!!! (¬ω¬) dude im so psyched for medjourn omg

lol nerd

no rly lol

we’re getting pruvia drusus

u remember that segment at 9? on 8tv?

she goes undercover and infiltrates drug cartels, yakuza houses??? badass
stuff???? armed w/ only a camera?????

Noctis searches the depths of his head for a semblance of connection to this Pruvia person, finds that
he doesn’t even know the channel 8TV exists prior to Prompto’s yammering, and sighs.

no idea, sorry

aw man u missed out big time. she kicks ass (¬_¬)

cuz she’s gonna be teaching us this sem!!!

what really

yea man! (○ω○) special contract only this sem and first come first served,
limited seats blablabla u know the deal

That mad dash Prompto did just to submit his form at the counter last semester? Bouncing on his feet
the moment the registrar gave it a once-over and nodded? And that little fistpump he did at the end of
it? Yeah, all of that totally made sense now.

is it too late to congratulate you

naw it’s never too late!!!

thanks noct!!!!

A loud bang and the lecturer abruptly enters, setting down a folder heavy with paper, looking like
she’d rather be anywhere else than here. Noctis shares that sentiment too; he’s starting to miss his bed
a little too much. Madam Yoshino Faustus is a middling lady with three large rocks on three different
fingers and they glimmer each time she waves her hand about, the hallmark of a nobility gone rogue,
throwing out the Lady in her to adopt Madam instead. He’s had her two semesters ago, an encounter
in Introduction to Conflict Management that ended with Noctis scoring an A- despite slamming into
classes an hour after she started, all thanks to his notorious oversleeping skills. Her squinting sweep
over the entire room to take in the faces of her future victims tells Noctis that this semester is going to
be even worse than the last one.

"Usus magister est optimus," her lilting voice begins, and by the number of times she always recited
that phrase in every class, Noctis knows it by heart to remember one thing: Practice is the best
teacher, a motto she lives by. “All right, let’s do a little roll call, just to make sure everyone’s here
today and nobody’s signing for their friends,” she drones on, consulting the name list of those
registered under her class, a true veteran who thwarts every student’s attempt on playing hooky.
“Albel Williams?”
Noctis turns to his phone when she belts out a few more names.

- 🏷️ yoshino’s here
- 🤷️ same
- 🏷️ pruvia’s here too omg im pumped

Which means Prompto’s replies are going to get increasingly spaced out by the seconds as he enjoys Pruvia’s class while his best friend is withering away here. Great. Resigning himself to enjoy his own company, Noctis logs into King’s Knight. CONNECTING TO SERVER circles endlessly on his screen with pixelated Ray Jack, Kaliva, Barusa, and Toby marching to the beat, brandishing their weapons. After what seems to be minutes—when it’s only seconds, really, Noctis tends to exaggerate when it gets boring—he’s all logged into the game, scrolling through the dev notes and checking today’s quests. He harvests his Zell trees for free cash, a thoughtful gesture once-per-day meant to aid the newcomers, and then he goes to his FRIEND screen, where—

“Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum?” the lecturer calls out in a tone that suggests she sees him with his phone out. “Are you with us?”

Prince. Right. He really needs to make a special decree just for stopping people from calling him that in class. Noctis straightens up his slouch, looks her in the eye like a dutiful student and the proud son of King Regis, doing his perfected princely nod. One sharp bob of his head, not a timid two. “Yep.”

Something about her adjusting her eyeglasses begs to differ, but she exhales all the same and moves on. “Noleva Mai?”

—he taps to his messaging application and tries to hide his grimace.

- 👑 yoshino saw me texting RIP
- 🐞 yoshino more like yoshiknows
- 🐞 (ง•̀_•́)ง

Noctis resists the urge to snort out of the imminent knowledge that Madam Yoshino might start chucking markers at him like all teachers do in anime, and sends out a last message.

- 👑 lol catch you later then
- 👑 have fun with pruvia
- 👑 thanks noct!
- 👑 (ง•̀_•́)ง
- 👑 u have fun w/ yoshi-no-no too!!!

Swapping back to King’s Knight, Noctis checks on his mini friend list. There’s Prompto but he’s offline, as expected. Gladio’s never online unless Noctis is the one badgering him to go on a raid with him and Prom, so Barusa’s all greyed out on the screen like Prompto’s Toby. He scrolls a bit more, searching for a glowing Kaliva rocking a skull-tipped weapon and oozing sheer badassery, but. It’s all greyed out too.

Well. He didn’t expect that.

The lecturer’s already scratching her name on the whiteboard and it reads Madam Yoshino Faustus
in case anyone’s a newbie, then she’s already jumping into the first chapter listed in the pro forma because that’s how seniors roll on their first day in the final semester, all badass and probably dying by the end of the term. Noctis swallows a groan, watches Madam Yoshino put up some drab slides of black text on white background, and turns back to King’s Knight.

It probably doesn’t hurt to text you before he puts his phone away.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: wake up.

He only hopes you’ll get back to him soon enough.

the jump from high school syllabus to university courses is something most people spend an average of a month to synchronize with the rhythm of building properly cited reports and bookmarking journal archives on their computers. you are fourteen and you only had a week. a week of the pinch-faced man running his fingers over your documents before handing byron your necessary textbooks, listing out your learning outcomes from the top of his head, and diving headfirst into your workload. he is only paid to teach you, not to make you understand, so he packs his briefcase by eleven and leaves for his next lecture on campus.

this is how you learn.

at six you rise, eating breakfast thirty minutes later. by seven you are dressed and sitting at your desk, reading your texts in advance before the lecturers arrive. eight a.m. they enter, an assortment of he, she, they, names you do not memorize. lessons end thirteen hours later, interspersed bites of meals squeezed in between your lecturers’ arrival. byron cleans as you wash up, readying a dinner that you nibble in between glances of your assignments. the clock chimes twelve. sometimes you sleep on your books. most of the time you do not sleep at all.

flipping through ancient solheim and decoding the dead language, you occasionally catch yourself muttering under your breath. “i’m an idiot. i’m an idiot. i’m an idiot.”

byron stops fiddling with his feather duster and corrects you softly, a pitiful look in his silent eyes. “to me, you are the most intelligent person i’ve ever had the honour of meeting, milady.”

what good does intelligence bring you? it is a word that has lost its meaning. intelligence bring you crippling thoughts of no i can’t do this no i don’t want to do this anymore no i want to stop please. intelligence makes you jump at every passing minute, dreading the moment he she they step in, posing a question designed to unveil your idiocy. intelligence has your bed collecting dust, dust that byron obediently expels with zeal.

so tell me, what good does intelligence bring me?

you must’ve vocalized the question, for byron shakes his head and corrects you again. “milady, i never had the chance to go to school.” he meets your eyes like it is the most natural thing for a twenty-seven-year-old man to remain uneducated, while you are fourteen and too educated for the world to appreciate. “one of the men i worked with taught me to read and write, then basic maths once i know the difference between bemused and amused. my first salary was only 50 gil, so i spent some on books and veggies, and saved the rest in my tin can. by the time i had close to a few
hundred gil in my savings, i bought this beautiful leather-bound diary and a pen i saw in this stationery shop, and taught myself some cursive from the old man at the bus stop.” with a voice that doesn’t quite match the melancholy on his face, he turns his back to you and resumes dusting your bookcase. “so please, do not think so lowly of yourself. you are worth so much more to me.”

all at once, you are ashamed. ashamed of yourself for whining at him for the scratches on your palms when he has welts on his body. you are fourteen when you realize you are blessed in all your misery. while it doesn’t make things any better with father pretending your existence is nullified, nor does it have the manservants respect you any better, you have byron.

byron who has nothing else left in life than you.

NOCTIS QUICKLY COMES TO THE CONCLUSION that the final semester sucks.

Four days. Four days is all it takes for Noctis and Prompto to find out that downing 12 cans of Ebony in 3 hours will send Prompto into a twitchy mess, then embarking on an adventure with marathoning four whole seasons of JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure blasting from the TV. Ignis isn’t quite pleased to find his stashed Ebony raided with no cans left to spare, though he refrains himself from berating them when they’ve finally finished compiling the report and slides for Strategic Management, a compulsory core unit both he and Prompto couldn’t ward off with credit transfer. Ever dutiful, Ignis takes up the task of sweeping pizza crumbs under the sofas, separating cans of energy drinks from plastic bottles for recycling, and pulls his sleeves to his forearms, banishing grease from the plates.

By the time Friday rolls around, Prompto’s draped over the cushion, a fine imitation of a corpse. Noctis, on the other hand, doesn’t recall how exactly he found his bed—or rather, his arm found it while he died on the floor. Over a box of cereal and some morning Malboro cartoon, they both agreed that the first week is shit—“Is that why all our ex-seniors looked like they died three years even before their final sem started?” Prompto asks aloud, then bursting into melodramatic tears when Noctis, in stately somberness, nods—and consoled each other with Ignis’ freezer-wrapped meals. When dusk falls, Noctis catches up on a solid fourteen more hours of sleep, while Prompto finally went home for the first time in decades.

Saturday. Ignis, bless him, decided to let Noctis sleep in a little past ten a.m. and only woke him up once it shows eleven on his watch. Gladio wants all of them back in the training hall for some ‘relaxed sparring’ to ‘polish on teamwork’ after ‘taking a long break’, a lie that Noctis could smell even if the Citadel’s miles and miles away from his apartment. Still, they picked up an unwilling Prompto from his house, sat through the crawling Insomnian traffic, reverse-parked in the prince’s underground bay, and ended up in the training room all the same.

Prompto is the first one to throw the door open, all singsong. “Gladi—oh.” And then he stops short. His hand falls off the doorknob like it burns him, jammed right in the pocket of his sweatpants. “Wow, uh. Hey. Architect. Hey, uh, Architect’s butler…?”

Ignis is only a step away from Prompto, a gentle hand landing on Prompto’s back to guide him into the training hall, spurring him out of his statuesque stand. The blond awkwardly slinks in with the Ignis in tow, who is all serene calmness even though he’s surveying the floor in great interest behind his spectacles. He, too, waits for an answer.

“Byron the butler, in case you forgot,” the mess of white offers, all smiles.

Something about that has Prompto paling faster than slapping a monochrome filter on a picture. Blue
eyes are skittish, darting from one side to the other as he pulls the worst kind of smile that’s undoubtedly jumpy. “Uh. Right, Byron, nice to see ya again. And uh,” he nods over to the last party member, “who’s that guy?”

“Nyx, Nyx Ulric,” Gladio answers from the other end, as gruff as always. “Noct, get your ass in here so we can start.”

He can definitely count on his Shield to be an ass about this. “Shut up, I know.”

So. What Noctis sees once he finally reaches the hall are four people. It’s hard to miss out Gladio, so naturally he’s the first person Noctis picks out from the floor, a crooked grin on his scarred face as he waves them in. As much as Noctis doesn’t want to see your butler again, Byron’s there for who knows what reason, substituting his fitted suit for a sharp ensemble of button-up shirt and khakis. There’s also some uniformed Glaive seated cross-legged beside him, all handsome ruggedness with his hair slicked back, trailing down his shoulders in little braids. Presumably the one called Nyx, since nobody else fits that description. He has the look of a predator if Noctis doesn’t know any better, minute tattoos dotted under his eyes, and decked in too much leather to be just a normal guy.

Noctis lets his blue eyes stray from the stranger and drift up grey sweatpants and a shirt too loose, clothes that he’s long accustomed to. You. For some reasons, when he sees the smallish smile gracing your face and the familiar glaze in your eyes when he meets your gaze, something stirs in him. Something like a bad stomachache—no, that’s not it. Something like overeating and getting nauseous—no, that’s not it either. It’s something knocking inside him, asking to be heard, except he has no idea what it is. But it makes him conscious of the way he’s returning your look with a slight wave—then turning it into some weird wilting of his fingers once the deed’s done—and then turning into an awkward rub of his nape.

At any rate, he joins all of them on the floor, sitting in a crude circle, feigning ignorance at your keen peeking every once in a while. It’s not like he hasn’t been talking to you in these past few days and it’s not like he’s ignoring you on purpose, Astrals no. Classes have been hard, sure, but King’s Knight bridged the gap between his physical distance with you. You texted him your training regimen, he texted you his day, you gave him pointers on how to draw up a report that netted him Madam Yoshino’s compliments, and he shared some room IDs for you to join his raids with Prompto. Normal, casual interactions, no red sirens anywhere, so he shouldn’t be on red alert like this. But it’s all a lie. If anything, it’s the way things are going that makes him a little too hyperaware of that persistent knocking in him each time he ignores your fleeting peeks.

Maybe he’s just thinking too much about this.

Things are normal. Things are casual. Things have been both normal and casual.

But things are different with how you’re here with Byron, finally giving up on catching his attention and turning to that Glaive instead.

Your friendliness is infectious and it doesn’t help that Nyx practically established no walls with you. He murmurs something, you listen, he murmurs a bit more, then you stifle a laugh behind your hand. Thankfully it hasn’t devolved into anything remotely touchy-feely that would’ve trespassed some borders for Noctis, but it sure as hell looks like the guy is a long lost friend catching up to years and years of chatter. And you’re all too honest with your feelings these days, smiling that same smile of yours at Nyx. That very same smile you were once reluctant to share with anyone else but him.

Noctis turns away, picking off the little thoughts overrunning inside like they’re ants swarming a crumb.
He’s being ridiculous. That’s what it is. He should be proud of your progress in making friends instead of feeling like he missed out on something in the days he hadn’t spent by your side. This whole thing is just all in his head and he should forget about it. His eyes drag over the opposite end where you sit, tracing over the docile quirk of your lips as words are whispered to Nyx, who turns it into a joke of some sort for you to laugh over. The searing flash jolting up his nerves is immediate, forcing Noctis to look away.

Yeah, he should definitely forget about it.

Gladio finally steals the moment by clapping once and Noctis is more than willing to fix the Shield his attention to end his thoughts. “All right, listen up. First off, meet Ulric. He’s a senior member of the Glaive—Kingsglaive,” Gladio tacks on a bit of an explanation once Prompto goes bug-eyed at the new term. “Elite soldiers who risk their lives to protect Lucis, Prom. They’re war veterans out there, fighting to keep people like us safe in Insomnia.”

“Too much credit, Gladio,” Nyx counters, sounding modest even if the mischievous grin on his face never went away. “Just doing my job. You guys must be the Prince’s entourage; Prompto Argentum,” he starts from clockwise, “Ignis Scientia, and His Royal Highness, Prince Noctis Lucis Caelum. Pleasure to meet you all.”

As Prompto and Ignis echo some pleasantries, Noctis can’t even bring himself to nod. Glaives are part of his dad’s legion of protectors even if the Crownsguard are bodyguards for the royal family. At the first signs of Niflheim’s forces stirring unrest outside Insomnia, the Glaives are the frontliners fending them off. On days they don’t get any action, Noctis knows some of them are tasked with tailing him from afar if he’s out in town, harnessing the power of the Crystal through his dad just to make sure they remain out of sight by scaling walls and such.

So what’s he doing here?

Unfortunately, Noctis finds no answer as Gladio moves on.

“And this guy right here,” the Shield thumbs at Byron, who’s gone ahead and braided his hair out of disinterest at the droll conversation, “is Byron, the little lady’s butler. Think of him as the older, pissier Iggy.”

“Flattered with the description.” Unconcerned, Byron continues braiding his ponytail like it’s the most natural thing to do, elegant fingers deft with its handiwork and twining one lock after another. You hide a smile behind your fingers, though it doesn’t escape Byron’s watchful eyes as he huffs not unkindly. “It means there are at least four levelheaded people in this ragtag band of,” he searches the ceiling for answers, “young adults. Young, moody adults.”

Is that a jab at him? Whatever it is, it has Noctis scowling after taking the bait, arms crossing over his chest. “As if you’re not a young adult yourself.”

Byron makes an expression of dramatized outrage, clicking his tongue like a mother hen, severely scandalized at the thought. “What a compliment, I must appear younger than I look. With all due respect, Nyx and I are the only full-fledged adults around here. We’re both well over our thirties.” He draws up his chin in disdain, sneering Noctis’ way. “The lot of you are simply children to us.”

Thirty—Noctis almost sputters at the words crossing his mouth, but Prompto groans and presses a hand to his forehead. “Gladio’s right,” he grumbles, “Byron is an older and pissier version of Ignis. Ugh, talk about two Iggies.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing,” says Ignis ruefully. He gestures to the rest of the members of this
odd gathering, himself included, and inclines his head towards Nyx—who, by now, is already taking in their exchange with a wry grin of his own. “Do forgive them, the children can be quite excitable in presence of new companions.”

Nyx props his head up and clears his throat, eyes bright. “Nah, not at all. Just happened to be assigned for patrolling in my new roster and heard loud noises—weird loud noises,” he corrects himself, nodding your way, “and the rest is history. Nowadays I just check them out every now and then to make sure they’re not getting into trouble.”

“You got the small kid to blame for the weird loud noises,” Gladio heartily thumps your back as you vibrate from the sheer force of it, scowling Byron’s way.

“Well, I wouldn’t have made those ‘weird loud noises’ if someone wasn’t trying to detach my spine from my hip.”

Byron deflects your lethal glare with the look of a customer service representative sent to deal with a particularly pesky customer, never once acknowledging the blame. “Milady, you’re as flexible as a plank. You need to stretch more.”

“Pretty sure there’s a difference between helping and attempting murder,” you rebuke as Gladio turns his sympathetic back-patting into comforting head rubs instead. “What if I broke something and had to go to the ER?”

To which the shameless butler rolls his eyes and pretends examining the twines to his braid a far greater issue than your metaphorical dislocation. “You’re being overdramatic. Nyx, do me a favour as a fellow old man and tell her she’s being overdramatic.”

“I’d say no to the part with the old man,” Nyx shrugs at the betrayal, “but yes to the overdramatic part. It is what it is.”

Hopelessly ganged up by the two men, you sulk under Gladio’s petting and wither. “Gee, thanks guys. Real nice of you.”

Ignis surveys the friendly banter with raised brows, though he ventures no further on the matter. Prompto looks like he doesn’t know if it’d be his place to join in when Byron’s involved, and Noctis kind of gets what he’s thinking. The last time Byron meddled, things ended as well as someone’s funeral. Their collective silence works out for Gladio since it gives him a chance to lay out his plans for the day, starting from the not-so-subtle looks he’s been tossing Noctis’ way.

“All right guys, enough chitchat,” Gladio brings everyone to attention once again. “The reason why I called you all here today is because,” he gives a sharp look to Noctis, “Noct, we’re gonna give it a shot with attuning her to magic today, see how well she takes to it, and decide where she goes from there.”

And Noctis couldn’t help the way his brow arches automatically at that. “So that’s why you called me out here?”

“Ya got any other sibling out there who’s also the prince?” Gladio scoffs. “Of course you gotta do it, dumbass, she’s yours.”

_His_, huh?

That sounds nice for a change.

“Ohhhh boy, I’ll go grab The Bucket™ real quick,” Prompto groans, dragging a hand over his face
as he scrambles to his feet. Met with your confused gaping, he only finger-guns your way and flits from the circle, rushing towards the showers. Cue clanging sounds, startled jumps, and epic sounds of scuffling before the blond emerges with a steel bucket dented at the side. He sets it down in front of you coolly, much to Nyx’s amusement.

And you’re all but finger-guess the suspiciously empty bucket at the rim, stumped. “What’s this for?”

Nyxosexual knows what that’s for. Hell, Ignis and Gladio were both well-acquainted with The Bucket™ at some points, but they’re very much disinclined to acknowledge The Bucket’s™ existence since all it does is bring back bad memories. Bad memories of puking uncontrollably, Ignis wiping his mouth and hunching over The Bucket™, Prompto dropping dead into a faint after just touching Noctis, and The Incident That Must Not Be Named™ involving Gladio stumbling like a newborn anak fawn all across the training hall.

Well. This should be interesting.

“No one can handle magic, even in trace amounts,” Nyx explains much to your gratification, fingernail tapping against the steel handle knowingly. It sets you into a mode of perpetual alarm, breathing shallowly, and Nyx chuckles even louder. “Calm down, you’re not gonna die or something. The worst that could happen is puking,” he lists off his fingers, “fainting, disorientation, or maybe all three.” He stops at the sheer horror crossing your eyes, shrugs, and finds it appropriate to add, “For a few days, I guess. We still have newer Glaives who puke when they land after warp-strikes, so that’s another case. Can’t get used to the thing if you don’t practice daily.”

Usus magister est optimus, the Yoshino in Noctis parrots. Practice, practice, and more practice. Practice even when he’s sick, practice even when Gladio served his ass in three different flavours, and practice even when his legs had failed him.

“Warp-strike is the thing where,” you chew on your bottom lip, all frowns, probably recalling the number of times he inadvertently showed you the move through his many practices, “you kind of throw your weapon somewhere and just—just end up warping there, right?”

Huh. Noctis just can’t help but to nod along when you throw a furtive glance his way as if confirming that’s the thing, right? At least you had been paying attention to him, that’s for sure. His skin prickles at the intriguing thought.

“All Glaives can warp since we utilize King Regis’ magic, and he’s strong enough to lend us his strength. Think of His Majesty as a conduit, it’s easier that way.” Nyx tilts his head over, lazy eyes ghosting over Noctis. His hardening stare threatens to expose him, yet he says nothing and is content to pick up the briefing where he stopped. “His Highness over here is also another conduit, but he’s only serving his retainers for now. So if you wanna get good, get practising.”

“It’ll also help if you haven’t had your breakfast,” Ignis points out, a knowing glint in his eyes. That’s definitely talking from experience right there. “If you’re rather famished by now, then it might be wise for us to begin right away.”

Byron finishes his braid with a bauble hair tie procured from his pocket, snapping it into place. He cycles through everyone’s expression for digestion and comes to a conclusion. “Since that’s everyone’s consensus, then we should start, milady. The sooner you start puking, the better, since I can clean up your mess before I start on lunch.”

“Someone has his priorities right,” Ignis agrees, meeting Byron’s eyes with a grateful nod sent his way, and Six, is his Advisor seriously getting along with the creep for your butler? Today is so not Noctis’ good day. “Come along now, Noct, hold your hand out to her. And you, Architect, do us all
a favour and give Noct *a hand.*”

Prompto hoots and slaps Ignis’ back, who looked oddly pleased with himself for thinking up that one. Ugh. *Whatever.* He needs to get this over with. Noctis scoots over to where you sit at the same time you shift closer, both meeting at the halfway point. With all his friends and some random Glaive grinning wildly at the side, it feels a bit weird to do this—but not in the way where it’s getting uncomfortable—just slowly getting there, somewhat. It’d be better if he had some privacy in the first place for concentration, but he can’t be too picky with how the circumstances are playing out.

Theoretically, the Crystal’s magic seems can be condensed into the simple concept of eating. Right now, he’s simply letting you have a taste of the magic, just a lick or two for your tongue to learn the flavour. Later on when you’re much better off at it, you’d be able to eat all you want through him if you’d like it. And him? He’s not the one eating from the Crystal. The Crystal is the one *eating* him like how it ate his dad alive.

Everyone knows how it is, everyone saw how he hobbles with a cane for a crutch.

The spiderweb spreading on his father’s right, uprooting the little pale canvas he has to offer, says enough to Noctis that the doctor isn’t going to announce his cause of death as a natural cause. What little magic Noctis could afford to channel to his friends isn’t enough to let him share his dad’s burden. But he’ll get there sooner or later once the ring is sitting on his finger, once his friends are part of the council, once you’ve succeeded your father.

To start that off, you need this.

You *need* him.

Noctis holds out his hand to you, the standard procedure of channeling the Crystal’s magic through him as the conduit, and he can’t say he’s surprised when a familiar ice grazes his palm. Fingertips, as cold as The Glacian’s touch. He’s felt this before. The first time you brought his hand up to your face, letting him wrap his slim digits around your neck, icy manacles of your hands draining the warmth from his wrist. Do you still remember that day? He can’t tell, not when you’ve gone ahead and wiped the emotions clean from your face, slotting your palm over his.

“How romantic,” Byron drawls. “Romance movie of the year, ten out of ten.”

Gladio snickers and that asshole for your butler is smug with his achievement of riling the prince. Noctis makes a mental checklist to deck Byron later, just to demonstrate why he’s the Prince of Pain. Unaffected, you just side-eyed Byron as though you’re long used to his assholery, turning back to a pink-dusted Noctis. “Don’t mind him, Prince, he’s always a jerk.”

“Glad you’re suffering with me right now,” he snorts, earning some sort of a quiet huff of amusement under your breath. Once the racket settles down, he closes his eyes and lets the darkness reach out to him. Time to get his act together; it’s been a while since he’d done this. Hopefully soon enough, he’ll get to guide you through this without messing up. “All right, first thing you wanna do is close your eyes.”

“Ugh. Cliché.”

“Shut up Byron,” he hears you chide, Gladio cackling appreciatively at the unnecessary commentary. “Ahem. And then what, Prince?”

“Uh. Make yourself calm, at ease. Stuffs like that.” Totally not helpful, not that he’s good with words, but he’s been told that’s how it goes the last time he did it with Prompto. “When you feel
calm and focused, then it’s a lot easier for you to reach out and feel things.”

“I…dunno Prince, all I’m feeling is how warm you are.”

That’s it? He must’ve been out of practice over all the months, damn. He catches Gladio muttering
she said warm, huh? somewhere to his side, probably to Byron, and your butler’s snickering at you
and him, totally getting a kick out of this. Champions of backseat everything, his friends. And your
butler too, can’t forget about that. What are they, prepubescent kids? Clearing his throat, Noctis tries
again, curling his fingers over the back of your hand. “Okay, try to concentrate on picking up
something. Anything. Not the noise, not the warmth, just—”

“—like you’re trying to grab fish in the river,” Prompto pipes up to his left.

“No, it’s different,” Ignis points out, “it’s a transient feeling unlike any other. Almost like oxygen, it’s
there, but it’s not seen to your eyes. Yet, it has always been there from the start.”

Noctis cracks his eyes open just a sliver before closing them again. “Guys, not helping.”

“Think of electricity,” Nyx supplies helpfully, and that’s more of an accurate description of the
Crystal’s magic more than he could ever describe to you. Leave it to the pros to tell you how it is.
“Flash of electricity, tingling under your skin and in your nerves. There should be a buzzing sound if
you concentrate hard enough, and that’s the sound the Crystal makes. Like someone humming off-
key, enough to make you aware of its presence, but low enough to fade into background noise.
Think of blues and violets, if the colour helps you to imagine things. Put together that feeling and the
electric colours when you search deep inside yourself.”

His lengthy explanation has you tightening your hold on Noctis’ hand, seizing him softly. In this
darkness, he sees nothing. He hears nothing, once everyone falls wordless. Just like this, true to
Nyx’s words, the Crystal’s distant hum beckons him, speaking in tones unintelligible to the human
ears. The Crystal sustaining protection in Insomnia, the duty he carries as a prince to his people,
everything as the Astrals ordained, bestowing salvation upon mankind, and so much more. Spikes of
electric magic whizzes past, an ECG reading peaking from a flat, amaranthine bursting into blue—
—you squeeze his hand until pinpricks of pain sets in, and a gasp.

Noctis opens his eyes just in time to catch the dusts of magic reflected in your eyes—only, they are
not blue, not his blue.

They are an infernal scarlet searing the blacks of your pupils.

He’s never seen that before.

And when you fall, he almost forgets to catch you.

titan, the archaean, steadfast as stone. ramuh, the fulgurian, sharp as lightning. shiva, the glacian,
gentle as snow. leviathan, the hydraean, relentless as tides. bahamut, the draconian, unbending as
iron. ifrit, the infernian, fickle as fire. since time immemorial, they have watched over eos.

cosmogony; the hexathion.

EVERYTHING IS BURNING. The ground, the trees, the skies. Darkness and dust intermingle,
clouds of smoke choking your mouth, scorching your lungs. Dry air strips moisture from your mouth. Nothing is alive, everything is razed to the ground. An abject sight of flames fanning over the hills, smothering steel into liquid. The blistering heat stings your skin and beads of sweat roll off your chest, but you do not care. Not when euphoria courses through your veins, rattling your fingertips with the intoxicating feel of victory. You throw your head back, scanning the melting horizon, searching for survivors that you know there wouldn’t be any.

You’ve made sure to eradicate every single one of them.

Down to their very last breath.

Wood crackles with fire gnawing through its crusty flesh, felling branches here and there. There is a sound, a displaced sound different from the rest. Footsteps. Heavy, booted footsteps, an uneven gait you’ve come to love and revere. You do not turn when arms snake around your waist, pulling you against a wall of bare chest. Liquid heat on your back, grimy hands leaving smudges of black across your torso, laving your flesh with ardent skims of flat palms and fingertips tracing circles on your skin. Something grazes your nape and ever pliant, ever worshipful, you tilt your head aside, broken, exposing your neck.

Dry lips descend on your skin, followed by a sharp nip of teeth, marking you.

This, right here in his arms, is where you belong.

Marked. Safe. *His.*

“We did it,” he murmurs throatily, and you groan your approval when his touches turn desperate, when his nips turn into bites, “we stopped them. You and me, just the two of us, we took them down.”

“Yes, yes we did,” you whimper, finding it hard to concentrate when he thumbs at your waistband, toying with the elastic. He restrains you tight, just like this, almost punishing in his strength—not that you mind it. You love it. You love him for the warning scratch of his fingernails digging through your skin, red welts rising from your unbroken skin. You love him for the way he runs his tongue over your earlobe, nipping at the shell, breathing hard in your ear. You love him even when he lunges a trident through a beautiful blonde, spattering her blood across his cheeks.

He buries his nose in your hair, inhaling with a ragged breath. “I love you.”

You know he means every word, for he loves as easily as he kills.

Eyes lidded, head resting against his chest, your hands dance across his fraught forearms and tangle with his fingers, filling in the gaps in between. This is a space made for you, meant for you, and nobody else will hold him like you do. He loves you. He completes you. He is *you.* Slowly bringing his hands to your face, you leave kisses on the bruises littering his knuckles, reverent. He is your Eos, he is your God, he is your King, and he is your Prince. He moulds you by his own two hands, filling the cavity with flowers for your lungs and honey in place of your blood. He deserves this corpse you call your vessel, down to your very last breath.

*I love you* is on your tongue, licking a stripe across his finger.

And he knows you love him too.

Turning in his arms, you crane your head to meet his heady gaze. Oh so wrecked, he stands stoic as his eyes bore into yours. Your sweet, wretched prince. Mirrored by the flames, there is a corrosive yellow to their quality, eroding his innocence. There is nothing innocent about him anymore. Gone
are the Galdin blues; he has the eyes of the gold coins lost in the sea, a ring of scarlet rimming the edges. He’s beautiful, just as beautiful as the fire he starts. You cup his blood-crusted cheek and he leans into your touch, long black lashes fluttering in bliss, breathing his approval. His hand joins yours, holding you in place.

This is the world you ruined together with him, and there is no place better than Hell for the damned.

definitions:

there once lived a man, born to a mortal but blessed with powers divine. conjuring a collection of glaives he dispelled the darkness plaguing our star. as a reward for his efforts, the god granted him a holy stone—the crystal, which he was to guard at all costs, for it would one day choose a king to see us through the coming disaster and lead us to salvation.

cosmogony; the crystal.

THE GLAIVE KNEW. Just one look and he knew. Noctis knows that look from anywhere—it was the same look everyone had when he strolled along in wheelchair, head downcast, never acknowledging the sympathy in their eyes. The fact remains that he isn’t as strong as King Regis to grant his entourage the same strength and magic the Glaives enjoyed. Yet in an effort to save face, Nyx withheld the judgment of a pro and offered your thoughts something else to ruminate. But what’s done is done. Noctis knows where he stands and it will never be on the same pedestal as the rest of the Glaives.

In the beginning, all was well. He was a child, but he was a prince, first and foremost. Afforded the luxuries many couldn’t ever since he could remember, but never the freedom other children had. “A prince shouldn’t dillydally shillyshally,” his tutor would click her tongue in disdain, brandishing a pen this way and that, marching up and down his room as Noctis pretends to be deeply engrossed in Lucian history just so she’d fade into a blur like one of the many wallpapers in his room. They all come and go just to stuff him full of knowledge as if education is a simple process of boiling textbooks into soups for him to devour. No matter how much they bore him to tears, they’ll never admit what they see: A young prince, hungering for the sun on his skin than the pages on his fingertips.

But he was weak.

After all, princes have to follow their father’s steadfast steps.

So what good was a prince who couldn’t walk?

Noctis has his back to the icy wall, but the scar on his spine burns white hot. He could just reach for it if he wants, searching under his shirt, feeling for the ridge where skin turns plastic.

Marilith.

His first taste of death came in a pool of red. Then came fear, shrouding him unlike any other fear he conquered. This was the monster under his bed, and it came for him. This was what it meant to be the prince of a kingdom, a price he paid in blood. This was death, and it wanted his life. The Crownsguard were diced into proportions by the Marilith’s blades, their coffins being the cars they drove in. Dying in place of the prince was regarded as the utmost honour one could hope to attain, but what good will a gold medal do to an empty coffin whose mangled corpse couldn’t even be retrieved? Nothing.
Things could’ve been different had Noctis not encountered that daemon. He replayed this scenario repeatedly, holding up the record to the sunlight to examine it in different angles as though a newer truth might unveil itself and undo what has been done. In another world, he never would’ve had to be wheeled around as an invalid, shoulders bearing the sympathies of many. Queen Sylva is never a casualty and Lunafreya wouldn’t be robbed of her parents, of her brother’s independence, leaving her as Niflheim’s prisoner. He never would’ve pushed everyone away just so they’re safe, safer where they are not a smudged scarlet on the floor. His nanny was an unforgettable example.

Anyone and everyone serving the royal line will be sacrificed for his safety. The Crownsguard, the Kingsglaive, the militia and the mass, all reduced to one thing: A fodder for his safety. Including his retainers, his friends. Ignis, Gladio, Prompto.

Ignis had been a staunch devout of an educationist in the very beginning. Graduated the top of his class in the Royal Academy during his earlier years, groomed into what they wanted him to be: His personal advisor. On paper, that is. In reality, Noctis craved the human touch Ignis possessed through their first handshake. Though duty remained a permanent distinction separating their friendship, Ignis isn’t as much as a stickler he could be at times. He’s the brain behind their nightly escapades out of the Citadel while Noctis is the brawn—or the one persistently convincing Ignis that it’s a good idea and they’re never going to get caught, thanks to his meticulous mapping of the Citadel’s hallways. They clambered through open windows, snuck past guards, and crawled in metal vents just for that small reward of the stars studding the night skies. And perhaps, for Ignis himself, the reward truly lies in Noctis’ brilliant smile.

Then there was Gladio.

Every swordsman marches into battle with a shield, just like how his dad has Clarus. The Amicitias, a lineage of Dobermans on a leash. All hard edges and buzzed haircuts, barking at Noctis’ shadow to pick up his pace. “Again,” he’d snarl after tossing Noctis into the air like a softball. “Again,” he’d groan when Noctis tripped over his parries and introduced his face to the hardwood for the umpteenth time this week. “Again,” he’d scowl as the TV screen burns red with K.O. and Noctis fistpumps the air, seizing victory for the fifth time in a row. Again, and again, and again. They fought. They made up. And they fought again. Gladio gave him none of the niceties as his Shield. His reproaches bruised Noctis both literally and figuratively, hitting his body blue all the way to his heart. He’s nothing like Ignis’ thoughtful insights into Noctis’ tantrums, but strangely, Noctis doesn’t think he needs a second Ignis. Gladio’s okay just the way he is, all bites and barks and bruises too.

Along came Prompto.

His favourite animal? Chocobo. Favourite game? Assassin’s Creed, but he still can’t decide between Black Flag or Origins. His favourite subject to photograph? Noctis. Prompto jogs every morning, works part-time at the camera store up the City Square, eats all Noctis’ leftover greens. He’s the epitome of healthy living, an antithesis to Noctis’ snacks-and-soda galore. But the way the sun loves him, kissing his cheeks to leave freckles in her wake, bounding up the school gates to reach Noctis’ side, it’s a breath of fresh air for him. Nobody’s ever seen him like this before. Like they’re best friends from high school to university and more. Like he’s less of a prince and more of a person.

And then. You.

If he is the True King, then you are the Denied Daughter of the Andronicus. Unloved by your father, unrecognized by your family. Willing to be banished from the comforts a noblewoman should enjoy, retreating to the safety of the Citadel. But did you complain? No, you probably don’t even have time to entertain such thoughts. You’re too busy with chasing your dreams just to succeed your father, to complete your thesis, to live life unlike what you experienced before. You’ve smiled, you’ve
laughed, you’ve made friends, and you’ve tasted what he offered. You swore to climb the ranks just to serve him. Who is he to deny you what you want?

Noctis casts a glance at your figure lying prone, head on Byron’s lap.

He knows the risk he takes each time he laces their lives with magic. All the fainting and retching as the average human body adjusts to the Crystal’s intrusion. All the hardships in the future that Niflheim brings. All the lives he might lose. It is a promise that his shared strength will serve as both protection not only for him, but for his friends as well. Senior Glaives commanded the Crystal’s magic through his dad, who also bore the brunt of sustaining the barrier doming Insomnia. The strain shows well enough through accelerated ageing and declining health, something Noctis had closely witnessed in the years that passed. The king suffers as much as his people do. Soon enough, it’ll be his turn. His turn to put on the ring and become the 114th King of Lucis.

And to do that, he needs to be strong, stronger than his father, stronger than the Glaives, and strong enough to protect everyone who risked their lives for him.

Such is the fate of the True King.

The first signs of your consciousness start with a sound, stealing his attention. A soft, weak moan. Noctis uncurls himself from where he’s lounged by the walls, perking up. You rose from your fainting like you rose from your slumber, all sleepy yawns while rubbing your eyes. Like nothing’s wrong, you pull yourself away from Byron’s dismayed fussing, batting off his constant mothering. Then, looking around the hall, he sees confusion creasing your brows, unanswered questions forming on your lips but never rolling off your tongue.

Only after your eyes travel from the high ceilings to the empty armours lining the walls, you catch him in the distance and beckon him over, mimicking a lucky cat calling in customers. “Prince—where’s everyone?”

Plodding over, he drops into the spot next to yours and reminds himself not to peer at your face unless he wants to get smacked in the nose again. “Nyx went back to patrolling. Prom’s at the shooting range. Gladio’s with Specs at the Royal Arsenal since they’re checking out the new shipment of weapons coming in.” After a beat, letting the information sink into your addled head, Noctis swallows. “Uh. Hey, you’re feeling okay?”

You nod, a little too enthusiastic, then regretting your decision seven seconds later. Swallowing down what seems to be an urge to retch, you doubled over with your arms wrapped around your midriff, trembling. “Um. No.” Muffled, but the suffering is evident in your wavering voice. “It’s—ah, a little too much to take in. Kind of,” you shudder, shoulders heaving with the effort of keeping it together, “just kind of—nauseous? Overwhelmed. Headache. Sounds, buzzing sounds like what Nyx said. Too much.”

With how things are turning out, the side effects are probably starting to kick in. Byron runs a sympathetic hand down your back, silenced for once, though the conflicting emotions on his face speak volumes. He brings you to a half-seating position, listlessly leaning most of your weight against him for support.

“This is truly a disaster, milady,” he mutters as your head lolls back into his shoulder. “You look like stale bread.”

Somewhere deep inside, you must’ve summoned the lasts of your strength to roll your eyes. “Thanks for the—accurate description, I feel—like stale bread too.” Momentarily repositioning yourself so you’d fit into the crook of Byron’s arm, you mouth words into his blazer. “What—time is it?”
“A little past two,” Noctis supplies. “You’ve been out for quite a bit.”

You make some indistinct noise in the back of your throat that doesn’t sound pleased, tugging Byron on his cuff. “Go – back, ’s close to father’s teatime. You can’t – miss it.”

Now it’s Byron’s turn to mimic your little eye-rolling, injecting it with a dramatic flair. “And whatever shall I do with you, milady? Leave you here to die?”

You can’t really die from something like this since Gladio, Ignis, and Prompto are living proofs on how the Crystal doesn’t kill anyone. He can count on Byron to exaggerate everything. “It’s okay, I’ll take over from here,” Noctis steps into the conversation once again, knowing all too well that he’s standing on the ceremony of you vomiting your guts out—or whatever’s left of your breakfast if you took any. “Want me to take you upstairs?”

That is a line he shouldn’t cross if Byron’s around, apparently.

“We’ll manage quite well on our own.” Byron’s hand on your hip tightens just a fraction, almost imperceptible if Noctis hadn’t been watching closely. “Thank you for your kind offer though, I’ll be sure to be in your debt for several millennia to come.”

Drained from all strength to nag your butler, you throw Byron a mildly peeved look, shaking your head in exasperation. Noctis just shrugs when he catches your gaze, as if you’re apologizing on your butler’s behalf. A jerk, yeah, he knows that much because it’s nothing new if it’s coming from Byron and his prejudice against princes—or whatever that’s up his ass. Surprisingly strong despite his deceivingly lean build, Byron hoists you to your feet, wrapping an arm around your middle to keep your hobbles steady. You manage to wave your farewell like a disjointed ragdoll, one that Noctis receives with a chuckle and returns with his own.

“See – you in King’s Knight—?” you grit out, borderline wheezing now.

Byron, of course, pins you with a threatening glare with his lips pursed, and Noctis, well, Noctis likes pissing Byron off. So he nods as casually as he could, ignoring the well-aimed scowl Byron’s sending his way. “Sure, I’ll text you a Room ID later.”

They’re such simple, insignificant words that meant nothing to others, but they’re more than enough to make you smile for him—even if seconds later, you’re hurling all over Byron’s shoes.

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

(°(°_°)5(°_°)5(°_°)5(°_°)°) intensifies.

1) so remember what i said about this going down the canon path? yea we’re doing a sliiiight detour for pre-canon into omen route no takebacks now. for those who haven’t watched the omen trailer, you can do so by clicking right HERE! as much as i love the canon story, i can’t help but to wonder what’d happen if they go down the path of the omen trailer so here it is. pls stick around and watch as they ruin the world together (no). (DON’T WORRY I PROMISED HAPPY ENDING SO HAPPY ENDING IT IS). (BUT BEFORE HAPPY ENDINGS THERE NEEDS TO BE SUFFERING.) can i get an amen for demon!noct in omen trailer.
2) we’re going to delve into more of noctis and reader spending more time together (hope you readers don’t mind that) because this is the flowering arc for a reason. we’ll explore noctis’ thoughts and dilemmas and how it overlaps with the reader’s own ambitions and how they’ll work together as one. 8’) the next arc is going to be pretty. it’ll be fluffy. and angsty. and watch them fall in love with each other and pretty much go down the path of the omen trailer.

3) Hope you guys liked this long chapter, I couldn’t find a good time to cut off everything so here it is, roughly 9k words. (ALSO THIS IS PRETTY MUCH THE ENTIRE REASON WHY I WROTE LPC TBH, I WANTED AN Omen ROUTE GDI, THE CONCEPT IS JUST TOO GOOD TO LET GO.) But good news is next chapter is super cute! And good news is, episode ignis is definitely going to ruin us all 8’)

4) Thanks for all the comments and kudos and the never-ending support for this fic, I truly hope you guys will enjoy the pre-Omen route, Noctis’ progress from prince to king, the eventual demon!Noct, and so forth. :D

PREVIEW:
Something tells him he should lament the loss—but the loss of what, exactly? He cannot truly have lost something if he does not remember what it is in the first place, isn’t it? Yet, the image you cast against a backdrop of fire is one of love, a severe attraction that ran for many months. It makes him forget he stands at the cusp of a shattered world when you stand at the other end, awaiting him with your arms wide open.

P/S: Noctis definitely watched JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure because his Ultimate Pose says so. JJBA is amazing.
flowering: the unloved and the loveless

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

flowering

THERE IS FIRE IN YOUR EYES, setting your pupils aglow. Curious thing, your eyes, for they draw him close and closer and closest. They never used to be that colour, that strange, infernal colour. Once upon a time, he gazed into your eyes, the glassy depths reflecting the blues in his. Now, nothing is left behind.

Something tells him he should lament the loss—but the loss of what, exactly? He cannot truly have lost something if he does not remember what it is in the first place, isn’t it? Yet, the image you cast against a backdrop of fire is one of love, a severe attraction that ran for many months. It makes him forget he stands on the cusp of a shattered world when you stand at the other end, awaiting him with your arms wide open.

Yes, you are always a creature who wants to be embraced, wants to be cuddled, don’t you?

He can provide that. He’s the only one who can provide that.

Each step he takes on the cracked ground is heavy, the earth pulling his feet in vain efforts of thwarting him in his journey. But he is a fighter, a warrior rivalling his father’s tall tales. Even if each step threatens to delimb him, he preserves if it means reaching your side. The expression you wear is nothing like he’s ever seen before, nothing like the small smiles you feed that Glaive, nothing like the longing looks you cast at an albino. The one you reserve for him is one born out of love and nothing but sheer love. It makes him want to card his fingers through your hair and kiss your scalp. It makes him want to brush his lips against your fluttering eyelids, just to still you from your nightmares. It makes his want turn into need.

Come here, Noctis, you mouth at him, wordless. Come here and let me love you.

And who is he to deny what his world wants?

He reaches out for your face, wants to receive the words on your tongue with his, only to reach for his ceiling instead.

“Nightmare, Noct?” Ignis’ tone is quiet, standing somewhere by his bedside.

The world comes back to Noctis in successions. A ceiling with two fluorescent tubes lightly burned on its ends. Sunlight filtering past his chintzy curtains, flecks of dust highlighted in the air. Scratchy blanket tangled around his ankles; that explains why walking had been difficult in his dream. Noctis lets his outstretched hand fall against the mattress with a thump, blinking the sleep from his eyes. Ignis, if anything, clears his throat to indicate he’s still there.

“Noct?” his Advisor tries again, a touch louder this time. “Are you all right?”

Finding his voice proves to be difficult. He swallows and fists his hand on the bed sheet. “Yeah,” Noctis answers, gravelly and utterly lacking conviction as opposed to his answer. “Yeah—yeah, I’m okay. Just. Give me a minute.”

A minute is a sliver of 24 hours, yet Ignis’ words are full of reluctance at the thought of loaning him
a moment in privacy. “Very well. Should you need anything, I’ll be outside.” Shuffles of footsteps lead to the door, but it stops just as soon as his door creaks open. “Please hurry, your class will start soon.”

With that, he leaves Noctis to entertain the weight of his dreams once more.

**someone had been following him,** it seems. *as one who is highly attuned with the art of stalking and ruthless killing, getting followed is an occurrence as common as sweating on a balmy summer’s day.* only, byron realizes that he is getting stalked not on the streets of insomnia, but right in the very walls of the andronicus manor. *this, by all means, isn’t the work of a professional. this is done by an amateur since only amateurs wear perfume to work. leaving behind a cloying fragrance as evidence of its existence, the mollifying blend of lavender and baby powder is one byron hasn’t smelled in so many years.*

dusting your bookcase and rearranging the titles in alphabetical order, byron carries on with his duty as though there isn’t someone standing by the door, permeating your room with that very same smell you loved. he knows this, knows this very well. planned for it, even. setting aside his feather duster, with his back turned to the perpetrator, he is free to withdraw a sleek blade from some of his collection housed in his room. *it’s a beautiful piece the length of his finger to his wrist, one composed entirely from silver with opulent carvings circling its handle. the only reason he could afford this lethal beauty is thanks to his generous salary, in which he should also indirectly thank the snake quintus himself—not that he ever would.*

byron’s fingers trace the edge of its glinting blade, having sharpened it yesterday.

it’s too bad, really, that it had to come to this.

he turns so sharply, so abruptly with an ill intention to catch the familiar culprit off-guard, launching the blade in the air. it cuts through every resistance there is in physics, slicing the distance from the bookcase to the exit in seconds. he sees it, sees the horror in her eyes as she ducks behind the heavy mahogany, wedging the silver in its sill. footsteps flee the scene, just like that day. byron straightens up and clicks his tongue. awfully pesky thing, wanting him to give chase. doesn’t she know he’s busy enough with handling your schedule and house chores? awfully, awfully pesky of her.

well, this is certainly a game of cat-and-mouse he can entertain for the sake of putting an end to it. and how does it end again? oh yes, with the mouse pierced between the cat’s canines.

byron tracks down the runaway stalker with an unerring calmness, knowing full well there is no escape from this manor. none that he does not know of, all 32 exits—78, if he counts crashing through the windows. if she turns right, she heads to the west wing, where the backyard traps her with its high walls. if she skitters left, she risks going to the foyer, making it a spectacle he certainly won’t object to. she certainly can run, but she obviously can’t hide. it shouldn’t set a smile on his face, but it does all the same.

of course, he isn’t a strategist of a great calibre like quintus, so he overlooks one crucial detail: an elderly maid aiding her escape, shaking as she rams the culprit into a room behind her and stands steadfast, or as steadfast as she could at such a delicate age. one solid knock and he could take her out, though he doesn’t. he wants answers and he wants them now.

from the inner pocket of his blazer, byron makes a show of withdrawing a secondary piece from his collection. *it is a twin of the blade, the second sibling out of the quartet. he hears her gasp and oh, it’s such a miserable sound that stretches his smile wider. “for each lie you tell, i will remove*
something from your body. and believe me, i will make it hurt. are we clear?"

her teeth rattle with her words. must’ve been dentures, he supposes. “y-you won’t hu-hurt milady. over m-my d-dead body.”

“yes, i suppose,” he hums agreeingly, “i’ll kill you first, then i’ll kill her. now, let’s make this quick.”

her resolve caves in faster than punching her in her face, then she’s huddling herself as close as possible to the crook of the doorknob. “please, please,” she wheezes, something he already knows where this is going, “milady mnemosyne doesn’t mean any harm. please just let her continue watching you, continue watching her daughter. she doesn’t hurt anyone. she just wants to see, so please.” she squeezes her eyes shut, tears bumping the wrinkles on her face. “just let her see the child, let her live like this until the end of her life.”

obviously it’s mnemosyne andronicus, who else could it be?

that bit is glaringly obvious from the start. her full cheeks have grown sunken and the lustre in her hair is a dulled knife, but nobody else wears that perfume in this house. throwing a wrench into his plans, as always, the good-for-nothing astrals are meddling in mortal affairs again. mnemosyne has no place in this house now, not when her role as a birth-giver has long expired. her untimely reappearance will ruin all the years he’s worked on you, softening your clay shaped by his hands. at this rate, you’ll fall short of your ambitions to overturn quintus’ dictatorship—and that is a concept he will never compromise, not when the stakes are too high.

“from what i understand,” byron starts, slow and measured in case the old hag has some hearing deficiency he isn’t aware of, “she’s been under strict orders not to be let out ever since lord quintus took her in his custody. i don’t suppose you’d like to answer to him regarding your transgressions, do you?”

“no—no, please, don’t say anything to master.” more tears cascade, staining her ugly uniform. snot drips from her nose and ugh, byron hates it when people start talking through tears as if anything’s going to make sense. “milady mnemosyne truly loves her daughter but master’s a cruel man. he says she’ll bring the world to ruin like solheim—milady doesn’t believe it, milady wants the young child to run away—but master is so cruel, so, so, so cruel.”

that bit on cruelty is an experience byron understands, but not the other half. “solheim?” he repeats the word, turning it over in his mouth as though its history can be tasted. “what’s that?”

she’s full-out quaking now, more tears bursting from her eyes as she hastily smears them over her face with the back of her hand. “i don’t know—that’s all i know believe in me—so please just let milady look at the child, please, i’m begging you.”

the hag doesn’t seem to be capable of lying because she certainly looks as brainless as she appears. she did share an interesting tidbit, so byron grudgingly grunts his agreement and stows the blade again. before he turns to leave, he taps the snivelling maid on her crooked nose, and gently reminds her of this, a small act of kindness scattered among his many bloodstains:

“if i catch anyone else talking about our meeting, be very rest assured that you will not wake up from your sleep. do keep that in mind every time you open your mouth. farewell, and may you die from old age than my hands.”

MAGIC IS A FICKLE THING, unlike anything penned by famed authors with many novels
backing their credibility in prose. Elementalists bring forth flames from Hell to mix it with lightning from the skies, crisping those blocking their path. Necromancy, a gift your upgraded Kaliva possessed in King’s Knight, allowed you to resurrect incapacitated party members and manipulate the dark arts. Yet none of them came close to describing the dull hum at the back of your head, discernible only if you concentrate on listening to the air. Nyx was right about the whole buzzing thing; sometimes it comes off sounding like electricity, and other times, it fades out much like how one tunes out a radio. If you carried on with your day’s work, you’d hardly remember that Noctis’ magic channels through your veins, a part of himself he readily loaned to you.

High school history classes taught everyone the same story over and over again: The Crystal is the divine cornerstone of the Kingdom of Lucis, entrusted in the hands of the Lucis Caelum for safeguarding. To the public, it isn’t something worthy of their concern. They’re just the common folk, going to school, getting good grades, making friends, graduating high school and entering university, and before they know it, they’re manufactured by the masses as a workforce to strengthen the Lucian economy. That’s got nothing to do with magic. Magic is just some story everyone knows —except, nobody cares because it’s nobody’s duty but the royal family’s. If you grew up in a normal household, you suspect you, too, would brush it off and say, “It’s not my job, not my duty, so why should I care?”

Unfortunately, it is your job and it is your duty.

The Andronici aren’t like the others. The Amicitias are the sworn Shields of the Kings, proudly passed down from one generation to the other. The same should’ve been in store for you—had you been a son. When you were young, mother tried to pacify father’s hostility by kissing your forehead and whispering that he didn’t want you to bear the brunt of duties—burdensome duties, guilt, playing with others’ lives just to keep yours safe. But you weren’t fooled. It wasn’t about the duty or sparing you from sins, it was just father’s prejudice towards your kind, towards you.

The longer you muse on the matter, the more you’re reassured by your decisions thus far.

Defying father.

Coming to the Citadel.

Meeting Noctis.

And now, wielding a fraction of his strength to serve him.

Seated at your table once more, you’re clicking through the pictures Byron amassed. You’re nowhere near done and there’s still so much for you to process, but it’s such a shame that they’re all bringing up the same obstacle you couldn’t solve: What are they? Monsters, you know that much. But what significance do they hold to Niflheim? Does this mean that they’re forsaking MTs for these creatures instead? No, that couldn’t be it. Some of these looked too inconvenient to be hauled into dropships and exported to every part of Lucis, unlike MTs and their standardized humanoid assemblage. You frown as you venture into the next set of diagrams, trying to make out its implication.

Byron is at his favourite spot, messing around in your kitchenette with an earbud popped in. Probably listening to some peppy pop again as he diligently worked on a baking tray. “How do you feel, milady? Any better yet?”

Better is subjective. Nausea is the first to stop after you accidentally emptied the bare contents of your stomach on Byron, earning another one of his infamously his too-wide smiles. After spending a good day in bed, easily losing yourself between the sheets as you kept thinking you melted through
your mattress, you could somewhat totter in a straight line without clutching Byron like a lifeline.

Looking up from your computer, you suppose you’re unfazed by the latest hurdle you crossed. “I’ve had worse days.”

That has Byron glancing over his shoulder before turning to whatever it is that he’s doing. “I know, but I’m still worried. I’ve come to realize that passing out from exhaustion and passing out from magic are two different things. One is something I can control, and the other has the Astrals laughing at me. I’m just thankful I didn’t end up ringing Dr Jude to check up on you. You haven’t written to him in a while, have you?”

Fainting is just surprise sleep in other words. It isn’t *that* bad seeing how much you’re a pro at it, like how Noctis is the Champion of Punishments. Seeing how you fainted enough these past few days, it’s safe to say that the worst has passed and you’re now able to perform basic functions without embarrassing the rest of the 20-year-olds in Eos. The moment the Crystal’s magic jolted your consciousness, darkness stole you from this world and erased your existence. Dissociated from the rest of the living as everything is placed on hold. As much as the whole experience was supposed to be magical because you were technically receiving magic, it was underwhelming. The novels definitely lied about fantastic fireworks going off behind closed eyelids, or that unearthly light consuming one’s body in animated cutscenes. Nothing had been out of the ordinary once the Astrals pressed the play button on your life again, no glow, no sparkles, no memories. Byron was there as usual, his lap a familiar pillow. And then there was Noctis too, an *incredibly* worried Noctis right in your face when he almost unleashed an onslaught of interrogation.

Flicking through another picture on your desktop, you take note of the beast’s elaborate contraptions before moving onto the next. “Not *yet*. Soon, but not now.” Another click, and your mouth curls in one side. “Actually, if you have time to worry about the Astrals laughing at you, it means you have the time to help me make sense of these stuffs. The suspense is killing me.”

“Aren’t they obvious?” Byron reaches overhead, withdrawing another baking tray. “Monsters, Niffs love their monsters. Especially when they get to play god and make them their ragdolls.” He shudders, not without exaggeration, switching on the tap to get water running. “Whatever it is they’re experimenting with, it’s clearly not working out. *Yet*. We need to be thankful for small mercies.”

Small mercies they are, but that isn’t the right answer. “It'll definitely end up working out sooner or later,” you retort, pausing at an incredibly intrinsic rendition of a *thing* with a glowing core jutting from the centre of its chest. Something about the sight has your breakfast mush churning inside. “And when it does work out, Lucis has absolutely nothing to defend with.”

“There’s…the Kingsglaive.” Byron sounds somewhat uncomfortable at his own uncertainty, setting down the tray with more force than intended. “If all else fails, the Walls should work.”

You bite off a sigh, already conjuring five different ways Niflheim could play this out. “Exactly. We’ve been depending on them too much, that’s the whole problem.” Minimizing the window, you glance at the Crown City landscape splayed before your eyes, knowing full well all can be turned into rubble and dust if the empire desires so. “Theoretically speaking, even if Insomnia survives another war, the rest of Lucis won’t. Our citizens aren’t only Insomnians, there are other people out there. Other people like you. We can’t just ignore them, they’re Lucians too, just that they’re born outside the Wall. It doesn’t make their worth any lesser than Insomnians.”

The sounds coming from your kitchenette stops for an abrupt second before picking up again, this time much slower in pace. “…I concur, milady. Thank you for thinking of people like me.”

Spoken so haltingly for the biting butler, you couldn’t help but to inspect his silence. How rare it is
for him to openly acknowledge your reference to his past. Never one to openly showcase his sordid background, he feigns nobility the same way you feign innocence in front of the prince. Byron keeps his shirts buttoned up to his neck, hiding a silver necklace behind thin cotton fabric. The holes in his ears, all fourteen of them, are remnants of a poorly kept secret privy for two. Yet, he still goes on with this charade, parading the prim uniform of a servant, even if the Ducati is his choice of a ride when he goes shopping. He carries with himself the duty of a servant signed under your name, just as much as you carry out your own obligations not only to your king, but to the rest of the kingdom.

Without his loyalty, you wouldn’t have made it this far.

And you should protect what little you have.

Looking down to where your hands had balled up your shirt, you muster a feeble nod. “You’re welcome, Byron. Always.”

Byron doesn’t answer, his broad back still turned to you. He just wedges in the other side of his earbud, shutting you out of his world. Never an unkind gesture, you know him too well by now.

Something beeps, stealing your attention, and you quickly glance at your phone. The screen isn’t lit. Huh. It’s Byron who stops working, checking his phone. Seconds later, he twists to meet your bewildered eyes. “It’s Gladio,” he remarks, scrolling through his phone. “He’s asking if you’re feeling better, milady. I just texted him what you told me and – oh,” another beep graces him with another smile, “he wants you to come down for practice later. You certainly seem well so I’ll agree on your behalf.”

As if your frown isn’t deep enough, your brows draw tighter. “That’s weird…since when did you have Gladio’s number?”

Byron pockets his phone and appears, at most, nonplussed at your suspicion. Ever the actor he is, his hands flutter about in the most elaborate display of indifference. “Why not? He seems like a reasonable man and a good fighter. Rather than your awful choice of comrades being the babied prince and the chocobo boy,” he scrunches his nose at the nicknames, “I’d prefer it if you associate yourself with Gladio and that lovely man—Ignis, was it? You could learn so much more from those two than the comedic duo.”

You stare at Byron’s growing smile, finding this all too convenient—and far too suspicious indeed. “You’re just saying that because Ignis cooks too, you biased butler. Weren’t you the one chewing me out for having friends in the first place? Did a miracle happen or something while I was out?”

He only scoffs at your insistence, flicking his ponytail over his shoulder. “Milady, being a grown-up is a wonderful thing. I learnt that stopping children from doing what they want is counter-effective to my cause, so it’s best for me to let you explore this friendship on your own. That way, when all hell breaks loose and you’re suffering the consequences of your actions, I get to be the one gloating ‘I told you so’. Experience is the best teacher, or so they say.”

There you have it, his truest motive all along, unveiled in this special episode filmed in the Citadel. Your butler lives and breathes just for the sake of poking fun at you. Greatly amused at your bitter expression, Byron turns to his private project and waves you off like shooing a fly.

“Now, excuse me milady, I have brownies to bake. Hopefully they’ll be done in time, so we can enjoy them after training is done.”
“obstinate buffaloes, they are,” quintus starts one day over a cup of breakfast tea, rubbing his forehead. “I’ve had it with them. They see nothing but only the things they want to see.”

for someone who keeps yapping on and on about how a great strategist should be someone unaffected by emotions, quintus is certainly a fucking huge hypocrite. Here he is, venting his heart out to a stoic byron, one who’s rearranged his expression to reveal nothing of his thoughts, and babbling nonstop about his stressful work life. If byron were to be petty, in which he thinks he more than deserves to be the pettiest person in lucis, his life as a babysitter, a murderer, and a butler is pretty damn stressful by itself. And nobody’s thought of hearing him out, how about that.

Arms folded behind his back, byron emulates a statue and does nothing more.

And quintus doesn’t seem to mind having a heart-to-heart session to a statue, it seems. “If we bolster our defences with the revival of the military, we can at least be granted a chance of salvaging all the fights we lost on our lands. We lost galahd, we lost gungnir, and we lost valesti. We cannot afford to lose more.”

byron despises quintus from the bottom of his decrepit heart. He truly does. Yet the man makes dastardly good points, one that byron cannot counter. Insomnia is a child dependent on its mother’s protection, the walls. On its own, it is but a helpless toddler whose candy got stolen by niflheim, the big bad bully of all nations. While they might not be able to combat the mts and daemons if they reestablish the military during its first year, the second and third and subsequent years could be better. It’s that simple. Gaining a peaceful stand as a beacon of light and hope does nothing for its people, doesn’t feed the needy, doesn’t revive the dead. It’s time for lucis to wake up and realize that a dark age will soon come.

Byron is a lot more eloquent than you. “I usually do not make it a habit to cuss in front of newly made acquaintances, but this is fucking amazing.”

Gladio barks with another laugh at the starstruck look on Byron’s face, preening at the heartfelt praise. You’ve seen this before, that juvenile glee Byron gets when he’s got another magazine spread with Claire Farron on the cover, or bought something that Claire Farron endorsed. It’s always Claire
Farron this, or Claire Farron that. If it’s not Claire Farron getting him giddy, the only other option left is a blade. You can’t blame him for being hypnotized by rows upon rows of glinting polearms shelved in stacks, brackets of swords decorating the walls as far as the eyes could see. Behind polished glass are firearms of varying builds and sizes, from submachine guns to the regular Glock mounted on steel grills. You’re craning your head to get an intimate look at the infinite depths of this armoury when Gladio waves you in.

“Welcome to the Royal Arsenal,” he proclaims, striding backwards into his territory with arms thrown wide. “Ignis and I got the latest stuffs in, so you’re in luck if you’re lookin’ for something new.”

You don’t know where to start when all your words have escaped you. Panels of LED lights overhead made sure everything dazzled like diamonds, silver edges to a sword more enticing than the hard rock itself. Your butler’s already wandering off with his fingers grazing the long stretch of a collapsible scythe, murmuring incomprehensible things under his breath, lost in delusions only a weapon can incite. You’re not any better, having already located a wall of scimitars and admiring a hilt tastefully carved in gold. The role of the babysitter successfully passed down to Gladio in light of Byron’s inability to function, the Shield has a warm hand between your shoulder blades as he points at the swords.

“Might be a little too heavy for ya,” he advises, meeting your questioning gaze with an answer. “For now, anyway. Once we’ve built up your muscles, you can have a go at ‘em.”

“Swords are the staple weapon in an RPG, so I definitely need to learn how to wield one,” you insist, moving past him to feast your eyes on a wall full of katana with their ornamented guards done in Lucian crests. Underneath each blade lies a complementary scabbard lacquered to the point where its reflection catches your eyes, corded wrappings knotted tight.

Gladio’s eyes roll skyward and he does this little shake of his head that says a lot on his stand, following you from behind. “Muscles, kid, muscles.” Big bear paws leave your back to ring your upper arm in one hand, giving you a squeeze. You shoot him a look warning him with what he’s about to say, and Gladio mischievously allows himself another squeeze. “Ya either swing the sword around, or the sword swings you around.”

“Muscles are overrated anyway,” you grumble, unsuccessfully wrenching your captive arm out of the Shield’s tight grasp. When Gladio doesn’t even budge an inch, you kind of wish Noctis’ magic would zap away his Shield’s annoyingly mocking grin. Fighting against Gladio, the man the Astrals decided to inflate to the size of a behemoth, is assuredly going to end up in your loss. The strategist in you says giving up would help in conserving energy, but it’ll swell his ego. The fighter in you, however, yells for you to struggle harder against him in hopes it’d loosen up his hold or something. You’re tugging for your arm’s rights, and Gladio tugs back just a wee bit harder to show off how easily he subdues you. Any harder than that and you think you’d successfully lose a limb to him in this game of tug of war. “Seriously—Gladio—you’re the one who’s going to be swinging me around at this rate—”

“What was that?” he taunts. “You want me to swing you around? Don’t mind if I do.”

Horror crosses your face at the suggestion, struggling intensified. “Gladio—don’t you dare—”

It turns out that ‘don’t you dare’ is Gladio Speak™ for ‘I dare you’. You’re not quick enough to face off against a Shield who’s got years and years of experience building his muscles. The subtle tug on your arm turns into a downright yank and your nose collides with a mouthful of T-shirt before something swoops under your knees. Your shrill cry bounces off metal walls when a wildly grinning Gladio goes, “Upsy daisy,” and scoops you right off the ground singlehandedly like he’s carrying a
bagful of groceries, like he’s hoisting his broadsword around, like he’s moving a pillow—and
certainly not another human being!

Death grip latching instantaneously on his muscled chest, tottering unsteadily in his one-armed carry,
you desperately cling onto him with your life. “Gladio—put me down this instant—“

“Not comfy enough?” Gladio counters, the sharp arch to his cocked eyebrow certainly a cliff you’d
jump off at a moment’s notice. He’s jostling you around a little when he’s adjusting his hold into
something he thinks cozier for you, pulling involuntary yelps and high-pitched squeals you’re
embarrassed to admit as yours. “Or do you wanna ride on my shoulder? You like that?”

If you weren’t already concerned with how your reflection looks stupidly aghast in the glass panels,
clawing Gladio with Titan’s strength coursing through your nerves, you would’ve bopped him right
in the face. He’s that close anyway, just a little boop from your palm will tell him to stop messing
around right now— “Gladio, I swear to Gods if you don’t put me down, I’ll—“

“—be terribly upset and there’ll be no brownies after our tour.”

Byron!

Your mind squeals at his impeccable timing in saving you time and time again, inwardly
cheering for your saviour. Gladio huffs at the intrusion, turning around to award a disproving albino
standing eerily straight by the halberds. Permanently fixed in a strangled smile and ruddy eyes in
upturned crescents, that’s definitely not a happy face. But that unhappy face makes Gladio happy,
doing a one-armed wave from your head to your legs dangling in the air like a kid who’s showing
off his prized collection.

“Nothing going on,” he says, grinning lopsidedly, “just tryna make her happy.”

“Pretty sure happy and distressed are on opposite ends of the spectrum, you know,” you retort,
though it falls on Gladio’s deaf ears.

Byron takes stock of your horror and leans against the metal shelving with his arms crossed. Always
hard to impress, that butler of yours. Thankfully this time, it works to your advantage. “Uuhh, happy.
Sure. I’m very happy too, if you must know.” Then he squints at Gladio’s unfading grin. “You
clearly get off from showing your strength, don’t you?”

“Can’t say that I don’t,” Gladio admits with nary a guilt in his offhanded shrug. Uncomfortable
warmth spreads from your ears to your chest when his amber eyes are dark and dirty, looking at you
with a corner of his mouth sneaking upwards. “We all get off on different things at night, ain’t that
right?”

If that’s supposed to mean exactly what you thought he meant, the shock leapt to your cheeks.
Gladio’s roguish charm undoubtedly magnetized those around him to stay since most would initially
be drawn to his arresting physique and bold ink that should’ve been preserved as Lucian high art, at
the very least. Hearing him talk would seduce everyone’s pants off in thirty seconds flat since he’s
got that perfectly balanced ratio of devilish debonair going on—not to mention he’s maxed out his
CHARM stat at +999, so that’s pretty hard to resist. Fortunately, Kaliva comes with high RES, so
you’re very much saved from the CHARM status effect, only answering his smouldering gaze with a
mildly flustered blink.

Ever unimpressed, ever hard to please, Byron saves the day by intoning, “That’s nice to hear, dear,”
in the same way a grandma says to her grandson after asking about his day. Never one to waste his
time, he covers the distance between him and Gladio to outstretch his arms like someone’s about to
pass the laundry load to him. “Now, please return her to me.”
Gladio breaks off the disconcerting eye contact he shares with you to aim a smug smirk at your butler. “You sure those noodle arms can take it?”

Byron tips his head aside as white bangs curtained visibly mirthful eyes, matching a barely perceptible smile. To any other, it would’ve looked like a trick of the light passing through the night. To you, it’s a dangerously unstable look just waiting. “I assure you, these noodle arms have held her more than you ever did.”

Gladio’s none the wiser to the threat, his chortling mimicking a volcano ready to erupt. “Fine, you win this round. Take her.”

Like an illegal commodity traded between two gangs, Gladio conveniently unloads you in Byron’s waiting embrace. You’re unsurprised to find him tense under your touch when an arm hooks right under your knees and the other goes on your back, holding you tight. Held this close, moulded against his body like the shadow to your light, you could feel the hard edges of knives bumping your ribcage. You know each of their names, the silvery siblings going by Astaroth, Belial, Lilith, and Nephilim. After all, you’ve used Astaroth to pin and Lilith to cut.

And Gladio is lucky not to learn their existence today.

Byron gently gets you on your feet once more as the Shield muses, “Y’know, you’re pretty impressive. Didn’t expect you to have some muscle under all that suit.”

Ever unimpressed, ever hard to please, ever the actor ready to dramatize a play, Byron laughs softly. His greatest strength lies not in his knives but in his smile, for he’s learnt from a strategist of the greatest calibre.

“I may be beautiful, but I am just as deadly. Don’t let that fool you.”

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**TO: THE ARCHITECT**

**FROM: NOCTGAR**

**SUBJECT:** [none]

**MESSAGE:** assignments suck.

That had been his opening statement some thirty minutes ago to an offline Kaliva. Prompto occupies the opposite end of his dining table, flicking through a textbook double the size of his head, something he checked out of the library a day ago. His lecturer turned out to be such an ass, forcing them to buy books that cost somewhere between a liver or a leg, but genius Prompt had a better idea. The library’s already included in their tuition fees per semester anyway, so why not use it? Not that Noctis ever stepped foot inside the library before and he doesn’t even know how to work the library’s system, but mad props to Prompto for outsmarting the lecturer. Now all that’s left for him is to snap pics of related pages and he’s saved his kidney for the entire semester.

Flipping through his copy of *Mastering Strategic Management*, Noctis squints through antlike lines of text before sighing. “This isn’t going to work.”

“I’m brain dead too, fresh outta juice, I know how you feel.” Prompto is all too eager to nod along, a sweeping gesture at the collection of lined papers, pens, textbooks, and notepads strewn about. “Can’t believe it’s only been two weeks and we’re getting invaded by assignments. Where’s our human right to proper rest and stuff? I need a vacation.”

“We just had one,” Noctis points out.
Prompto slumps across the table in what seems to be another artful imitation of a corpse buried permanently in the avalanche that is his textbook. “Did I say vacation? I mean retirement. Gonna spend my pension in Altissia and never come back.” His voice comes off muffled, but there’s no mistaking the generous amount of pain slathered on his words. “I can’t do this anymore Noct, I’m gonna call it a night. You’ve got class tomorrow, right?”

Noctis consults his planner with a thoughtful sound. Scratches of pencil, fluorescent highlights, and a cactuar doodle Prompto tucked into one of the pages later, he shakes his head. “Nah. The lecturer cancelled it last week. He’s got a conference somewhere.”

“You’re so lucky,” the blond groans, thumping his forehead on the textbook in protest. “I’ve got an early one tomorrow. Ugh. I’m gonna head home and grab a shower before it’s too late.”

“Want me to drive you back?” Noctis gets up from his seat, already making a move to grab his keys he threw somewhere on that marble countertop over there, but Prompto’s jumping to his feet and the deafening drag of chair is enough to stop Noctis in his tracks.

“Nah man, I’ve got this one. I’m gonna jog my stress out all the way to the train station and jog a little more on my way home.” He quickly swipes the rest of his belongings into his chequered carryon, cramming textbooks and papers and pens altogether in that one space before shouldering the canvas. Standing in dogged determination, he gives a once-off mock salute and marches to the exit. “Night dude, have fun sleepin’ in tomorrow, you hear me?”

And that’s the end of that, what with Prompto slipping on his worn blue sneakers and leaving Noctis behind with a cheery wave, the door locking automatically behind him.

Well. This is weird. Standing there all alone in his apartment, a little past nine on the clock hanging by the TV, it’s awkward to be left on his own for once. Most of the time there’d be Ignis hovering over him like a persistent hoover, picking after the mess Noctis trailed behind. Prompto comes in by a close second, sleeping over and remodelling Noctis’ guest bedroom into his second home. He’s even got his toothbrush and a closet of his own, leaving behind a chocobo plushie safeguarding his bed until his next visit. Then there’s Gladio, who’s always there to kick Noctis into shape and barking at him like the pain in the ass he is. Noctis doesn’t miss any of that ass-kicking galore, but now that they’re not here, it’s kind of strange.

Scratch that. It’s just strange.

Fingers raking through his tousled spikes, Noctis checks the clock again. It’s just barely 9.04 like time’s mocking him. Not that this hasn’t happened before, what with him being left all alone, but it’s still an unpleasant feeling. Sure, he could just crawl right into bed and sleep all the way past sunrise tomorrow, a prospect he should be grateful. Grinding for materials in King’s Knight is another option he could pursue, although that offline Kaliva won’t be raiding with him past midnight anytime soon. Outlast 2 is always up for replaying in case he wants to forgo a night’s worth of sleep thanks to all the jumpscares, but.

The jarring silence is starting to get to him.

A silence resembling that of the sunsets he stared out of his windows, waiting.

Waiting.

And waiting for the bedtime stories that never came.

Six. Noctis drops his back onto the couch and kicks his legs up. He hates it when he gets into one of
these moods again, the exact same kind that made people label him as difficult and moody. He’s not
difficult and moody, he’s just. Alone. And talking is hard. He’s not good with words; talking is
Prompto’s job since he talks enough for three, something that Noctis appreciates about his best friend
who’s ready to make a subject out of the nutrition facts on a cereal box. Nobody else understood him
like Prompto did. Nobody else came close enough anyway, never closer than he allowed.

Elementary school had kids eagerly flocking around him to ask superficial questions like how many
servants he had, or if he could do whatever he wants since he’s the prince. Girls in their pink ribbons
and tulle skirts hounded him with their posse, rattling off one question after another until he
blacklisted lunchtime in classroom and escaped to the backyard. He’d say high school was better, but
then he’d be lying through his teeth because it wasn’t any better, it was worse.

And Prompto had been there to see the worst of it.

P.E. teachers purposely made him run 100 meters in less than 10 seconds as benchmark
demonstration for the rest of the student body, letting them ooh and aah over the image of a prodigal
prince who’s always better than everyone else. History teachers picked him to recite the events of
M.E. 606 just because it’s the part where the late King of Lucis first activated the Wall and of course
Noctis had to be the one telling the tale. He can’t risk screwing up at maths when Miss Moriyama
jabbed the blackboard and called him out. Between reviewing council documents Ignis scribbled and
studying for exams and doing his homework and trading classes for arcades, his circle never grew.

And don’t get him started on girls and their cliques and boys and their gangs, or the wrinkled
noblewomen introducing their daughters in late night galas and greedy businessmen snagging his
handshakes like it’d seal a trade or two.

Nobody else had a sixteenth birthday that was declared a public holiday through the airwaves.
Nobody had to read a speech scripted by the Citadel’s PR team either. Nobody else could brag about
their twentieth birthday when it couldn’t be compared to his twentieth birthday, officially declared an
adult on the national TV for everyone to celebrate. Imagine walking into the class the next day,
stomaching all the stares, having girls coming up to him with prettily packaged gifts and boys
awkwardly sauntering up to stutter a birthday wish. The only thing left for him to do was to breathe
out some thanks and wait, blank-eyed, as he amassed a mound of offerings. Because, seriously,
Insomnians are going to have a field day if they find out that the Prince of Lucis is some guy whose
scarred history and stunted emotional growth makes social interactions tough for him. He’s had
enough on his plate already.

Trying to get out of his slump, first thing Noctis grabs is the TV remote, switching it on and scrolling
through the channels until he finds something that has loads of fake laughter tracks, like this gaudy
talk show with a reedy brunet hosting an interview. Then he stalks off to the kitchen and raids the
fridge, pulling out some wrapped meal Ignis prepared this morning. Contrary to popular belief, he
knows how to work the microwave and get the electric kettle to boil, so Noctis pops a ceramic plate
into the metal box and lets it whir along. He scrambles through the fridge again to uncap some meyro
sparkling berry juice, sipping at the refreshingly fizzy drink, unloading his dinner once the
microwave dings.

So it’s just him, some stupid show on the TV gossiping about the latest celeb trend—feathered
eyebrows? Holographic highlights? What’s that supposed to mean?—before he goes on channel
surfing again, cycling through some fifty-something shows in the span of less than a minute. There’s
a nature documentary on the Secret Life of Coeurls and it doesn’t look half as stupid as the rest of the
channels, so Noctis gives it a shot, spearing through his pasta.

As he sits through the gripping part where kitten coeurls mewl for their mother, scrabbling over steep
rocks in search of her scent, his phone vibrates with a notification tone he assigned specifically for King’s Knight. Message. Right. Eyes still trained on the baby coeurls bravely venturing into the wild, Noctis grabs his phone and slides to unlock it. King’s Knight automatically logs in and brings up the latest message, one he quickly skims over—and then rereads it again once he realized who sent it.

TO: NOCTGAR  
FROM: THE ARCHITECT  
SUBJECT: Sorry.  
MESSAGE: Apologies for the late reply. I was busy. What were you working on, Prince?

The baby coeurls mewl for his attention and Noctis is half-looking at the TV, half-keying in a reply to your message.

TO: THE ARCHITECT  
FROM: NOCTGAR  
SUBJECT: [none]  
MESSAGE: projects. boring stuff. what were you working on?

Several minutes tick by with the coeurls finally reuniting with their mother, who licks them the moment they scramble all over her big paws, basking in her attention and love. It’s a little heartwarming and if Prompto were here, he’d totally sniff and grab the tissues for his nose, but. Noctis steals a glance at the spot beside him. Cold. Empty. The credits start to roll all too soon, white serifs on retro black, and quite suddenly it’s a bit too quiet again once the show’s over. Just him, alone, without the baby coeurls vying for his undivided attention.

Shaking off the familiar darkening of his mood shadowing the mellow afterglow from the documentary, Noctis busies himself with dropping off his plate and silvers into the sink, leaving them for Ignis tomorrow. That’d earn him an earful, but he doesn’t care. Couldn’t even care less at the moment. Grabbing his phone along the way, he switches off the TV and clicks the lights on his way to his room, shutting the door behind him. Minimalist once it’s tidied, there’s his bed with its sheets smoothened out, his trusty spot to hang out until sleep finds the way to his head.

Another beep and Noctis drops on the mattress as he holds his phone over his face.

TO: NOCTGAR  
FROM: THE ARCHITECT  
SUBJECT: Ugh.  

He frowns, trying to picture the inflection in your words.

Is that an undertone of exhaustion right there? He’s seen the toxic way you take care of yourself—by not taking care of yourself. Throwing your body headlong into your thesis, and then throwing yourself headlong into Gladio’s training session, you obviously have little regard for your health. Kind of like him, once he gets into that mindset—just that Ignis mothers him way too often these days. Shouldn’t that be Byron’s job? What’s he doing when he should be the one caring for you? Thinking about that smirking butler of yours, the one whose startlingly scarlet eyes stare at him too much, kind of irritates him so Noctis diverts his thoughts to your message once again.
Noctis almost hits send, but stops himself just in time.

And *how* exactly is he supposed to talk to you when he doesn’t even have an inkling of an idea where he can get your phone number? Sure, he could just ask you straightforwardly, *but*. That kind of seems. A little. *Y’know*. Yeah, he doesn’t even know it in words, but he knows it. So he takes a second to stare at the burnt fluorescent lights until he blinks and *still* sees the tubes imprinted on the backs of his eyelids, and then erases his message, replacing it with a new one.

Once satisfied with how he casually phrased it, Noctis’ thumb hovers over the button, hesitating for the barest of second.

Then he hits send.

And so begins the waiting game.

—or not, seeing how a message comes in as soon as he sent it.

That’s kind of. A little. *Yeah*, Noctis doesn’t even know what it is this time, but something’s growing warm under his skin. Just warm, like the microwaved pasta in his stomach now. Nice and warm, like blankets and pillows. And it feels good. It feels *really* good. Depositing his phone on his bed, Noctis yanks his shirt over his head, aiming it at the laundry basket. Nope, he doesn’t care it doesn’t go in and ends up somewhere in the darkest corner of his room, something Ignis will add to his nagging list tomorrow.
Not when he has somewhere to be right now.

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

ngl I’ve been a mess after my friend’s passing last Christmas and it really dampened my 2018 spirit. Much thanks to those who sent in kind messages and encouragement on my Tumblr, they really helped me cope with my loss. That and your comments as well, I’ve reread every single comment left on this fic just to pump up my spirits to get back on track with writing. Hope everyone’s 2018 started off on a good note! If it didn’t, don’t worry, you’ve got me with you. :’)

The next chapter is another Interlude like Chapter 10 with cuter stuffs like going fishing hell yeah who’s excited for fishing (I am). Thank you again for all your comments and kudos, they’re incredibly encouraging and heartwarming to read. Here’s the next chapter’s preview, and just because I was editing Chapter 24, here, have Chapter 24’s preview too!

PREVIEW:

No matter their distance from the Crystal, it’s getting easier and easier for him to pick up the lingering traces of magic in the air and tap into the source. Practice, just like what Nyx said. Like connecting to a server, a jolt of acidic violet sparking to electric blues, and he grabs the camping lamp from his armiger just as easily. He feels you jumping behind him when shards of magic flutter around his hand, materializing a bright lamp out of nowhere. “Not creepy, just real dark. Here,” he offers his arm, “just stick close to me.”

CHAPTER 24 | PREVIEW

Sensing your hesitation, Noctis makes a sound in his throat, rubbing the sheets. “C’mon, you’ll fit.” He reinforces his point by scooting a few more inches to leave you a lavish gap between him and the wall, but you know that’s not what it is. You want to know if it’s what he wants too. Really, desperately wants.
IT’S CLOSE TO 10.30 WHEN he gets to your door, just catching you off-guard as you are rapt in examining your computer. It is the sort of expression reserved for serene mornings from your throne overlooking Insomnia, legs crossed at the ankles, spine straight, frail neck cradling a millennia’s worth of knowledge, gazing upon the skyscrapers with the eyes of an architect. An apology is readied on the tip of Noctis’ tongue the moment he barges into your room as though he is once more a stranger in your company, but you are a sharp study of sounds. At once, life returns to your face, reconstructing an expression he comes to realise as a smallish, almost shy smile for him.

A specific smile of eyes lidding low, a hesitant gaze stuttering to meet his, corners of your lips mellowing the sharp edges.

It’s a smile unlike the ones you feed Nyx, nothing like the longing looks you cast at Byron.

His tongue fails him the moment the moment you extracted yourself from the tight confines of your chair and desk combo, circling around easily. “Hey Prince,” you greet him, soft, tipping your head aside. When a stray lock of your hair falls over your cheek and you tuck it behind your ear with a brush of your finger, an absent action born out of habit, Noctis might or might not have forgotten to breathe. “Are we ready to go? Or do we still need to pack up something?”

Fishing. Right. That’s the main reason why he’s here today. Tonight. Whatever. He’s increasingly distracted by the lingering of your fingers over your cheek, tracing the supple curve before dropping to your side. Noctis sucks in a quiet breath, apology forgotten at your nonchalance. “Yeah—no, everything’s already in the armiger.”

You sweep past him as he does a swift inventory over a list of extra lures, lines, clippers and pliers in a quick ten count. It’s a pathetic distraction from the menace that is your hand, fingers fluttering on the wall in search of switches. He doesn’t know what he’s hoping for when he’s the one automatically reaching for the switches instead—an accidental graze of fingers, perhaps?—but the moment dies with the lights as you step out of the darkness, standing in the corridor.

And disappointment feels like a cold wall and a dark room with only him left behind.

“Armiger?” you echo, quizzically cradling your chin. “Is that some sort of—thing?” This time, a frown is back on your forehead again, the kind that stems from complicated lectures with Gladio. “Or is it like a magic space like how video game characters could pick up 99 pebbles and still have the space for 99 potions?”

What should he even say to that?

A snort, that’s what.

He can count on you to liken him to a video game character out of everything else. Striding by your side, heading towards the lift, Noctis consciously remembers to slow down a little when he walks
just so you’d keep an even pace with him. “It’s a bit like magic space, yeah, 99 pebbles included,” he
nods when you tilt your head the other way round, frowning harder at his vague explanation. He
sucks at this, threading word after word to weave meanings into sentences, but nobody’s here to
make it work for him so he gives it another shot again. “It’s this kind of space where I keep my
weapons in it. Well, not only weapons,” he taps down on the panel, “just whatever I wanna keep in
there. Like a room, just that there’s no physical location.”

It doesn’t make any sense to the ordinary, but you seem to be accepting his half-baked explanation
well enough, even if it’s severely missing details from its shoddy composition. You’re definitely
chalking it up to video game logic. “Gladio talked about it today,” you brought up another topic as
the lift arrives, permitting both you and him entry into its metal stomach. “That armiger thing you
mentioned, Prince. He showed me how he kept his broadsword in this space, the one where it just
disappears in his hand like that.”

“Did he?” Noctis presses G, just as your head bobs. Leaning against the brushed metal interior, you
fall right into his side, shoulder bumping against his bicep by accident when the lift jolts downwards.
It takes every single brain cell inside his head to remember making space for you instead of being
content with your weight against his. “Um. What did he say?”

“Quoting him,” you clear your throat, in your best impression of his stern Shield, rumbling, “‘We
keep our stuff in Noct’s armiger so it’s pretty handy,’ and that’s where I got a little confused since I
thought the armiger is a physical location.” Perhaps chagrined at your own foolishness, you rub your
nape. “That’s why I asked, ’cause that was way beyond my imagination.”

Noctis blinks, head blanking.

That’s the first time he hears your tongue curling around the curves of his nickname, giving voice to
the wordless illusion haunting his dream. It’s always prince, prince, and prince with you, and never a
single breath of his name. The heavy lilt of lips curving round the first syllable, a sound dripping in
the missing gaps of his memory. Tongue meets palate in the second syllable, a hiss and a flash of
teeth to birth his name. If he fits your voice with all the other occurrences you spoke, he could just
imagine the way you’d say it.

Come here, Noctis, you’d whisper, a high, lingering note, just beckoning him to draw you close,
come here and let me love you.

The way his skin crawls all-too pleasantly at the thought and the way you stand so painfully close to
him aren’t helping with anything—it just has him swallowing the nausea rising in his chest. Oh. Oh
shit. Bad idea, abort that immediately.

He’s saved by a timely ding! of G, relying on his feet to carry him away from disaster. This isn’t like
any other disaster he’s encountered, nothing like the practice drills in schools preparing them for
Niflheim’s attacks. This is a disaster that shakes him in the core, a disaster he couldn’t get away fast
enough when you tail him with a certain skip in your steps. Just some of the few signs he’s learned
from how your body betrays you out of excitement, a faithful re-enactment of your bouncing about
in the city. The thought offers poor distraction following the aftermath of a disastrous idea, so Noctis
latches onto the way fishing unreasonably close to midnight makes you happy—not that he knows
whether or not you like fishing. It’s an incredibly mundane hobby Gladio poked fun at him for being
such an old sport with his choice, but—

—do you even like fishing? He never thought to ask, did he?

Aside from a shared love for video games and sleeping, he’s drawing up a blank. This is where he’d
insert a cross-reference of his experience with other girls; except, he had none. Luna would be an
exemplary choice—but they were just a couple of kids reading copies of Cosmogony under leafy canopies, the heat of the glittering Tenebraean sun on his skin and her half-hidden smile breaking behind her fingers. Gentiana doesn’t count when she’s a Messenger so she’s automatically out. Schoolgirls shoving love letters into his shoe locker don’t count either, not when they can’t even spell out his favourite game.

Iris is the closest runner-up, an active contrast to your constant lethargy. Springing on her tiptoes to cling on his arm with the strength of the Amicitias unleashed, pressing her face close enough until her lashes trace his cheeks. Breath smelling of watermelon bubble gum, her favourite, and leather armbands skin-warm on his. Fashion magazines for her choice reading material versus your shelved textbooks of a dead language stationed at arm’s length. Gladio knows what’s trending on Billboard Top 20 because Iris won’t stop changing the radio stations to blast her favourite tunes when they’re in a car together. You remain a distant Rêverie done by Debussy, an existence expressed only through ivory keys. She’d laugh and she’d cry and she’d shout and she’d scream while you’re only beginning to learn what it feels like to smile at the things you love.

In the end, she isn’t someone he could superimpose on you.

And perhaps nobody could come close either.

Noctis sneaks a glance over his shoulder, stealthily stealing a look with each step.

To him, this is just a simple stroll through the Citadel’s lobby, an act he could perform with his eyes closed without running into anyone. To you, this is something else. This is a careful saunter through a museum whose works of arts must be marvelled and lauded. The high ceilings and wrought iron chandeliers burn with magic, supplementing recessed lights. 24 Messengers circle the dome in eternal prayer, oil paintings of Astrals housed in gaps of gold and marble pantheon columns. Every now and then he’d catch you stopping for a second or two to peer at something that caught your interest, only to hastily catch up when he’s no longer within proximity. It’s a mistake he doesn’t commit on the second round, deliberately drawing out his steps just to let you have one more second of your freedom.

Descending the lengthy flight of stairs stretching from the entrance, a familiar valet unlocks his Audi, handing Noctis his keys. He watches the young man unquestioningly opening the door for you, making sure you’re comfortably belted inside, and then Noctis slips into the driver’s seat, igniting the engine once more.

Gently easing his car out of the Citadel’s courtyard onto the linking expressway once more, Insomnia pulses with lights underneath them. “You ever went—I mean, seen fishing before?” Noctis makes a quiet sound in his throat when you glance over. “Y’know, like…fishing fishing.” Yeah, he doesn’t even know what he means by that, except it makes him sound stupid.

“I’ve seen pictures on books. Documentaries too, stuffs on the big fish caught in the wild—or something like that,” you offer, though you don’t entirely sound proud of that answer for some reasons. Eyes on the road, he can’t really make out the expression you wear, but the airy note in your voice is telling enough. “They probably don’t even come close to the real thing, so I wanna see it for myself.” Seconds pass as Noctis turns over your answer, broken when you clear your throat, fidgeting a little. “Do you like fishing, Prince?”

“Are you kidding?” he chuckles, eyes flickering to catch you smiling at the sound. “Yeah, love it. It’s relaxing. Takes my mind off things.”

His answer has you perking up, twisting on the leather cushion to get a good look at his face. If he weren’t driving, he would’ve darted away from the amount of direct attention he’s receiving. “You
must be really good at it,” you muse, your words a slow observation based on his expression—not that he’s consciously controlling any of it. “Do you spend a lot of time fishing?”

It’s a little distracting to be under your scrutiny and the way his stomach flops isn’t helping either. Fighting from giving in to the heat on his cheeks, Noctis exits left, the blurry city landscape sinking between whistling greens with a cover of darkness. Sliding down a ramp into an interconnecting highway, one that wades through thick trees and a winding stretch of road lit by ornate lamps, Noctis eases off the gas pedal to let you enjoy the different side of Insomnia, where the skyscrapers have no place in between these ageing trunks the size of an apartment. “Nah, not anymore. I don’t really have time for myself these days.”

What with dad getting older and the responsibilities are piling up, he wants to say, but ends up saying nothing of it. “I’m still pretty good at it though, probably the best out there.”

Gladio would’ve rolled his eyes by now while Ignis sighs and unloads a witty retort just to take down Noctis a notch or two. But his preening doesn’t seem to repulse you. Instead, your lips part in wordless awe, riveted with his self-assured confidence. That sort of look strokes his ego just the right way and Noctis feels a swell of pride at your precious admiration for him, not that you’ve expressed anything else other than ardent respect with whatever he does. You venerate his very existence, and there is always a certain fondness for him in your reserved actions.

It makes him feel good. Really, really good that someone reveres him without placing unrealistic expectations on his shoulders. The genuine sincerity in your eyes makes him want to believe in you.

Noctis follows the bend, guiding his car through a pair of automated gates, prowling deeper and deeper through the antiquated woods. Unquestioning, you remain transfixed by the many sights and sounds that fill the muted space of his car; the lulling titters of birds, the darker hoots of owls, the chirps of crickets, and the soothing rustle of branches. A sound all too different from your city upbringing, droning air-conditioning and the classics from your computer. It’s a world you’ve been denied, a world that he wants to show to you, a world that will soon become yours too.

He carefully parks by the side of the road, sliding to a halt. “We’re here.” Slotting the gear to P and pulling up the handbrake, he kills the engine and gets out, stretching his legs. Crisp midnight air nips at his exposed skin, and he rubs his palms together to generate some warmth as he locks his car. You readily await his next move with a hopeful glow, one that gets him smirking, and he motions for you to follow. Together, you clamber over wire fences lining the road and trot down a gritty trek worn out by many feet.

“No matter their distance from the Crystal, it’s getting easier and easier for him to pick up the lingering traces of magic in the air and tap into the source. Practice, just like what Nyx said. Practice, the Yoshino in him warns. Like connecting to a server, a jolt of acidic violet sparking to electric blues, and he grabs the camping lamp from his armiger just as easily. He feels you jumping behind him when shards of magic flutter around his hand, materializing a bright lamp out of nowhere. “Not creepy, just real dark. Here,” he offers his arm, “just stick close to me.”
It’s mostly a careless gesture, one with absolutely no underlying meaning behind it. He’s done it with Iris before, just because Gladio will whoop his ass if anything happened during her many mischiefs. A habit just to keep those weaker than him safe and sound under his protection. But when your hand lands on his forearm, a lighter touch than Iris’ suffocating grasp, Noctis stops short.

With your chin angled upwards slightly, half-lidded eyes peering underneath heavy lashes, the white cast on your skin strips you to your bleached bones; a face clear of emotion, a gaunt skull with its sockets emptied. He’s seen this at the cinemas when the bloodied screen painted you an indelible red, unnerving. It’s same, but different this time around. You are not focused on the screen; you’re focused on him. Transfixed, even. The image of a good lady with her hand on her prince, awaiting escort where happiness awaits. This isn’t Iris and her boyish crop, wearing a grin she learnt from her big brother. This is you, just you and your uncertain smile, sneaking in one or five looks at your surroundings, no doubt filing this moment away in your knotty little Andronicus head again.

Noctis counts to ten, inhales, and commands his legs to work.

He leads you through the ferny undergrowth, careful enough to duck past treacherous low-hanging branches. “Watch your step.” Loose, upturned rocks are always there to trip an unsuspecting Prompto, so it’s out of experience that he warns you appropriately. You grab onto him just a tad bit tighter as you tread across wobbly rocks, emerging safely after he guides you along flattened grass. Frogs croak and scamper when Noctis looks around, orienting himself with the surrounding. A stretch of gravel runs through a dense grove, and guided by the lamp shining the way, he makes out a pale glimmer of silver in the distance. “Just a bit more. Try not to trip.”

You don’t seem to complain, not when you’re too lost in your little delight of a world that doesn’t smell of stale air-conditioning. “Right behind you.”

Beside, he mentally corrects, what with you huddled closely, but whatever.

Given the right time of the month, moonlight shines in slivers from the leaves. But there’s no moon in mid-January, so Noctis puts in a little mental note somewhere to have you out again when the condition’s right. The Royal Lucis Park can be chilling in its beauty when the full moon glows overhead, so it’s possible you’d appreciate the sight more than what the books taught you. Right now, he supposes you’ll just have to make do with a camp light for a measly substitute. Soon, he tells himself, soon enough he’ll see you underneath moonlight instead.

“Prince, is that…?” you trail off, alternating between looking up at him and peering at the sight splayed before your eyes. “That’s a… lake, isn’t it?”

The apparent wonder in your voice says you’ve never seen one up close before. Noctis tugs you along the way, gravel crunching under his heavy boots, particularly proud that you seem to be content with what he could offer—even if it’s fishing at night. “Yep. Manmade lake with pretty huge groupers in it. Still working on catching the mysterious King Bass, but I’m not having much luck with it. Tricky bastards.”

Upon reaching the clearing, he finally feels your hand leaving his arm, freeing him with ample space to set the lamp on a rocky outcrop slanting into the waters. The rickety jetty creaks with your every step, each panel aged by sun and rain, and for a moment the fear of falling through crosses your face, immediately darting back to his side where it’s safest. Noctis laughs weakly, knows it’s bad to laugh at you, but you don’t seem to hear it, not when you’re eyeing the jetty with so much doubt in your eyes.

“That thing safe to walk on?” you ask, studying the blooming lichens scattered in patches here and there. “Because I don’t trust it.”
“Haven’t broken my trust yet after all these years,” Noctis deadpans, much to your disbelief. Just for the sake of concrete evidence, he demonstrates striding coolly on the jetty even as it groans under his weight, finally reaching the edge of it. “See? So c’mere.”


It’s funny how you still doubted him in your eyes, yet you simultaneously did not doubt him with how you inch one step after another, steadily making your way towards him, freezing up in places where the wood rasps, and inching faster across panels that groan a little too loudly. He drops into a seat on the precipice, legs dangling mere inches above the still waters, patting the spot right next to him when you finally reach the safe zone. “Told ya so.”

“That easily took ten years out of my life,” you mumble under your breath, making yourself comfortable right beside him as you pawed your shirt into place. “Not cool, Prince, not cool.”

“You’re overreacting,” he huffs, swinging his legs. “Even if we did fall, some midnight swim won’t hurt.”

Scanning your surroundings, the lulling lake under your sneakers, leaves scraping in the cutting chill of the night, you turn back to him with a shake of your head. “Yeah, pass. It’s way too cold to be swimming out here.” You grimace, hands rubbing together to generate heat. “We’d probably fall through and pop up like popsicles in TV shows, can’t risk that.”

“If we’re cartoon characters, we might,” he indulges you with your imagination, content enough to have you laughing at the absurdity of his suggestion. Still, he doesn’t miss how your fingers edge into your pockets, or how the smear of camping lamp highlights rusty pinks on your cheeks, all the way over the bridge of your nose. It is cold, come to think of it, in a way that’s different from the Citadel’s coldness altogether. You’d freeze by the time he snags a catch on his line.

And he’s not ungentlemanly enough to sit around doing nothing when he could do something about it.

Another quick mental inventory into his armiger has his fingers ghosting over the metallic curves of magic flasks bottling bolts of lightning, prickly icicles, and molten flames. Most of the elemental deposits around the Citadel replenish themselves within a few days and Ignis had fleetingly cautioned him once or twice to make full use of them, just in case of grave emergencies. While this doesn’t constitute an emergency so grave it requires an abuse of magic, Noctis would rather have your fingers intact than falling off into ice at night. Better be safe than sorry. Hand held out, palm up, he laces the delicate Crystal magic with the flames from a flask, unfurling a delicate fire dancing along his skin.

There’s a gasp, and he lifts his chin to meet your gaze. The childlike awe is back on your face again, scooting closer to him in wonder. Humans, normal humans obviously could not command the Crystal’s magic; only those deemed worthy by the King and the Prince are bestowed the knowledge of harnessing such powers. Ignis is the resident expert himself, having taught Noctis how to effectively channel magic without electrocuting, immolating, or chilling himself in three hazardous combinations. Trial and error through experience, according to him, is the best teacher for such situations. Which is Ignis Speak™ for having frozen himself at some point, Noctis supposes. He’s still not good enough at this despite magic being one with his blood, yet the genuine awe on your face is a frail reminder that no, he doesn’t have to be good at it to be your prince, and no, he doesn’t have to be good at anything at all just to be your friend.

Just like this, he’s good.
Not perfect, but just good enough for you.

“Warm up,” Noctis breathes out, watching you scramble to hover your hands close to his, glossy sheen of fire reflected on your fingernails. “It gets colder the longer we stay here.”

His fire burns warmly in the night, a spread of heat blooming across your face and shading your skin scarlet. Always in awe, always in admiration. “Thanks, Prince. I really, really appreciate it.” After a moment’s consideration, your chew on your bottom lip and add, almost abruptly, “Also I think this is super cool so I’m kinda wondering how you’re doing this.”

Noctis snorts, only to cover up the abrupt clench of his heart at your sincerity. He’s warm all over, yeah, fire tends to do that, but this is a different sort of warm. “Practice. Loads and loads of practice.” He grimaces, adding an afterthought, “And maybe a burnt shirt or two. I’m not too worried about you though, you’d be good at it in no time.”

He expects a chuckle at his mishap, the tragedy of a charred Noctis shaking soot from his socks a tickling tale that could be passed down for generations onward. Even Prompto got a good laugh until it was time for him to train with magic, and then it was Noctis’ turn to sicker at Prompto’s catastrophic patch of hair, singed by fire. As an Andronicus, Noctis hazards a guess you’d tame magic the same way you tamed Kaliva into a glass cannon of a beast in King’s Knight. Magic did seem right up your alley, what with your strength shining not through your slighter stature, but through your fervorous mind. Adamantine Andronicus, he’d say. Unbroken and unwilling to be broken.

Instead of laughter, you are rueful with your belittling smile. “I wouldn’t say that, Prince,” you admit, just a notch higher than a whisper. “I’d probably screw it up like how I screwed up today.”

It’s an unexpected turn in the conversation. Unexpected, and grave enough for him to catch the way your lips slipping from its smile. “Did something happen?”

The colour on your face grows deeper, though it could be the shadows playing tricks on his eyes. Fingers wilt, curling into your palms before you withdraw altogether from his touch. Something about your reluctant profile takes him back to the distant days of his evenings in your room, a mouthful of secrets on your tongue, vacant eyes as you gaze upon Insomnia’s landscape from your chamber of glass. Perhaps, in that ever-knotty little head of yours, you’re overthinking things again. Always a thinker, lost in your thoughts all alone. Rarely sharing them unless he prods you for answers. Maybe you’re berating yourself for your ‘screw up’, maybe you’re conjuring a thousand and one ways you could’ve done things better. Or, maybe you’re thinking of your family again, of the things he does not know.

But it’s okay.

He might not know the Andronici’s elusive background or why Quintus dishonours you so, and it’s funny how he doesn’t know your birthday or the colour you like best, but he knows you’d set an alarm just so you’d wake up for King’s Knight, knows you have ten pillows and your favourite happens to be the one with a little stain on its corner, knows you writhe in your restless sleep with every toss and turn as your dreams morph into nightmares, knows you’re always the one pulling up his comforters and smoothening them carefully just so he won’t catch a cold.

He doesn’t need to know your name when he knows you through everything you’ve shown.

Noctis snuffs the flame in his hand, dousing you in darkness once more. Just like this, you’re good enough for him. You’re good enough, and you should know that by now.
“You don’t have to tell me anything,” he coaxes, “it’s okay. Shh.”

It’s okay, it’s always okay to him, but to you, it’s not okay.

Already, you’re shaking your head. Shoulders tight. The staccatos in your voice rising. “I went to the Royal Arsenal today,” you start, lucidly recounting your day with your eyes trained on the crisp black sky. “Gladio took me there because we needed to find something that’d suit me. Or something that I liked, whichever came first. We went through a couple of things, like swords, halberds, and axes—but I don’t have enough muscle to carry all of that, so Gladio told me to get started with some daggers instead. Lightweight, portable, easy to handle. But honestly, I don’t really like daggers and knives,” you shrug, refusing to meet his questioning eyes, “so we just walked around a bit more to look for other unconventional weapons.”

Noctis remembers the first time he stepped foot in the Royal Arsenal. He was ten, badgering a grumbling teenage Gladio to show him what the ‘big, bad adults’ played with. Trained with, Gladio persistently reminded him, not played with because adults never play around when they’re about to kill. The glinting blades, the lacquered poles, the scabbards and the guns, they were everything that both terrified and excited Noctis. Things that cool video game protagonists tote around would soon be his command, things that could either hurt, torment, and kill, or save, protect, and rescue depending on him. Years he accumulated as experience built him into a man who realised that yes, Gladio was right all along: The adults never play around when they want to kill, and Noctis himself was nearly a helpless victim to a ruthless emperor’s machinations from hundreds of miles away.

Oblivious to his thoughts, you continue to murmur. “There were steel folded fans, flails, nunchakus, bombs, stuff that I thought I’d only see in video games.” To this, Noctis softly smiles to himself because it’s funny how your train of thought overlapped his. But no sooner than that, his smile fades as you turn to him, distant eyes and a breaking voice. “And then I saw it. A whip.”

“A whip?” he repeats.

You nod.

And he waits.

Waits for the revelation that will soon follow, even if he doesn’t understand why you choked out whip as though it left lashes on your skin.

“It’s just a whip,” you utter, more to yourself if anything. Somewhere along the way, you’ve started kicking your legs, swinging in tandem with his, as though the similarity in stance comforts you. “The kind where it has a switch on the handle to unlatch the blades all along its length. Roughly seven foot, all black adamantine and titanium, coiled like a sleeping snake on the wall. Gladio told me I could do magic imburement on weapons like Ignis does—once I’ve trained up, that is, so that the whip could channel electric, ice, or fire if I want. It’s not an easy weapon to master, but.” You rub your forearm, turning away. “But the moment I saw it, I wanted it. I wanted to learn how to use it. And when I realised how much I wanted it, I felt really disgusted with myself.” Disgusted, you said, though regret is louder in your words. “I shouldn’t have anything to do with whips anymore. I shouldn’t even want to touch it. But I know I do.”

Four months in with you, and this is the closest bout of insecurity he’s seen and heard. Clearly the whip is a big issue to you, a matter chipping your usual composure. And he still doesn’t understand a single bit of it.

You give an inelegant shrug almost like his, but whereas his is all cocky, yours is all hesitant. A shallow imitation at its best. “I.” You start, downcast, stop. And started again. “When I was five, father gifted Byron to me.” *Gifted*, as though humans are mere commodities in Quintus’ hands. “He’s both my butler… and my whipping boy. So whenever I make a mistake, he pays for it. Not me. Him. It’s always him and never me.”

Noctis sucks in his breath. The only time he had ever encountered the term ‘whipping boy’ was when he picked up some dated novels for some lit reviews in high school. To hear someone explicitly mentioning this term, in this specific era, is disquieting. The Andronici are traditionalists advocating patriarchy in their system, and by right it should surprise him that whipping boys still exist, but your life’s circumstances are stranger, stranger than the existence of whipping boys walking within these walls. Overruling human rights, trampling on the weak, exercising the law by their hands. That’s what your progenitors were, walking away scot-free in their lives and passing on without a single guilt in their deaths.

So Noctis swallows it down, all hard facts roughing his throat, and makes some muted sound of acknowledgement. That explains why Byron had been possessive—no, possessive and obsessive over you, seeing you as the only reason for *his* existence. Your every step, your every move, everything would be presented to him in the form of a whipping if you stumble. Taking care of you would ultimately ensure taking care of himself; it’s a two-way symbiosis. It makes Noctis realise how dangerous the game you had been playing with Quintus, planting seeds all around your father until their fruition just to reach the Citadel, to reach the king, to reach his side.

And to think you’d risk it all for him is a thought that gives him a twisted sense of satisfaction, one born out of triumph for knowing you bested your father, and one born out of guilt for never knowing what else you sacrificed to be with him.

“I was an idiot of a child, Prince,” you admit with a little self-deprecating laugh, though Noctis thinks all children are idiots at five, himself included. “I just keep wanting and *wanting*. When you want what isn’t yours, it means you don’t deserve it. But I didn’t know that. I kept thinking I deserved it. So I kept wanting and wanting and wanting until Byron had to pay for it.” You shudder, and Noctis almost catches himself reaching out to stifle your trembling. “All twelve on his chest, five on his arms. Too many to count on his back. After that, I stopped wanting.”

He doesn’t have to hear you say it to know what you meant. Whatever it is that you wanted, Quintus deems you undeserving. His throat grows queasy with the disturbing thought, and his legs stopped swinging.

You stopped too. “So… when I saw the whip today, I felt really surprised with myself for actually still wanting something so badly as if I didn’t learn anything from that lesson. I don’t even know why I wanted it. Maybe.” You bite your lower lip, blotting out all colours until it’s released in a rush of red. “*Maybe* I thought I can use it better than father did. Maybe I wanted something as proof that it’s not a weapon that’s used to hurt, but to protect. Maybe I just wanted to atone in some stupid way that won’t fix anything in the end. I don’t know. But I know I just *want* it.”

Wanting is an ugly concept. He knows. He’s wanted for a while too; only, you learnt your lesson and stopped your futile wanting. And him? He never did. He wanted King Regis not as a parental figurehead, but as a *dad*. He wanted legs that don’t limp stupidly when he walks or twisting awkwardly when he runs. He wanted friends chatting about King’s Knight, not about him as king’s heir. He wanted arcades after school and shooting zombies with cheap plastic guns, wanted naps that never end and wanted warm hugs from a mom he doesn’t remember and a *dad* he doesn’t have.

He does not want to be sympathised for being unloved, unwanted, *unneeded*. 
And you too, you wanted the same things he did.

Ducking your head, hair curtaining your face. Hardly a scar marring your limbs, all in possession of your defaced butler. The hard edges of Quintus’ smile a permanent reminder of your place. Never a toe out of line.

“I messed up,“ you choke out. “I’m messed up.”

No, you’re not messed up. He’s messed up.

He’s the one who wrapped his fingers around the tantalising column of your neck, squeezing the life out of you. He’s the one who slung his hips over you, pinning you down. He’s the one who pretends it's normal to want to kiss you just to find out what other sounds you'd make.

He says none of that.

Noctis shifts around, fingers tangling over his thighs before they have a mind of their own. “Hey, look at me.”

He doesn’t expect you to, but you do. It takes a moment before you register his words, yet you’ve never been one to turn down his demands, no matter how trivial they were. Slowly, quietly, you mirror him, knees almost bumping against his, sneakers toe to toe against boots. He’s always been bad with words and he doesn’t know how to say the right thing at the right time, and he’s only blown away the dust covering the surface of your history and he doesn’t even know your name, but what he knows is this:

“You’re not messed up. You're okay to me,” is all he says, meeting your gaze. “That’s all.”

And just like that, the despondent glaze in your eyes dissipates, unveiling the raw exhaustion that eats at your very core. Years of fighting the Andronici have left embers in your fighting spirit, a soul too weary to push on, but having gone too far to quit. Perhaps, nobody’s ever told that you're good enough, so you kept fighting and fighting and fighting. Your family sees you as a proud castle in your standing, but you are a crumbling sandcastle when the waves lap the shores. It’s the same thing with him all along. Lucis thinks him a worthy progeny made for the throne when he’s just twenty and unprepared for what’s to come.

You are him, yet he is not you.

You embody him, yet he cannot aspire to become half of what you are.

Noctis looks away from your glassy eyes, hands in his lap seeking refuge in his pockets, curling into fists. Not in his current state, no, he can’t even dream of becoming you. Running away from his responsibilities, complaining about everything simply because he has the luxury to entertain such options. Not like you. Gladio yells at him for being such a pain, while Ignis is simply far too kind a man to beleaguer him. By right, terrible, selfish brats like him are not princes. Princes are dignified men who wear the mantle of responsibility even at the tender age of five, neck kept erect lest the crown slips and shatters on the ground.

Then what is he, if he isn’t a prince?

You pull up your legs to your chest, forehead resting on your knees. Curled up in a ball like this, you are weak. “Thank you,” you mumble, face securely hidden in the crook of your arms. “I’ve always wanted to hear that. I. Really. Needed to hear that.” Your voice cracks again, and water fills the crevasses. “Thank you, Prince.”
He is Lucis’ prince, he is your prince, he is your king.

And kings protect the weak, just like what dad always says.

Noctis tips backwards, lets his back hit the jagged panels, and blows a gust of air in the chilly wind. Overhead, stars crowded the night skies until they resemble thumbtacks driven into a black board. There is none of the reassuring constant presence of the moon fenced by clouds, but somehow, it’s not too bad. Even if there’s no moon, there’s you. And there’s him. And there’s—whatever it is, this smudged line of friendship that he’s fixing with some stupid promise of fishing at midnight.

And then there’s the rest of Lucis out there, just waiting for you and him. Together.

IN THE END, he doesn’t even catch a fish. What he ends up catching is your smile, and it paints a charming scene of an inviolable beauty in a world too big.

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

<3 And now we’re finally getting somewhere with Noctis and the reader! All the build-up and the drama, there’ll be more of that in the future since this is just the starting point of what they’re trying to do together. There’s Noctis fumbling with his own thoughts and then there’s the reader coming up with ideas. Though I absolutely love that in FFXV, Noctis is portrayed as a really good listener when you get that scene between him and Prompto chilling out on the rooftop as they had a heart-to-heart talk. Noctis says so little but every word has meaning.

also the moon is an allusion to luna winkwonk

Thank you so much for sticking around with this fic, I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter! All the kudos and comments and messages on Tumblr are incredibly supportive. <3 And incredibly lovely too, you guys are the best! Seriously y’all are the best thing ever I would legit send each and every one of you a hug and an ugly weeping sobbing sound of my gratitude over and over again if I could because y’all are too wonderful with all the kudos and comments im just So! What’s in store in LPC 18? :D

PREVIEW:
The scene transitions from the newsroom into a panning shot of a rooftop ceremony, all crisp glass and smooth silks hanging off the banisters, all bearing the royal crest of Lucis. It cuts into a voiceless shot of Prince Noctis interacting with guests, an aristocratic teenager clad in a bespoke suit of fine lines, receiving each and every handshake with a smart shake or two. His bangs haven’t quite grown out yet, tapering in stunted spikes over his alabaster skin, and his deep blue eyes are too narrowed, too tensed to be enjoying this birthday celebration, but the imperfect image imprints itself in your mind all the same.

Personally, I’m a lot more excited for LPC 20, because that’s another roughly 9k worth
CHAPTER 20 PREVIEW:
Fluorescent bulb flickers uncertainly overhead, the stairwell smells strongly of dust and cement. You can’t hear your heart beating when Noctis tips his head, messy bangs turning blue eyes black. He has your back to the wall like he had you at the tree—only, there is no distance separating you and him. He presses into your space with the intent to take everything, leaving nothing behind. You let him. His leg nudges between your knees up your thigh and he bends close enough for you to feel his breath on your cheeks. You can’t breathe.

Tune in to find out what the fuck is going on in LPC 20 (° ³̾ 5°) (° ³̾ 5°) (° ³̾ 5°)
Chapter Summary

**XVIII flowering: gluing eggshells together**
“At ease, young Andronicus,” the man commands, and you know you’re right if he’s the one calling you that. He comes to a stop with Gladio hovering closely by, eyes raking you from head to toe. You must’ve appeared disheveled, sweaty, awful for a first impression, but he says nothing of it. “I’ve heard of you from my son. Received your papers, in fact.”

**XIX flowering: the heart of a king**
What kind of friend is he anyway? The shittiest, lowest kind. The kind that’d fuck your mouth with your head to the wall, that’s what. The kind that’d press his fingers over your ribs like a pianist over his keys, memorising the erotic way you shudder under him. The kind that wants to substitute your pillows just so you’d hold him instead. Exactly the shittiest, most fucked up kind of friend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*flowering*

**loud voices are never good** omen. byron favours speaking in soft tones with underlying firmness that warns those unprepared never to challenge him. shouting marks an unworthy man and it is a level he strives not to stoop for as long as he lives.

*in this house of statues, he knows nobody speaks to you. save for the outsiders, your lecturers, the manservants mute themselves in your presence should they encounter you. your commands are acknowledged by way of a bent waist, head lowered, mouth stitched shut. hearing voices carried from your room right into the hallway is a phenomenon that has byron picking up his speed twofold, careful enough to balance the tray of tea and tidbits as he marches into your room, nary a knock.*

“twenty, and that’s final.”

*unless your room had transformed into a haggling hypermarket overnight, it sounded like an unfair deal coming from quintus. truly a rare sight to see father and daughter gathered in the same space, byron takes a moment to pencil the details in his mind. you, besieged, behind your desk with your fingers woven through your hair, shutting your eyes, shutting out the world. quintus, machiavellian, a proud figure in the heart of your room, unsmiling, uncaring. it has byron stepping aside when quintus gathers himself after seizing victory in one of the many wars he fought for lucis, even if it’s a war he waged with his very own daughter.*

*locking the door behind him, byron deposits your teatime tray and strides to your desk. you’ve curled in on yourself, legs drawn to your chest, all balled up on your chair, a hatchling truly unprepared for the world beyond the fragile shield of your eggshell. the pathetic sight makes byron*
“Everything, milady?”

He doesn’t need to see your face to hear the tears in your voice. “Everything, milady?” he tries again, softer, resting his hands on your twitchy thighs. “What did your father want from you? Twenty of what?”

“Not twenty of what.” Your head shakes, arms that are shielding your face gradually dropping to unveil a face full of forlorn, reddening eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Twenty, Byron, twenty.” You stop, sucking in a deep breath, trying to pull your legs to your chest once more—only, Byron has his hands on you and he fights your desperation to curl in on yourself again. “—Let me go, Byron—”

“Not until you tell me twenty of what, milady,” he breathes, tone going softer than before, barely lined in warning. “Now, tell me: Twenty of what.”

You could’ve kicked him, planted a foot in his face if you struggled hard enough. Break his teeth, break his nose, break everything for all you care. But you don’t. All you do is look at him, helpless, hair mussed up, broken, choking low in your throat, lost, tired of fighting your frustration. “Twenty,” you cry out, voice cracking, and Byron’s fingers dig into your thighs at your next words: “Father’s marrying me off at twenty.”

IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN THE same routine in any council meeting. Councilmen and women alike, dressed in their regal uniforms, discussing Lucian politics in this chamber. Sunlight streams from high above the paneled walls, bringing light to the ebony carvings on crystal chandelier. Fire from two elaborate torches lent feeble warmth in this air-conditioned place, not that Ignis minds it. Even in his waistcoat, he barely feels the cold. Ballpoint skittering across feint-ruled paper in an elaborate script Noctis had long deciphered under his tutelage, Ignis pens in points from today’s discussion for his charge’s digestion.

Hands clenched, Quintus’ jaw barely rocks with each heavy blow of his word. “We cannot dismiss the fact that each day brings us closer to Niflheim’s machinations.”

Gentle-faced Estelle, Countess of Cimlain, is never known to raise her voice in the presence of the king. But her voice is clear as her stand on the matter. “We’ve discussed this time and time again, Andronicus: We will not reinstate the military. There is no need for them in this world, as Lucis is taking a peaceful stand against the war.”

—Heated discussion, Ignis amends his initial monologue, pen skittering faster to keep up with the exchange of dialogue.

“My dear Cimlain, you say it’s peaceful only because you get to sleep soundly on your bed each night, blissfully unaware of the wars our Glaives wage against the Imperials,” Quintus remarks with barely a twitch of his wispy brows, knowing his words brought forth a round of shifty eyes hiding their guilt. “Believe me, if His Majesty permits my presence on the battlefield, I would have done the job myself.”

King Regis holds up an authoritative hand to silence any retorts from red-cheeked Estelle, regarding Quintus with the apathy of one whose ear had been plugged with this debate for many years. “Your place is not the battlefield, Andronicus,” he reminds him. “Your health takes precedence above all else. It’s best you spend your years waging your wars behind a desk instead.”
“Marshal Leonis commandeers the Crownguard and Captain Drautos, the Kingsglaive.” Quintus nods the king’s way like a sleepy man nodding off at a boring meeting, entirely disregarding what he said. “Your Majesty, I’m not asking for much. I merely want to reestablish a small fraction of militia, starting with conscripting our young Insomnians to join the fray. The great Solheim was not built in a day, and I’m not expecting much from these men,” his hands wave about, eyes drifting from one face to another, taking in their expressions, “but give it time and it will surely flourish.”

Lukas clicks his tongue, earning an eyeful from Quintus. He is not known for his kindness, and it shows in his words. “We can all see that you are hungering for the power your family has lost, Andronicus.” His moustache bristles. “We do not condone Niflheim for their cruelty, yet it seems you are keen on letting Lucis tread the same path. You will be the downfall of our kingdom, mark my words.”

Ignis stops penning at that point, knowing the downwards spiral of the meeting has just begun.

“It truly isn’t a fruitful meeting without our friend Lukas resorting to ad hominem,” unsmiling Quintus says, ignoring the verbal lunge for his heart. “Because I care more about the result of our meeting, I choose to disregard the useless nonsense you spewed, and instead, focus on how to solve the problem we face.” Without much pomp, he turns away from the fuming man, facing a weary Regis. “Majesty—“

And he stops. Eyes screwing shut. A thumb on his temple. Pained.

A fresh wave of murmurs spreads through the chamber behind a hand to the lips. Ignis would’ve leapt to his feet if this occurrence was the first of its kind, but he’s lost count of it as the years trickled by. Headaches, dizzy spells, migraines, standard signs of a man overworking past his limits, past his age ordained. For all the cruelty Quintus inflicted upon you, he is but a mortal in the end. A helpless old man even in the face of the reaper himself. Capping his pen, Ignis quietly observes as Quintus’ forehead is slick with a sheen of sweat, soundlessly battling his agony. And, ever friendless, nobody moves to aid him through his personal war.

King Regis, the benevolent man he is, leans forward in urgency, settling a steadying hand on Quintus’ shoulder. “Dizzy again?” he asks to a soundless Quintus, who neither nods nor shakes his head at the question, eyes still shut. But King Regis knows. He holds up another hand to the rest of the Council, marking the end to the meeting.

As Ignis sweeps his belongings into his briefcase with the rest of the apathetic crowd thinning out, he hears faint murmurs from the king himself.

“What did the doctor say?”

**AT THE END OF YOUR** third rep of push-ups, the subtle burn in your upper arms whines for you to stop. Not the awful kind of burn, but the kind of burn where it feels satisfying. Sweating enough to fill buckets for rainy days, the bridge of your nose slick in perspiration, shirt plastered to your back. Even the slightest twist has your muscles aching, crying for mercy. Gladio’s ruthless, that’s for sure, clocking in enough counts for you to pass out if you aren’t thoroughly prepared with your warm-ups. It hurts when he manhandles you just as easily, demonstrating his raw strength and power over you, a reminder that it took him years to get to where he is now: A Shield to Noctis.

But the ache launching through is real. All sharp edges, knives cutting your nerves. This ache isn’t anything like your innards you eviscerated, this ache comes from an entirely different reason altogether. It reminds you that you’re very much alive, living and breathing with Gladio stretching
you to your toes, big hands on your shoulders to put you in place, to put up with the pain you agreed. Your throat scratches with all the sounds you make, from tiny squeaks to big yelps, pushed past your limits with Gladio’s amber eyes promising you that this is just the beginning of what he started.

“C’mon, ass up,” he swatted your back one time, just because he caught you drooping unsteadily in your planking. The sheer difference in size between you and him meant that one: He swatted you and it hurt, and two: It had enough strength to collapse your elbows and introduce your face to the hardwood.

Of course, Gladio remedied it with a hastily barked apology, bear paws wrapping around your hips to hoist you up once more, and he might have left a handprint Byron pointed out before your shower. But you liked it. Liked how each session ends with your lungs wheezing and your knees bruising, liked how Gladio cards his hands through your damp hair like a proud brother, always encouraging your every move—liked how he praised you even if it’s for the pettiest of things.

Good job for holding out longer than ten minutes.

Good job for those five extra stretches.

Good job for not puking.

Good job, lil’ lady.

You distinctly remembered making a face at that. “Little lady?”

“Yeah, ‘cause you’re one,” he supplied helpfully, looking like it was the most natural nickname ever. At your persistent staring, Gladio stops practicing his broadsword swings and shrugs, lips twitching.

“What’s a man gotta do to get your real name? Just T. Andronicus or that Quintus Guy’s Daughter or Quintus’ Whatever ain’t gonna cut it down the years.”

“How about Kaliva?” you proposed, sounding hopeful. “That’s pretty close too.”

The look Gladio threw you was an answer enough, returning to his sword swings once more. “Yeah, no. No name, no change.”

Well, at least you tried. If anything, it’s a lukewarm reassurance to hear him inadvertently confirming he hadn’t snuck his nose into all six of your private envelopes signed in your name.

The heavy double doors creak open, effectively bringing you out of your musings on your behemoth of a trainer. Gladio had run out earlier, babbling something about picking up someone and instructed you to stay put as he threw on a jacket and left. In the middle of your cool down stretches, you couldn’t help but to crane your head over your shoulder to spy on your new visitor. Is it Nyx again? The cheeky Glaive liked to pop in and out of his rounds, smirking at how you panted through your regimen. On days he felt gracious, he’d share tips on how to maximize your core muscles, and on not-so helpful days, he’d cross his legs at the ankles, leaning against the wall and chuckling at your wilting planking.

Your jaw almost unhinged when Gladio steps in, bringing with him a man the size of a boulder. Distinctly aged, his salt-coloured hair and shaved jawline is reminiscent of an obelisk in a museum. All regal poise, spine straight. Age is something he wears handsomely, despite the hardened finish of his eyes. Your gaze trails over the soft leather and gilded trims on his robes, memorizing the regal way he holds himself. Despite the difference in his ensemble, this is a variation of a getup you’ve seen father wore before.

He is man you certainly shouldn’t mess with.
Pulling yourself to your feet, you fold your hands over your thighs, bowing deeply. Manners first. “Good evening, sir.”

“At ease, young Andronicus,” the man commands, and you know you’re right if he’s the one calling you that. He comes to a stop with Gladio hovering closely by, eyes raking you from head to toe. You must’ve appeared disheveled, sweaty, awful for a first impression, but he says nothing of it. “I’ve heard of you from my son. Received your papers, in fact.”

So this is what Gladio talked about, the trial by fire. Realising the severity of the situation, you allow yourself absolutely no chance of being mistaken as a diminutive doll all shy and reserved, for he is part of the Royal Council. And men in the Royal Council surely must be statues in serving the king. You should do well to reflect your part too. “I’m glad you did, Sir Clarus. Gladio did mention that I should be expecting a visit from you sometime in the future.”

A curious light shines from within his granite grey eyes, a hand thoughtfully placed on his chin. He seemed to have not heard you at all. “…I must say, I wasn’t expecting to meet the controversial child of the Andronicus like this. Your existence had been a rumour, all this while.”

For you, it brings only the tritest of smiles. “Are you surprised, sir?” you say, all too aware of how he quirks a brow at your impudence. “I know how my father had repeatedly discredited me, just because I’m female. He has no plans to allow me to lead the House, but be rest assured I will.”

“Bear in mind, there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Confidence will take you to places beyond your imagination, but arrogance will only serve to narrow your vision,” Clarus warns, making neither distinct disproval nor approval at your proclamation. “I mean no offense, of course. From a simple glance, I can see nothing of Quintus in you. But your words cut just as sharp as his.” He pauses, seeking your eyes in a resolute stare, a predator staring down a prey. “You aspire to best your father and become the next Andronicus serving His Highness Prince Noctis, yes?”

Hearing Noctis’ name from Clarus’ lips brings back that same nausea from before, nausea blooming in your heart. He’s testing you, you realize. “Yes sir. And I won’t stop until I will be the next in line to serve His Highness. That has been my dream from the start.”

At this, Gladio makes a face, eyebrows perched high on his forehead.

Clarus, presumably used to his son and some of the many odd faces he’s artfully mastered through the years, chooses to ignore it. Though his movements are minute, each action is calculated, never an absent gesture. Eyes travel from Gladio to you, from Gladio’s stanch silence, to your squared shoulders. He is summing you up, finding you a place in his mind. A temporary residence, where you can easily fall if you failed his trust.

“I expect to see you during the Prince’s Coronation Ceremony when he is finally the 114th King of Lucis,” he finally says, allowing himself the slightest quirk of lips. Then, his choice of word sharpens with the slant of his frown. “Whatever it is that you are trying to do, you best avoid your father’s eyes. You and I both know how shrewd he can be at times. Sometimes the best course of action in war is to retreat and reorganize your strategy.”

Of course he would know, wouldn’t he?

Clarus Amicitia must’ve sat at the table over a dozen of times stomaching father’s arguments and refuting them in councils. Father assaults him verbally, and Clarus deflects them as the steely Shield of King Regis. Judging from the way he speaks of father, he doesn’t seem to regard him highly, though he refrains from voicing out such thoughts in concrete. Fortunately though, Clarus seems like a sound man who doesn’t pass his judgment from father to you in the very same way. And you’re
thankful for small mercies like this, thankful that he doesn’t reject you for your father’s mistakes.

“Thank you, sir,” you incline your head in a respectful bow, one he accepts with a nod of his own. “Your advice is well-heeded.”

Clarus doesn’t smile at you. He doesn’t need to smile when his words carried his sincerity. After all, a smile can be easily faked; one that father had taught you over and over and over again. He bids his farewell, turning away. “I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors, young Andronicus. We will cross paths again, soon enough.” Gladio follows him to the door, but Clarus only lifts a hand to stop him. “No need to see me out, son. Who do you think owned this training room before you?”

To his credit, Gladio only crosses his arms as his father left with little flourish, seeing himself to the exit without waiting for a farewell. As the doors clicked shut, you can’t say you’re surprised when Gladio attacks your hair with his hand—one that left you batting his arm in desperation as he musses up your already scruffy hair, limp from sweat.

“Look at you, being all adult with my old man around,” he grunts, though there’s no malice in his teasing. “Good job for not pissing your pants talking to him.”

Clarus is intimidating, yes, but the random encounter isn’t all too bad. At least he genuinely offered you some advice instead of putting you down. You chalked it off to being lucky, since Gladio’s a nice man and his dad, however terrifying he may be, should be a reasonably nice man as well. “Your dad’s cool—but kinda scary,” you admit, bringing his barking laugh rounding your statement. “Just…don’t tell him that, okay? It’d totally ruin all the front I put up just now.”

“Depends on your next answer,” is all Gladio answers, amber eyes winking in mirth. “Think you can drop down and give me five reps of push-ups?”

Try as you might, you definitely did a poor job of hiding your grimace. Gladio definitely saw that, arms crossed over his chest with a huff, awaiting your reply. The short little break you took barely did anything for your muscles, but if Gladio wants it done, you suppose you could try—even if you fail halfway. With a sigh, you head to the training mat. “I guess…I can try. Just—don’t chew me out if I can’t finish it, please?”

Gladio only pats your back good-naturedly, following you as you drop down on the mat and shifting into position. “That’s more like it, at least you’re givin’ it a shot.”

You only barely resist the urge to roll your eyes at him. “Sometimes, I wish I don’t.”

**twenty and married**, **a fate worse than death. father trampled over your dreams once again, never caring if you had anything to say about it. a maid had shown up on your doorstep, one who refuses to meet your eyes as she mutedly dropped flimsy files on your desk, curtsying before she left. your treacherous fingers flipped through one of the dossiers, taking in the sight of a formal report with a passport photo stapled in the right hand corner. each file contained different pictures, different names, different information, yet they all bear the same trait: a man.**

the knowledge sees your hand trembling, whether out of grief or rage, you aren’t certain. this is father’s final slap to you: a choice you have to make, that is to select your own husband.

you make quick work of these dossiers, glancing through the eligible bachelors father had undoubtedly handpicked. they fall nothing short of a standard arranged marriage’s prerequisites: groomed handsomely, unparalleled intelligence, of acceptable height and weight and build,
shortlisting their many talents and hobbies, detailing their age, current workplace, and their slew of achievements like trophies on a shelf. Some wear their dark hair slicked back; others opted for a loosely trimmed touch, falling over their foreheads. Some wore glasses, sharpening their overall appearance; others had eyes the sparkling colour of sea foams.

aether, flavian, icarus, scientia, xander.

proud men from distinguished families whom father saw fit to tame you.

you stomp out the urge to introduce these files to your fireplace, throwing them aside to be perused no longer. Instead, you remove yourself from your desk, making your way to the television and switching it on. Anything to get your mind off those things, off the thought of marriage, off the sight of men who’d hold you down and snatch the name of the andronicus for themselves. Furiously flipping through the channels, past gossip talk shows, past cliché soap operas of poor girl meets young CEO and falls hopelessly in love, past music videos and blaring rock music, finally settling on Crown Broadcasting Channel.

The newscaster, a peppy blonde in subdued makeup, prattles off three words per second as she’s already well underway a story. “—tigious day as prince Noctis Lucis Caelum celebrates his sixteenth birthday in style at the Caelum Via. Attending his birthday celebration is his Majesty King Regis—“

The scene transitions from the newsroom into a panning shot of a rooftop ceremony, all crisp glass and smooth silks hanging off the banisters, all bearing the royal crest of the Lucis. It cuts into a voiceless shot of Prince Noctis interacting with guests, an aristocratic teenager clad in a bespoke suit of fine lines, receiving each and every hand with a smart shake or two. His bangs haven’t quite grown out yet, tapering in stunted spikes over his alabaster skin, and his deep blue eyes are too narrowed, too tensed to be enjoying this birthday celebration, but the imperfect image imprints itself in your mind all the same.

He isn’t ugly, no. He’s easily the most beautiful person you’ve ever seen, even if you are only going by the unfairly monochromatic pictures in the newspaper. Yet, there’s something about his profile that strikes a chord in your heart.

He looks tired. He looks like he’s been run haggard for his own birthday. He looks like he’d rather be anywhere else than here. And he looks sad. But why is he sad, when he’s the prince and princes have everything they want in the world, and then some?

At sixteen, he looks like he’s suffering.

At sixteen, you are suffering.

Sixteen and suffering. How awful. Novels always made a big deal of being sixteen and how it marks the start of boyfriends and casual romances and a little fumbling in the sheets, but Prince Noctis doesn’t even look like he has the time to comb his hair. Snatching the remote to switch off the TV with a click, you hold your face in your hands as you try to breathe. Legs to your chest, toes curling into the cushion.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Here is the man you’ve been shaping your life after, but he doesn’t even know you exist.

How will he know, when you’ll be married at twenty?
NIGHT HAS LONG FALLEN OVER the city, shading skyscrapers in shadows. In your little chamber, you make yourself a thick mug of hot chocolate, sipping on the artificial sweetness to replenish your brain juice. After each training session, Gladio would always bring you back to your room, making sure you’re safely tucked inside your little box and messing up your after-shower hair. And, following his standard end-of-the-day statement, he’d always recite, “Same time tomorrow, lil’ lady,” before he retreats with a wave. It’s rather comforting to know he’s got your back if anything happens, though you don’t really know what to do with that knowledge for now.

Glossing over the documents in your Moogle Drive, you take another sip of your drink. A great many of the documents never made full sense to you, often containing jargons too complicated for you to understand lest you’re a scientist of Niflheim. Some seemed to be subject test reports on their monsters tubed in Fodina Caestino. Others aren’t any better, just full of codes and never a legible word. Unless you contracted external henchmen, say an underworldly character to decode this gibberish, you’re never going to get anywhere far. But the risks are high with these shady fellows, for their loyalty lies in those with deeper pockets.

It’s either that or those who have them on knifepoint all the time, you think to yourself, eyeing the scattered documents in your Drive.

With no new information coming from Byron, you’re still stuck trudging your way through these nightmarish creatures. Of course, he is never to be blamed for the shortage of information coming your way. This two-man show of yours suffered a great many shortcomings. Money is never an issue to you, thankfully, since father never trespassed into your bank accounts to see how you spent your allowances. While having enough money to silence a cop is undeniably handy, it isn’t the best currency to scout for the best talents in gathering information for something as dodgy as Niflheim. Because, really, who wants to get involved with the Andronicus and Niflheim?

Even the hardiest of assassins would run ten kilometers northwards if they heard that.

The reputation surrounding the House of Andronicus is something much like a hardened stalagmite; built upon blood dripping over its foundation, culminating in a sharp peak in the end, sharp enough to rend flesh. These men weren’t written into history as paragons of Lucis. You know what they do: Exact justice all in the faith of keeping the kingdom safe, even if it sullied their hands. There are no grey areas in here: Everything is either white or black. White, for upholding the commandment and maintaining public safety; black, just to hide the bloodstains that inevitably come along with it. Kill whenever required, extort whenever needed, reconstruct the law whenever they saw fit. Your father is a man of sins from the very beginning, and there is no denying that you have left reddened footprints of your own too.

The sooner you unravel what the empire is building, the easier it’ll be for the prince in the long run. And you know exactly what you have to do.

With a yawn, you chance a glance at your desktop clock. 10.26 p.m., already past the bedtime Gladio designated for your optimum rest. Sensing a well-rested night’s sleep already beyond salvation, you resign yourself to the usual standard of falling asleep on your worktable, dragging yourself to your cupboard, where your stacks of pillows await. You randomly select the one at the top, sinking in your chair once more, propping the pillow on your thighs. Hugging it like this as you sloughed your work is so comforting, especially with your nose pressed into the cotton and—

—oh.

You sit up abruptly, staring at your pillow.
It’s a different scent from the usual. Not worn cotton drained from sunshine, no. Something more of fancy soaps and chamberlain-laundered clothes, and a little bit of something else. You gingerly nosed your pillow again, marveling in the different smell. It’s something you’re familiar with, but it’s just different. Familiar but different. How confusing. You smelled this before, not on your body, not on your bed, not on your clothes, but on someone. Someone whose clothes smelled exactly like this, coming into contact with your pillow. Someone lying on your comforters, someone sharing your sleep.

Noctis.

It’s his scent.

The nausea associated with his name comes back in full force; warmth washing over your cheeks, churning your tummy. He’d always smelled nice, you know that, but you never expected the scent from his clothes would transfer on your pillow. It’s a nice scent, clean with underlying notes of—you don’t know, himself, maybe? Whatever it is, and as creepy as it sounds like, the knowledge only serves to make you tighten your hold on the pillow, burying your face in it.

You’re okay to me, he said.

He saw you as an okay person, even when you stammered out your thoughts, tongue tripping, breath hitching in the night. How desperately you want to wield a whip. It’s okay to him. How desperately you don’t want to be like your father. It’s okay to him. How desperately you want to atone for your sins. It’s okay to him. How desperately you want and it’s still okay to him.

Teeth already littering bites on your lower lip, chin on the pillow, you hold it closer to your heart. Close, closer until each curve yields around your frame, holding you tight in return. If you think hard enough, you could recall how the flame danced from the tips of his fingers all the way to his palm. How scarlet melts into his skin and a clumsy smile on his lips, thoughtful enough to notice you’re cold all over. He listens, he stays, he encourages, he is everything you don’t deserve because you’re a liar and a murderer and you’re sitting on a throne of bones with their skeletons shackling your ankles.

What if he leaves you when he knows how dirty you’ve become?

You should tell him what you are.

No. You shouldn’t tell him.

If he leaves now, he’ll destroy you. You’ve gone too far with wanting this time, farther than wanting mother and her musical memories. All the years you built around him, carefully constructing a castle around your prince, it’ll all crumble once he’s gone. All the months you spent with him, all for naught. No more trading texts in King’s Knight co-ops, no more sleepy afternoons slumbering together. He is the very foundation of your core, and you know that well enough not to let him leave. Because once he leaves, he’ll never come back for you.

Curling in on yourself, you hug the pillow tighter, inhaling deeply.

For now, it’s okay like this. It’s okay. It’ll be okay.

That’s what you’ve been telling yourself all this while, haven’t you?

You’ll be okay as long as he’s with you, as long as he stays.

He can’t leave. He won’t leave. He will never ever get the chance to leave.
A solitary beep shakes your phone awake, the screen lit by a notification. Your shoulders twitch at the sound, casting a discreet glance at the King’s Knight message box adorning the front. On any other normal day it’d be a promotional message from the developers, trying to entice players with limited-time events and bundle sets. This time around, things had been different these past few months. A text that’s not from the developers only meant one thing.

Slowly shaking yourself out of your stupor, you log into the game with a frown.

TO: THE ARCHITECT
FROM: NOCTGAR
SUBJECT: [none]
MESSAGE: quick favour: what’s your number?

You blink owlishly, slowly digesting his message. That’s odd. Your number? What does he need it for? Silently praying it isn’t for anything urgent, you press in your reply.

TO: NOCTGAR
FROM: THE ARCHITECT
SUBJECT: Sorry.
MESSAGE: Of course, here is my number.

After double-checking the digits, you hit send.

Some paranoid part of your mind yells at you to stay up for his next message—what if it’s something urgent after all? If he got caught up in some unsavoury part of the town and needed rescuing? No—that’s silly, firstly the prince is more than capable to fend for himself, and secondly, Ignis would be on his speed dial for emergencies. Which begs the question once more: What’d he need your number for? You rock back and forth nervously in your chair, staring at the message with your heart racing and debating whether or not to send another message to Noctis—only to have your screen blurring out into a call. With your phone hooked up to your computer, you could very well see that it’s not an ordinary call with your phone to your ear; it’s a video call linked through Moogle Ring.

Before you manage to listen to some rational part of your head counseling you to reject the call, your itchy fingers scramble for the bright green button. Your desktop pixels out into a dimmer, blurrier image with an all-too familiar voice echoing, “Hey.”

Somewhere in the background, a little bit off to the right, a spot of yellow chirps. “Woah—hey! Hey hey hey!”

It takes a moment for the connection to stabilize and iron out all pixilation, but once it does, you’re treated to a lovely sight: Noctis and Prompto, two heads at two different ends, the prince to your left, and the blond to your right. They’re both hunched over a table, books spread haphazard, looking equally exhausted with faint dark accents under their eyes. You try to ignore how your heart lurches a little when Noctis meets your eyes, but you can’t deny a corner of your lips quirking upwards. It makes you hide your face in the pillow, breathing softly.

It smells like him here, right where you are.

Ah.

You shouldn’t like it this much, but you do.

“Hey guys,” you finally work up the courage to summon a little wave, though you still hide part of
your face behind the pillow. “Uh.” This is something new, something you haven’t done before. What should you say during video calls? They’re not physically here, but the prince is here, staring right at you. Best to get down to business, just so you don’t have to hide your face behind this pillow. “I—well—why’d you guys call? Did something happen?”

“Nah, figured you’d be busy,” Noctis waves you off, the pen in his hand drawing abstract patterns in the air, “cause you’re always busy.”

“Yeah, when are you not busy anyway?” Prompto chuckles good-naturedly, leaning forward. His voice echoes through what seems to be a living room, though you’re not sure where they are. Noctis’ apartment, maybe? “We both kinda have to stay up for tonight to get rid of this pesky assignment due tomorrow,” he stops to heave a theatrical sigh, “so do you wanna stay up too? Y’know, just the three of us, the Midnight Trio?”

Noctis makes an amused noise in the back of his throat, throwing the blond a half-grin. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She doesn’t sleep—and you and me, buddy, we both aren’t gonna get any sleep tonight.” Prompto shrugs, snatching a canned drink off-camera, taking a swig out of it. “Makes sense, yeah?”

Hearing their typical banter between each other stirs a bit of laughter in you, and the sound has them turning to you with questioning eyes. Noctis still wears that half-grin as he studies you, though you don’t know if it’s still for Prompto, or. Well. For you. Thinking about it has your nausea bubbling like a pot on the stove, so you duck your head and try not to mind the warmth seizing your cheeks, your neck.

Surely you could stay up a little and keep them company as they battle their avalanche of assignments. Give them a bit of a pointer here and there, a silly banter to keep the mood light, easy, less sleepy. And you could certainly use the opportunity to look through the documents you put off earlier as they suffer through their paper, making good use of your time. Already knowing what’s your answer when you’ve started making excuses for yourself, you lick your dry lips and muster a nod at the expectant duo.

“Makes a whole load of sense to me,” you agree, making Prompto hoot and fist-pump the air. “Gimme a sec, okay? I’ll just go and make myself some coffee real quick.”

“Be sure to make a whole jug of ‘em,” Prompto’s voice follows you as you deposit the pillow on your chair, ushering yourself to your kitchenette. “cuz we’re partying all night tonight, woohoo!”

You hear Noctis snorting Prompto’s way, the sound of a pen clattering on the table echoing loudly through your room. “Party tonight, funeral tomorrow if we don’t finish this up, yeah?”

“Talk about a mood killer, Noct, sheesh. Okay, okay, let’s focus on getting this stupid intro out of the way first. Where’d you stop?”

“At the index.”

“…dude, you didn’t even start yet?”

You know you’re laughing again because the sulk is dead obvious in Prompto’s voice, reaching for a canister of coffee Byron tucked somewhere in the cupboard overhead. Standing here like this, boiling some water and preparing coffee—a whole jug of it, as per Prompto’s helpful advice, you can’t help but to smile as you liberally doused the dark concoction in creamers and sugars.

Friends are beautiful: They make you forgo your sleep, just to keep them company.
YOU LOVE HIM. He knows you do.

He flicks a gaze where you stand in a blue wave of sylleblossoms, your hand outstretched, balancing a dragonfly on your fingertips. Your expression is soft, glassy, your hair floating almost ethereally in the breeze. The mesmeric melancholy on your face draws him in, closer and closer until three stalks separate you and him. In this field, you are a free soul, bounding through crests of blossoms with the paper petals kissing your calves. Watching you wade through this sea of flowers, clutching a fistful of stalks with limpid heads of sylles, a smile on your face.

He reaches for you, fingers chasing after your shadows.

Only, the breeze whips around you, around him, scattering petals to the skies, thwarting him.

Between the snatches of blues, you cradle the blossoms to your breasts, eyes cut to sultry halves. There’s something hypnotic in the way the corners of your lips lift; you know he’s there, he knows you’re making a show out of it. Hands bring the sylleblossoms to veil your face, wispy blues hiding the pale pink of your lips. Eyes lidded low, coy. The sight is just enough to whisk warm flares in his belly and he is acutely aware of his intense need to cradle your cheek in his palm, thumbing your eyelids, just to taste the flower on your lips.

The first step he takes has him crushing a sylle under his foot. The earth is cool and moist beneath him, and the broken blossom dies between his toes. He doesn’t stop; he crushes a second one. Leaving behind a swathe of devastation, injuring the sylleblossoms with his every step, but he stops at nothing until he paves a road of death to you.

Here you stand before him, cradling the sylles when it should be him in your arms. He doesn’t want that.

His hand curls into your wrist tight enough to break your hold on the blossoms, scattering them in the little space between you and him. No, there shouldn’t be any space separating you two anymore. He doesn’t want that either. He wants you under him, so he tucks an arm around your midriff and pushes you to the ground, breaking your fall. He’s draped over you, falling in all the right nooks and crannies of your body as if you’re made for him, fitting him in all the ways he wants you to. On this bed of blossoms, hair fanning your face, you twist your head aside, teeth catching on your bottom lip.

Noctis. So good to me.

Hearing his name colours his vision in red.

All at once, your palm rests in his, with his tongue running over your little digits. These are the hands that feed him. These are the hands that love him. These are the hands that make him live. Each swipe of his tongue is reverent, worshipping your existence. He’s mesmerized with the way you tip your head back, the way you’re whimpering Noctis Noctis Noctis in fragments from your lips, the red in his eyes running over the reds on your cheeks. Your quiet little sounds are hungry with want, and he makes sure to return your show with his own as he licks a wet stripe from the heel of your palm to the tip of your index, nipping oh-so gently at the end.

Noctis, I want.

He knows you want. He wants too.

He sucks on your ring finger, getting a reaction more vocal than before, relishing in how hot you’ve
become under him. Like a fevered flush leaving you delirious, all eager, all needy, all for him. You’re his. All his. And all that is his should be marked. His teeth circle the base of your finger and sink deep into your flesh, hard enough to leave imprints. You whine—Gods, a high-pitched noise that goes straight to the burning pit low in his belly, but you don’t resist because you love it, you love the pain, you love whatever it is he does to you. He releases you with a wet pop, licking his lips, leaning back just to admire the art he made.

A ring of teeth marks, just for you.

_Noctis, I._

He loves you. You know he does.

Noctis knows, even when he disentangles himself from his sheets, that his throat is tight and he _feels_ sick, but he too knows he’s just a man left on his knees, waiting for your hands to crown his hair.

_MOST OF THE TIME,_ the prince is too busy to show up to practice sessions with Gladio. You kind of get that, since the final semester always hits the hardest. His little video call days ago proved how much him and Prompto were suffering, cramming as many words as they can in a single Word document before rolling the pencil to decide who’s proofreading the entire mumbo-jumbo. It’s a little bit sad too, you realized with a sip of your coffee at 3.48 a.m., that Noctis might be dying from caffeine overdose when he cracks open yet another can of energy drink to prep himself since he lost the roll.

As their senior—well, kind of senior, albeit clearly majoring differently from their course—you kindly shouldered the burden of proofreading instead. You’ve never heard Prompto bawling in relief and hailing you as their newfound savior, though it’s a little bit exaggerated and embarrassing to be regarded in such saintly light. Noctis only slurs a quiet thanks before he drops on his textbooks, sleep-heavy eyes just waiting to be laid to rest.

Quickly rectifying whatever jargon they misused, formatting the assignment for improved readability, and redoing their appalling citations from a scratch, it was only past five that you could resend the document for them to print and staple alongside other assortments. The call ended anticlimactically with a Prompto passing out on the couch and a sluggish Noctis yawning out another thanks, hand absently scratching his neck.

Poor boys. Suffering is part and parcel of university life, and nobody graduates without losing some part of their sanity. Or a huge chunk of hair, whichever comes first.

“Come on, milady, pull yourself together.”

Right now though, there are more pressing matters in hand. You squint at the whip, willing it to go away. “Uh. Trying.” It doesn’t budge an inch. “Trying.”

Byron is as unimpressed as ever. “Well then, try harder.” His gloved hands gesture at the entirety of the languid weapon all curled up on the hardwood, its segmented handle braided in leather, and the notched tail of blades resembling the jagged edges of a human spine. “Surely if the rest of the Crownguard and Kingsglaive could do it, you can’t afford to disappoint them.”

You could only frown at the whip. That’s easy for him to say since he’s not the one trying to work the prince’s magic. “Trying harder.” The accursed whip still doesn’t budge, stubborn bastard. “Yeah—still trying, in case you haven't noticed.”
“Unless you’re trying to scare the whip with your glaring, whatever it is you’re trying, it’s not working at all.” At this point, even Byron looks like he’d rather do it himself had Noctis blessed him with magic—much like how he grows exasperated every time you do something either too slow or too imperfect for his liking. “Come now milady, remember what Nyx told you? Electricity. Magic is like electricity. Even Gladio demonstrated how he kept that trunk of a sword—surely that electric magic had something to do with the disappearance, like shorting the metal into molecules or something.” His expression falls for a split second. “Well. What was it that he said again?”

He’s not doing a very good job at lecturing you if he can’t even remember what Gladio said in the first place, and you’re pretty sure that’s not how physics and chemistry work at the same time. You sigh, rolling your shoulders in an attempt to work out a grand strategy in your ticking head. “He said to visualize a room, like you’re trying to put something in it. And taking it out is like removing the stuff,” you condense the whole speech, finding that it makes lesser sense the more you think about it. “I dunno, Byron. His Highness said it’s kind of like a room too. A weapon room, I guess?”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is armoury,” he supplies, murky eyes settling uncomfortably on you. It’s one of those expressions that says he’s disappointed in you, but he’s willing to see this out until the very bitter end. “Let’s try again from the top: Put your hand on the handle and reach out to the magic. Let it beckon you.”

Byron, coaching you on magic? When he knows nothing of it? Unbelievable. Yet his face is clean from laughter, not a twitch of an eyebrow whatsoever, and if you didn’t know any better, he could actually pass as some legit magic instructor from Harry Potter. On days Gladio can’t train you personally, he enlists Byron’s help in watching over you—codename for babysitting, really, though you don’t appreciate getting hawked like this. You’d rather have Gladio punishing you with ten push-ups for your ineptitude than getting served by Byron’s tongue.

Biting the inside of your mouth, you almost wrap your hand around the handle—until your phone beeps inside your pocket, and then you find yourself wrapping your hand around the device instead.

Byron only raises a slim eyebrow in disapproval. He doesn’t say anything about your newfound addiction. He knows a vain effort when he sees one.

Ever since Noctis asked for your number, exchanging text messages on King’s Knight moved to an appropriate channel, one that actually sees you using your phone for proper communication. Texting is the only way for you to reach him, not to mention it’s the easiest method too. You trade texts with him on a daily basis now, reminding him to wake up earlier on Mondays and Wednesdays, keeping him company through lectures that are drier than Leiden landscapes, and snorting through late night video calls with caffeine-fuelled Prompto while they battle through three stacks of project papers.

This time, things aren’t any different as you give a cursory glance through the message.

👑 busy?

Judging from the eyebrow permanently raised on Byron’s forehead, you toss him an apologetic smile, thumbs automatically keying in a reply.

.trying to make my whip disappear. Not working. Send help.

Another beep brings another message from the prince. It has Byron’s other eyebrow joining its friend up there, forming a bridge. You wince, hastily getting your job done, readying to banish your phone far far far away where you can’t reach it.
lol good luck

Meanie. Gonna head back to practice now, Byron’s grilling me with his eyes.

wait.

You take a moment to mouth Byron’s way, *prince said wait*, and the *look* he gives you aptly sums up whatever he thinks of Noctis in these three months. Still, he doesn’t stop you other than to mimic an unapologetically texting schoolgirl, sass you by flipping his braid from his shoulder, one that has you rolling your eyes and turning back to Noctis’ message.

*wait. you busy this weekend?*

You look up from nosing your phone, resting your elbows on your knees, wearing the deepest frown that Niflheim surely couldn’t even pull from you. “Am I busy this weekend, Byron?”

“Please don’t tell me he’s asking you out,” he deadpans. You shrug, clearly having no idea what this is about, and he makes the most distressed sound ever in the back of his throat, the kind that sounds like it belongs on the wildlife channel. “Six help me. He’s going to ask you out.”

Is he? Somehow, that particular thought has you wetting your lips contemplatively, thinking of a reply witty enough to best Byron. Nothing comes. All you’re left with is Byron’s judgmental staring, complete with his arms squared across his chest, and the prince’s message on your phone. Neither of that solves your question, so you readily assume your weekend is free from disturbances, free enough for you to enjoy your time together with Noctis if he does ask you out.

*Should be. Why?*

*specs’s birthday is coming up and i wanna get him something. come with me.*

Ignis’ birthday is coming up?

You perk up, offering your phone to your babysitter, who’s already well underway dissecting every single sentence Noctis sent to you. “He said Ignis’ birthday is coming up. We need to get him something special.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that he’s still asking you out,” says Byron, already lifting your phone and examining the messages in different angles of light as though it’d unveil some sort of secret subtext inked in lemon juice. “But yes, I must confess, I’m rather fond of my alter-ego. Go ahead and ask the prince if he’s throwing a birthday party for the man. I imagine he’d rather like the thought, since it doesn’t look like the Prince appreciates him much.”

Ignis is Byron’s alter-ego? What a disturbing notion. Still, you don’t get the chance to pursue the conversation with your phone handed back to you, so your steady thumbs press in Byron’s demands.

*Sure. By the way, are you throwing a party for Ignis?*

*nah, but prom wants that party tho lol*

Relaying the message to Byron has him wearing the ghastliest disproval on his face, eyes blown wide and mouth twisting in obvious displeasure. “What? No birthday party for the poor man?” he spits out, clearly baffled with what Noctis is planning. “Hand me that phone, milady, I must correct this problem right away. And no,” he cuts you off the moment you’re fighting to keep your phone
from him and failing, “you won’t stop me from throwing a party for him.”

Unsure of what to expect from this dramatic turn of conversation, you hang by the sidelines as Byron presses your phone to his ear. His fingers tap a methodical melody on the hardwood, impatiently waiting for the prince to pick up. Once your butler gets into this mode, not a single soul succeeds in telling him otherwise—Gods know you tried and died. And you’re not about to sacrifice yourself again like some martyr because you’ve seen the things Byron is capable of.

The moment Noctis picks up—or so you assumed, Byron opens his mouth, only to shut it with a click.

You nervously wet your throat with a gulp. Oh boy.

Seconds later, Byron’s eyebrows are hiking his forehead with an air of utter disgust. “Don’t use that deep sexy tone on me, young man, it’s obviously not going to sweep me off my feet,” he starts, clicking his tongue in disdain. You somewhat wonder what qualifies as a ‘deep sexy tone’ coming from Noctis, though the question remains unanswered when Byron tuts. “No. I’m not sorry for disappointing you, I’m not her. Now, enough with this pointless prattle, I’ve come to make my demands.”

More chatter coming from Noctis has you pitching your ears for any stray sounds.

Verdict: None.

“I hear you’re not throwing Ignis a birthday party,” he says, examining his fingernails, running a thumb over them. “As a manservant who clearly understands what it feels like to be unappreciated,” he eyeballs you, to which you launch a well-timed kick on his knee, one he counters with a warning smack to your ankle, “I’d like to remind you that Ignis Scientia is a fine man who probably does it all for you while you sit around and stuff yourself silly. Therefore, he more than deserves a party for his birthday.”

Another hum of silence, and Byron narrows his eyes at your phone.

Your stomach roils at the sudden stress.

“As far as I’m concerned, there is no royal decree preventing me from having his number,” he sighs, long and weary. “If it bothers you so much – oh, this is getting silly, we only exchange recipes and cleaning tips. Dull manservant stuffs a prince like you shouldn’t be concerned with. Nobody likes a jealous boyfriend, Noctis, you best keep that in mind for your next relationship.”

This is a disaster.

You know you can’t do anything but to internally cheer the prince to weather it through.

“Mhmm. Mhmm. Yes, thank you for getting back on track,” Byron lazily drawls. To you, he nods Noctis’ way and mouths kids these days as you submit a mental email to the Astrals to ask what you’ve done to deserve this nightmare. Probably a whole bunch of things starting with murder, that’s for sure. “Ah, all right, 7th February? Lovely date for a lovely man like him. 3.00 p.m.? Your apartment? And where exactly is your – huh, all right, settle down please, don’t shout. Do text milady the address later on.”

At this point, you wonder if you can attune the entire floor to Noctis’ armoury just so it’d suck you away from this place.

Byron, fortunately, doesn’t seem to notice your dead-eyed resignation to your fate. “See? That
wasn’t so bad, you and I manage to have a civil conversation after all—oh,” he stops, lowering your phone to examine your blackened screen, amused. “He hung up on me. The nerve.”

You bury your face in your hands, rubbing your throbbing temples while you’re at it. It could’ve gone much worse, so you’re thankful for small mercies. At least Byron didn’t go completely off-tangent like a grandma next door. “Uh…on the bright side, I guess we now know Ignis’ birthday’s on 7th,” you murmur dryly. “Now we can get to work planning a party for him. Good job, Byron.”

“We? Did I hear that right?” he echoes, dusting his hands on his thighs, getting up from the floor. You crane your head to scrutinise the odd curve settling in the corner of his lips, and he returns it with excessive flair to the sweep of his bow, rising partway to shoot you a salute. “No, not we, milady, only me. You, on the other hand, have a whip to attune. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some shopping to be done.”

And he’s off, strutting towards the exit in a sashay that belongs on a catwalk runway.

You can’t help but to slump against the wall, defeated. “That’s so unfair,” you whine, causing your butler to throw his head back with a laugh that echoes through the training hall, a hand on the doorknob. “How come you get to go shopping and I don’t?”

“Oh, milady,” he turns on his heels, wearing a smile both deceptive and insincere in nature, “you have a date to prepare this Saturday, am I right? I can’t simply commit the sin of letting you wear last season’s fashion statements. I’ll be sure to find something suitable for your little outing. Floral patterns are all the rage these days.”

You’re definitely not buying that snide smile of his. “That’s just some fancy excuse ‘cause you just wanna go shopping, don’t you?”

Byron’s only answer is another heavy laugh, full with mirth. “I’ll text Nyx to replace me in light of this unexpected circumstance.” With a little cheery wave, scarlet eyes glittering beneath his bangs, he heaves the doors shut. “Goodbye, milady!”

Wood meets wood with a bang, silence goes sssssss from the air-conditioning, and you’re all alone with this whip. So much for a butler, goodbye indeed.

**PALE SUNLIGHT FILTERS THROUGH** cotton curtain, mellow rays diffusing in his dim room. Phone tossed aside, on the edge of his bed. His sheets smell like dried sweat, the air stagnant. It’s probably past eleven and he should be up for a replacement class slotted during lunch break, but all he does is to cover his face with his hand, eyes scrunched shut. At the backs of his eyelids you stand, hugging sylleblossoms the same way you hug a pillow.

The longer he looks at the love slackening your habitual indifference, the more he wants to brush his knuckles over your lips. The smaller the smiles gracing your face, the more he wants to kiss you to make it widen. The harder you fight back with whines too wanton and heart too giddy, the more he wants to pin you in place how one pins a butterfly to a corkboard.

It’s sick.

He’s sick.

A million and one questions harried his thoughts; *how* did it start, *when* did this happen, *what* should he do, but all he does is to kick off the sheets tangling his ankles, palm digging in the depression of his eyeball.
His cock had been straining heavy and full against his abdomen and it’s an ache he can rid in seconds with a few rapid strokes—Gods, that’s how fucked up he’s gone, but the thought of delving his hands in his pants, to desecrate his image of you—it’s something he can’t do. It’s disgusting. He’s disgusting. Prince Noctis pining over a girl in his disgusting desperation, venting out his frustration only in his dreams. Tabloids would salivate over the scandalous headlines, plastering it in bold all across Insomnia.

He wants to claw it all out, everything, starting from his careless curiosity of The Ghost in the Citadel, all the way to the weak curl of your spine as you mouth thank you for the scant few words he uttered under the stars. Restart fresh from a scratch, forgoing all the hellos and goodnights and fencing you from a distance, keeping this on a professional level Ignis would approve. He’ll ascend as the 114th King of Lucis, reforming his father’s council into one of his own, one with his best friends and comrades—Ignis, Prompto, and Gladio—installed in their rightful positions.

And you, whatever it is you want to do, he’ll set you free.

No longer bound to the Andronicus and their antediluvian rules, you’re free to roam the lands after throwing a dart to the globe. Quintus will never set his hands on you, he’ll make sure of that, he’ll promise. It’s the least he can do, out of the many things you did for him.

Still, why does the thought raise an urge to retch? Jealousy, that is an ugly emotion he hasn’t felt in the years following his dad’s retreat. A primal urge to keep you with him, never with anyone else. Nobody separates you and him, nobody takes you away from him, nobody leaves him alone anymore. He hates it, hates how weak he feels when he sets his thoughts straight—but what can he do when it’s what he wants? You gave him whatever he needed no matter how meagre you had; you acknowledge his strengths and never once ridiculed him, you embraced his weaknesses and offered your shoulder instead.

He wants it all.

Wants all the time you spent on him, wants all the laughs you gave him, wants all the smiles you left him, wants your eyes fixed on him forever.

He craves you, that’s what it is.

Tossing on his mattress with a groan, Noctis rubs a hand over his clothed cock in an attempt to will it away. He’s so fucking hard since he woke up, it’s starting to hurt real bad. A damp spot’s already on the front of his sweatpants and he’s sticky all over. He needs to rub one out, that’s the best remedy to cure any stubborn erection, coming like it’ll purge him of his sins on any other day. On his bed or on the shower walls, whichever’s the closest release he can get.

Or maybe on your lips as you smile your glassy-eyed smile, his hand around your neck, painting your tongue in streaks of white.

Fuck, his cock twitches at the thought of debauching you in your whole. He’s venturing into the dangerous territory where reality blurs behind his fantasies, burning down all the bridges he’s crossed just to get to your side. His toes curl in the sheets when a hand subconsciously grabs his cock, already rutting into the callused roughness of his palm. It hurts, still dry for him to ride it out like this, but he’s too far gone to even give a shit where he’s heading even if it’s headlong into destruction.

His cockhead’s beading at the slit, angry red and peeking from the hem of his elastic, and the waft of cool air brushing over his over-sensitized skin has him biting his lip to keep it down. Fuck, he hasn’t even locked the door in case Ignis walks in, but fuck, you like littering bites on your bottom lip, don’t you? He’s learnt how you seem to chew on your lip when you’re thinking—it only makes him want
to yank your mouth to his just so he’d introduce you to his teeth.

The slight slick from his precum makes things easier but not necessarily less brutal with the wild pace he’s set, thumbing at the head and smearing it all over his cock for makeshift lube. He grunts into his pillow, bangs in his eyes, that familiar coil taut and ready to burst in his belly. He’s fucked up in the head from your smile, he’s fucked up in the head for your mouth, he’s fucked up for you. There’s no turning back from being friends when he’s already shoving his cock down your throat in his foggy mind, hand holding the back of your head and letting you choke around his mouthful of cock and cum.

Oh, fuck, his hand is a poor substitute for your throat convulsing weakly around his leaking length, but he’s got nothing else than the you living in his head, making sweet little sounds like you worship his cock the same way you worship his existence. Noctis bites into his pillow with a groan when he pulls out of your messy mouth, rubbing his saliva-slick cock on your hot and wet tongue, savouring the way you wait on your knees for him to come all over you. He grits his teeth when the indulgent thought is one that shamefully tips him over the edge, snapping the tight coil in his belly and spurting warmth over his torso.

He’s done it now.

Fuck.

No turning back.

Coming down from the euphoric high of release has him panting harshly through his mouth, gulping in oxygen fast enough to replace the vacancy in his lungs. Cum cooling on his sweaty skin, fatigue settling in his muscles. The unmistakable scent intermingling with his stale bedroom air. Vision blurring, head heavy. Once he salvages the lasts of his thoughts before his illusions took over, the aftermath of his actions has Noctis reeling backwards in three parts shame and one part anger. Shame on him for succumbing to primal reactions when he defiles you into a slave of his, angry with himself for thinking about you in that way. His fingers are sticky when he stretches them to the ceiling, examining them with hooded eyes.

He knows.

He knows he’s officially gone off the rails when he first saw you sleeping without a care in the world, vulnerable, pure, weak on your white sheets.

He’s just prolonging the inevitable, isn’t he?

Swallowing the pathetic sounds he nearly makes, Noctis swipes his dirty hand clean on the sheets and twists to his side, curling up. Ridding the evidence rids him none of his guilt. The heat of his skin abates, but the throb of his heart doesn’t. Class is starting soon and he needs to pack up all his textbooks to sit through Modern Managerial for two hours and a half on an empty stomach unless he whips up some oatmeal to replace Ignis’ hearty breakfasts but all he wants to do is to call in sick and pass it off for some over-exhaustion from burning himself through a whole damn month just to cover up the fact that he jerked off to some lewd thoughts of his friend.

Scratch that. You’re not his friend. He doesn’t deserve to call himself your friend.

What kind of friend is he anyway? The shittiest, lowest kind. The kind that’d fuck your mouth with your head to the wall, that’s what. The kind that’d press his fingers over your ribs like a pianist over his keys, memorising the erotic way you shudder under him. The kind that wants to substitute your pillows just so you’d hold him instead. Exactly the shittiest, most fucked up kind of friend.
Swallowing his dry throat, Noctis tips his head on his flattened pillow and stares at the ceiling.

He needs to get his shit together, and fast.

Fast enough before he does something he can’t undo.

**WEEKEND COMES WITHOUT MUCH FANFARE,** putting Byron in a mood too good to be true. He hums, he bobs his head to some catchy pop tunes he Moogled on your computer, he even does a little backwards walk on the mopped marble. You find it cute that he’s jittery like he’s the one with a full weekend when you’re the one who stepped out of the shower smelling like crushed sugar, towelling your damp hair absently, ready to go out for the week.

As you plug in the hairdryer and blasted hot dry air, raking fingers through your locks to detangle knots, Byron sneaks into your room to stare at your reflection in the vanity. “You do realise this is a date, right?” he crosses his arms over his chest, eyes narrowing. “As in, not the friendly sort of date. A date date.”

“I wouldn’t call it a date,” you retort mulishly, angling the hairdryer from the drying tips and steadily working it up the length of your hair. “We’re both going out to get Ignis his birthday present.” At Byron’s pensive staring, you find it appropriate to bolster your argument with more defense. “You’re really overthinking things, Byron. Stop that. It doesn’t matter anyway, not with the way things are.”

Given the time, Byron’s persistence rivals a cockroach; it’s no wonder the two won’t get along before Byron winds up cutting the critter into two. He all but rummages through your closet, withdrawing purchases from days earlier that are still packaged in paper bags. “But you’re alone with him. It’s a date.” He makes it a point to stare in your eyes, nodding solemnly. “Your very first date, mind you.”

Technically, it’s not your first date, is it? If you follow his judgment on the matter, this makes it your third date. With your hair sufficiently dried, you switch off the device and set it aside, dropping on the vanity’s velvet stool. “He might bring Prompto along,” you offer, carefully putting your thoughts together. “Because, y’know, the more the merrier. Prompto probably didn’t have the time to put together a present for Ignis too, since they were all chasing deadlines these past few days.”

Emotionally-challenged Byron casually cocks a brow. “Then it’s a threesome.”

You give Byron a look. “Am I going to get one of those birds and bees lecture from you again? I’m not sure I wanna relive that trauma right now.”

“Milady, you need to realise that you’re at that age where men will find you incredibly ravishing.” He sighs, introducing his palm to his forehead. You make a face at the word because who even uses ravishing at this day and age anyway? “I saw that, don’t make that face at me, young lady,” he warns, clicking his tongue. “I was once twenty, all right? I know what boys think when they see a pretty lady walking down the streets.”

“Then make me unpretty.” You shrug, sorting through your comb and clips stowed in the drawer, deciding between a bejewelled claw and a fuss-free ribbon. “That solves all issues, doesn’t it?”

Byron sighs for what seems to be the umpteenth time in ten minutes, resting his head against the cupboard like he gave up on life. Or on you. Both sounds tempting. “It’s hard to devalue a work of art like you, milady. Even if I wrap you in last season’s Dior, you are still Mona Lisa hanging in the Royal Lucis Museum.”
“And what’s wrong with last season’s Dior again?” you roll your eyes at his dramatization, combing sections through your hair and scrutinizing your reflection, wondering what’s the best way to go about looking casual but not too casual—somewhere in between? Like you’re trying to look presentable, but not trying too hard. “It’s not a date, trust me.”

“You’d be very surprised at how fast this entire thing is turning into a cliché,” he points out, shuffling through flimsy chiffons in Hermes and pairing it up with some stiff pleated skirt from LV. He recoils at his disastrous matchmaking, sets down the two items, and picks through a bagful of Comme des Garçons instead. “Girl says it’s not a date, boy thinks it’s a date, they both go out together, and somewhere along the way,” he wrinkles his nose, “girl falls for boy, they kiss by the sunset, and go home to make out. Awful cliché, don’t let your romance suffer through the same predictable path. I’d rate your movie 1.5 out of 10 if that’s the case.”

You try your very best to remember why he’s your butler again. Right, some sort of contracted family deal from ages back, probably dating all the way to Solheim. “Just—can we drop this topic? I’m just hanging out with him, we both like the same things, and I’m expected to serve under his council somewhere in the future. Don’t set us up.”

Byron examines a floral YSL piece printed in pastels, holding it up to the sunlight. “Milady, he looks at you like a constipated man finding an empty stall in the public washroom. You’re the love of his life, the one he needs, in case you don’t understand my analogy.”

You do—just that it’s probably not the best one he’s come up with. “Uh. Doesn’t sound like a compliment, but I totally appreciate the sentiment all the same. Very Byronesque, as expected.”

Byron finds it appropriate to ignore you. “Noctis does seem like an awkward young prince who has little to no experience in love, given his sheltered circumstances. He’s like you—except, he’s the prince. So it’s understandable why he latches on to you the moment you show signs of accepting him for who he is. You and him are two halves of a moon, completing one another.” He holds up a plain sundress scalloped in sheer lace, thin straps crisscrossing down the back, and nods at the satisfactory shift of your expression. Then he kneels to sift through Manolo, trying to pop some colour on his overall co-ord for the day. “He’s a classic textbook fool on falling in love—trust me, I’m a man, I know what I’m talking about.”

You open your mouth to retort—only, your mouth is dry.

His ruddy eyes dart from the strappy wedges to your brooding face in a split second, turning back to his task once more. The corners of his lips are upturned, smug. It’s an answer enough. “What about you, milady? What do you think of him?”

Your nails cut crimson crescents in your palm.

Ignis’ birthday is next week. It’ll mark a full four-month friendship with Noctis, toeing the start of a fifth month in the making.

Four months passed since he showed up demanding your name, eating through your cereal and playing through King’s Knight with a Revenant weapon. He introduced you to the personification of a chocobo who photographs loads of things as he worked through part-times in hopes of saving enough for a Lokton. His Shield, on the other hand, puts you through the wringer by adding punishing reps to your regimen, gruff voice calling you lil’ lady. And his Advisor is a piece of work amiable enough to carry a conversation, yet distant enough to remain an enigma skirting your life.

What was it like without the prince?
Listening through mother’s tracks on your computer, Debussy making itself a home in your heart. Talking to the walls, talking to the books, talking to Byron, talking to yourself in front of the mirror. Mother’s hands never left your neck, her glossy fingernails raking your skin in welts. Insomnia is your pretty glass globe and Niflheim wants to shake it in its hands, stirring snowstorms in its wake. It was cold. It was lonely. You were cold and lonely.

Then Noctis came along and you forgot what it felt like to sleep alone.

You know what it is. You always do.

“I like him.”

And Byron’s smile turns bitter. “I know.”

You like him, you know you do. How can you not like the person who defended your rights against father, who wanted you like you wanted him? You purse your lips, turning away. “But you know how we are—you know how I am. He doesn’t know anything about me, about us, about mother, about father. I can’t possibly tell him—“

“Milady, does he need to know?” he interjects, sitting on his haunches. At your wordless silence, eyes uncertain, Byron clears his throat and tries again. “What I’m trying to say is, I’m certain King Regis remains unaware of what exactly the Andronici do. We may be nobles, but we are tied deeply to the underworld. The police, the mobs, the gangs, the yakuza—they are all under the Andronics’ thumb. If His Majesty knows what your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather, and the rest of your ancestors had done to keep Insomnia safe, I’m sure he’ll have a hard time trying to convict Quintus of anything without crippling everything.”

He words it as though he’s putting a finger on your lips just so you won’t tell anyone who ate the last cookie.

But Byron never minces his meaning.

Taking a deep breath, you mutter, “So…you’re saying I should continue keeping this whole thing a secret until my death.”

It isn’t a question. It’s a statement met with Byron’s approving nod. He brings the dress and the sandals together with him, dropping them in a hapless heap by your feet. Always reverent, always your dog, he kneels with his hands resting on your knees, tipping his chin to admire you like he always does.

“Ignorance is bliss, or so they say,” he chuckles low, warm breath fanning over your cheeks. Just like this, his fingers card through your hair, tucking stray locks behind your ear, thumbing your cheekbone. Sunlight brings out the blood in his pale irises, thick lashes curtained partway. “Milady, I do want to see you happy. I truly do. But these past few months have taught me that I can’t make you happy the way he does. If your happiness lies with Noctis, so be it, I’ll continue fighting to keep the smile you learnt from him.”

Happiness is subjective.

Happiness is when you hold a brand new video game in your hands, waiting to be played. Happiness is when King’s Knight gets patched with a new update, and you’d roll over in bed as you scuffled through the stages. Happiness is when Byron drops by with a new book, babbling about his latest reading recommendation and how you should read it too. Happiness is when mother sits at the piano, her elegant fingers pressing the ivory keys to produce a hymn only the Astrals could’ve
bestowed, her eyes closed, eyelashes fluttering. Happiness is when King Regis’ letter finally came, freeing you from the shackles within.

And happiness is when you are here with him.

With Noctis.

Byron’s sincerity brings tears to your eyes, but they don’t fall down your cheeks—they never do anymore, ever since you eviscerated your innards to rid your feelings. Yet, his reverence tightens your throat, seizes your voice. You choke up.

He only runs his fingers over your wet eyelashes, grazing against your unshed tears. You draw his head to your chest, scrunching your eyes shut at the feel of his cheek resting on your collarbones. Hunching over like this, all balled up with Byron by your side again, you are aware of how insignificant you are without him. On your own, you would’ve slit your wrists in the tub, letting clear waters run red, letting the Andronicus end with you.

Byron gathers you in his arms, rubbing loose circles between your shoulder blades. His words are a soothing thrum against your neck, breathing in the lush scent of soap on your skin. “In the end, we are no better than your father. We are liars. We lie to keep those around us safe. That is what the Andronici do: We lie. We kill. And we lie again.”

You know. Aren’t you always lying? Aren’t you always killing people to get what you want? Human lives are the currency in your game, and you make it a point to have as much as you can before time runs out.

This is how it goes: You will amass a mountain of bodies by the time Noctis appoints you as his military strategist, and he will never know the things he does not need to know. Insomnia thrives under his reign, while you are every death sentence signed in blood. As he goes to bed each night, you will do a routine maintenance to sweep unnecessary dusts from stirring unneeded curiosity. For every dispute raised in the council, you will have already threaded your orders through the ranks, starting from the police, to the gangsters, to the yakuza, to the mob and the men. Those crossing your path will be carefully scissored out of the picture by way of Byron or their sudden cooperation out of the plea of a beloved, whichever method most convenient at the moment of need. Decoys are magnificent, what more framing those complicit to the cause; suspect a foul play, and an execution is the remedy to all.

And this is how you will maintain your ecosystem, keeping a manicured garden free from weeds and pests.

Resting your cheek against Byron’s hair, idle fingers curling his ponytail between each digit, you clear your throat, fighting to keep your voice from cracking.

“You know, when I was young, I really liked reading all those fairytale books mother bought for me,” you confess, stewing in the indulgent thoughts of mother and her boozy smile, gifting you books to make up for the world father denied. Byron makes a quiet noise at your throat, and you give a small laugh at your foolishness fifteen years ago, holding him tight. “Thought I’d be one of those princesses when I grow up, wearing dresses and tiaras for my whole life. I was so wrong. Look at me now. What kind of fairytale princess am I?”

You don’t blame Byron for huffing under his breath, probably amused at your childishness.

Then his hand rubbing your back stills, lips burning words on your skin.
“Oh milady…you’re never a fairytale princess to begin with. You’ve always been the monster.”

[tbc.]

Chapter End Notes

Hi, are there people still reading this fic and waiting for updates?

LPC updates long overdue? DON’T WORRY I GOT YOUR BACK! WITH TWO CHAPTERS BACK TO BACK! TLDR of my current life can be read here if you’re wondering, but all woeful life shenanigans aside, woah plot. And keeping secrets are no good but we’re only starting! Slow burn! Friends to lovers! Angst! And the next chapter is a plot-filled interlude of fun dates, car rides, and a certain creepy old man!

With this, we’re finally coming to an end with the FLOWERING arc, thanks for sticking around this far! Everyone’s support, comments & kudos on the fic, and heartwarming words on Tumblr didn’t fail to keep the passion going for writing LPC, and I really appreciate everyone’s enthusiasm and consistent check-ups on the next update! Again, I’m truly sorry for the one-year break, but I hope everyone enjoyed both chapters!

We’ve made it through BLOOMING, and we also made it through FLOWERING. Now, let’s welcome the next instalment, DECAYING. And you all know what that means… (◡‿◡✿)

PREVIEW:

[20] Nonchalantly picking out a petal streaked in rich pinks fading in whites, Noctis drops it into your outstretched hands. You crane your neck to reward his gift with a smile, and it’s all that he needs, really. He’s good at pretending, isn’t he? He’s been pretending he’s got his life together all these years, so he’s sure he can pretend to be your friend just a little while longer.

[21] Byron’s eyes are the colour of rust-eaten iron flaking gold over the years, corroded by the light. There is a disturbing twist to his lips. Caressing your cheek, he’s whispering go back to sleep too loudly and all you can tell him is wait byron i’m scared please stay voicelessly when your limbs don’t
move and you can’t move and it’s dark, it’s too dark, but why can you see
the line of his smile shifting into a smirk and—

[22] “...is it okay if you stay for the night?” you ask, the curl of your
fingers tightening as if it’s a manacle chaining him where he should be.

[23] Sure, Noctis could disentangle your limbs from his and keep this
memory all to himself, but he’s done lying to himself, he’s done pretending
this is going nowhere when he wants it to go somewhere—anywhere, as
long as it’s with you.

[24] Home. A word he lost when mom left and dad ran. A word he found
in you once more when he realises his home exists in a person, not a place.
Byron throws his gaze to the slice of sky above, counting the days when
he’ll see you again. Home.

[25] Noctis feels his jaw grow tight at the aloofness of the answer. No,
Ignis doesn’t understand at all. Ignis won’t ever understand this. How could
he understand when he hasn’t suffered through a crippling loneliness only
Noctis had felt? Through gritted teeth, he grinds out, “You don’t get it. I
don’t want her to go too.”

[26] Noctis knows that much when Regis furrows his brows, understanding
dawning in his eyes. “So we finally meet,” says Regis, exhaling the words
like a laborious process, “young daughter of the Andronicus.”

[27] “And you, Highness? Will you still rally under her banner even if you
know she slit her mother’s throat at sixteen?”

[28] Tossing a look over his shoulder, his eyes are alight with mischief.
“Well, what’re you waiting for? For me to bathe you too? Aren’t you too
old for that?”

Lord have mercy on me, because each chapter’s close to 10k words. RIP in pieces
myself for having to edit through almost 80k of words. There’s a mixture of drama and
so much fluff it’s so fluffy I could die from the fluff. (The fluff is just there as a
distraction to hide the fact that this is DECAYING we’re talking about and there’s
bound to be angst everywhere.)

Hope you guys enjoyed the updates on LPC, My Friend, Mr Noctgar, and My Little
Sister ☆ Can’t Be This Cute! Looking forward to hear from everyone again; thoughts
and comments are always lovely to hear!

P/S: Do allow me some time to reply to everyone’s comments from 2018 because
there’s been a lot of lovely comments in this fic and I must reply to every single one of
it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!