The Temptation of Saint Anthony, but with This Guy

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The Temptation of Saint Anthony, but with This Guy

by HigharollaKockamamie

Summary

Noct says just to ignore his weird uncle. Prompto thinks he's interesting.

Notes

For a kink meme prompt:

Ardyn is Regis’ brother and not evil. Instead of being Trash Jesus he is Noctis’ weird but charming and scholarly uncle. Prompto and Ardyn have met a number of times and get along quite well, and then they fall in mutual love with each other. Deeply in love, not a pretty boy trophy with a sugar daddy. The kind of love and relationship that is strong, stable, and can endure a lifetime.

+ Prompto is of legal age
++ Noctis is uncomfortable with his best friend dating his uncle
+++ Regis is happy for them
It was a good idea to stay away from Knife Territory while Ignis was doing the gutting and scaling. The way he flashed those things around was impressive to watch, but he did it with the kind of concentration that made you think that if he lopped somebody's head off on the backstroke he might not notice. So, while Gladio built up the fire, Prompto went and sat by Noctis to admire the technique from outside the splash zone.

“I put that pic up,” Noct said. “It's got a bunch of comments already.”

“Ooh, lemme see!” Prompto grabbed Noct's phone out of his hand. Those likes were earned, if he did say so himself. He was proud of the angle he'd gotten on Noct wrestling the fish onto the dock. “I got lucky on the timing there. Got just the right expression that really shows the struggle.”

“The struggle you could've helped me with.”

“Hey, that fight was between you and the fish. It was personal.” He scrolled through the comments. “'Nice catch,' 'look at that water!,' couple creepy ones about you in a wet shirt, 'how does his hair still do that,' which is a good question, a...huh.”

Noct was leaning back in the camp chair with the sun on his face. His hair dripped on the ground now and then. “If it's spam about making nine thousand gil a day from home again, just delete it.”

“Nah, somebody posted a picture of a dude hugging a dead guy on the floor.” Prompto squinted closer. “Like, a painting.”

Noct glanced over. “Oh, that's my weird uncle. Just ignore him.”

It took Prompto a second to figure out who he meant. Sometimes he forgot he was best friends with a guy who could refer to Ardyn Lucis Caelum, Prince of Lucis, Duke of some other stuff, Royal Archivist and Physician and about a dozen other things Prompto was forgetting, brother to the King, as my weird uncle.

Prompto said, “He also put a little tree, a pig face, a star, and a ghost.”

“Yeah, he doesn't really get how emojis work.”

Prompto zoomed in on the picture. He'd met the guy a couple times, and it did seem like he had an odd sense of humor, but it couldn't just be random. He knew he'd never seen the painting before, but still, something about it was familiar.

“It's gotta mean something. You could ask him.”

Noctis winced. “No way. He'd be all smug about it for days, and that guy can smug.”

“Okay, fine. It'll just be a mystery forever.”

Forever turned out to be about three minutes, when Prompto gave up looking at the weird painting and scrolled back to the photo. The second he handed the phone back to Noct it clicked.

He bounded up to his feet and hopped behind Noct's chair. “Wait, I got it! It looks like you!”

“I do not look like a guy hugging a dead body. Totally wrong hair.”
Gladio came over, smelling like smoke. He leaned over for a look at the screen. “You're both pretty bug-eyed there.”

“Yeah, it's that!” Prompto said. “Kinda got the same expression, see? And look, the whole composition of the picture. See, that tree is in the same place as the dresser, and that round pillow thing is Gladio's duffel bag.”


A while later, when things were starting to smell like fish in a good way, Noctis's phone beeped.

“Aw, man,” he said.

“What?” Prompto said, and bounced on the balls of his feet. “Was I right?”

“'My compliments-' wait, hold on a second.” Noct cleared his throat and went on in a goofy accent.

“'My compliments on solving the riddle, dear prince. Give them to your adviser for providing the tip.'”

Gladio laughed. “He got you there.”

“Woah, he thinks I'm Iggy? That's never happened before.”

“With any luck, it won't again,” Ignis called.

“You don't have to tell him, though,” Prompto said. “That guy's seriously intimidating.”

“Gotta set the record straight,” Noct said, typing. The message popped up: *nah it was Prompto.*

It was just long enough for Prompto to complain about him being a jerk before there was a reply.

(triangle) Your friend is quite perspicacious. (cat) (mountain range) (wrench)

“Woo!” Prompto pumped his fist in the air. “I'm perspicacious as hell!”

Ignis said, “Then you will notice that dinner is ready.”

Once the fish was down to the bones and the stars were coming out, Prompto asked, “So where do you figure he found that picture?”


“Your intellectual curiosity is an inspiration to us all, your highness,” said Ignis.

Prompto was quieter that evening than usual. He watched the arrangement of them by the fire, and let his eyes relax until they were shapes of light and shadow in the frame of the dark.
Prompto forgot all about it for a few days. Plenty of the shots he took on the way home were better.

Home, for Noct, meant the palace. After being there enough times, Prompto had gained some serious levels in Not Gawking At Everything Like a Tourist, and was definitely making some progress in Walking Around Like You Belong There And It's Not Even a Thing. Gladio and Ignis, who looked like they belonged there without even grinding any points in it, went off to do Shield and Advisor job stuff. Noct went off to talk to his dad about how the trip to “build relations in the territories” had gone, though Prompto had a feeling it'd turn more into stories about the fish he'd caught and all the monsters they'd beat up. Though that worked for PR, too. If anybody ever asked that one lady what the government had ever done for her, she could say “chased the saberclaws out of my yard.”

Prompto had turned down the offer to have a Glaive drive him home, half because it felt really weird to have an elite knight chauffeuring him around and half because the one time he'd gotten a ride from Crowe he'd ended up having to pry his fingers off the handle one by one and then go and sit real quietly for a while. That left him by himself in one of the white stone halls that felt like it wasn't scaled for normal little humans. The quiet always felt so different when it wasn't just a temporary space between their voices. He could go home, to the quiet there.

Prompto walked around the palace for a while. He wasn't the only one, since parts of it were basically a public space. Like the gallery, full of official portraits and paintings of people centered and looking straight forward, or arranged in neat lines.

It shouldn't have taken getting his nerve up to go into the library. That was open to anybody, and anyway he'd been there plenty of times before back in high school when they'd do homework there, and Noct would be laid-back and act like he was doing a half-assed job, so that it wasn't so obvious that the problems Prompto was struggling with were stuff he'd gotten right away. It smelled like books. It was full of polished wood shelves and leather bindings and the kind of quiet that was on purpose.

Prompto edged in like some of the squares on the carpet were booby-trapped. He picked his way through the shelves, looking at all the spines, and realized he had no idea where to start. The idea that'd seemed good and solid in his head when they were driving through the countryside and he was staring out the window had vanished now that he was in a place to do something about it. How did you even find books with art in them?

“Why, hello.”

If the first step was jumping a good few feet straight up, Prompto was halfway there.

“My apologies for the shock,” the king's brother said, leaning on a desk and not looking any more sorry than he sounded, “But really, you should be on your guard when entering my lair.”

Prompto didn't know how he could have missed him. He was a big guy – not Gladio-caliber giant, but somewhere in the Gladio ballpark. Part of that was the coat he wore, which looked like something you could buy if there was such thing as a designer thrift shop. In this light his hair looked purplish, and like something that didn't have time of day for mainstream stuff like combs. He had stubble that was purplish too, all along the line of his jaw. You'd believe somebody who told you he'd just walked out of a summit with seventeen foreign ambassadors, and also somebody else who told you he'd just woken up under a bench. The second after thinking that was a weird time to notice he was handsome.
“I was, uh, looking for a book,” Prompto said a beat too late, and felt like an idiot immediately.

“You've come to the right place.” He leaned forward a little and looked close. The light made his eyes look yellowish. “You're the prince's friend. The artist with the keen eye.”

“Nah,” Prompto said, with his hand in his hair where it always ended up when he was feeling sheepish, “I can't draw or paint or anything. I just take pictures.”

“Merely another application of the same aesthetic sense.” The archivist's hands wandered around a lot as he talked, trailing the draping sleeves, like he was about to pull a rabbit out of a hat. “You're the one who catalogues our prince's adventures, correct?”

“If that's what you call posting stuff on the Hasteagram, yeah.” Prompto's eyes ran over the spines of the books, all bound up in leather and with titles like *Counting the Wings of the Angels* and *Fated Children: A Time Compressed*. Where did those come from, anyway? You never saw books like at in stores. They just spawned in libraries like rare enemies in different areas in King's Knight.

“Modern times call for a modern medium.” The guy looked like he thought something was funny, but maybe he just looked that way all the time. Like those girls who always looked really mad at you even when you and your buddy hadn't ordered the last of those fancy egg yolk croissants that were a big deal for a while or anything. (It had been totally worth it.) “We have some interesting photography collections. Angeal Adams, Kuponut Newton, Diane Algus, Annie Leibocovitz…”

Prompto's heel twisted back and forth in the thick carpet. “Actually, I was kind of curious about art. Like, the picture you put up. The one with the stabbed guy.”

Noct's uncle's face lit up. It was an expressive one that could do that a lot. “I have just the thing.”

He pointed up at the oversized books on the top shelf way out of reach.

“Oh!” Prompto said. “I'll go grab a ladder.”

“No need.” The archivist picked a letter opener up off the desk. “Step back a bit, won't you?”

The second Prompto did, metal zinged upwards past his face and he was looking at the archivist's outline in neon magenta. He whipped his head around and followed the glowing trail. The man was hanging one-handed from a shelf a good ten feet in the air, and his other hand was reaching up to pull out a book.

“Catch,” he said, and dropped it into Prompto's arms. It was big and heavy enough to earn an *oof*.

He let go and landed lightly on the floor in front of Prompto. He flipped the letter opener in his hand and tucked it into a pocket.

“That was *so cool,*” Prompto said, wide-eyed.

The archivist swept a bow.

The book wasn't much smaller than a stop sign, and so fancy and old it didn't even have a title on the cover. It smelled like leather and old paper.

Prompto said, “Thanks, uh…”

Crap. What did you call the king's brother? There were different ones for everybody important, and they all depended on relative rank and situation and whose presence you were in and whether you
were talking or writing and probably phases of the moon or something. Ignis had a chart.

“Ardyn,” the archivist said, and that was definitely not on the chart anywhere.

The book was full of paintings. Big and gorgeous, way clearer in person than the one trapped in the little screen of Noct’s phone. He spread it out on a table, and Ardyn leaned over his shoulder and pointed out how the light and shadow worked, and how lines drew your eye, and how they put the good stuff at a third of the way across the canvas. He smelled kind of like a tree. Before Prompto knew it he’d lost track of time.

“Oh crap,” he said with a guilty start when they came to the end of the book. “You must have work to do and stuff.”

“Which I avoid by whatever means possible,” Ardyn said, “so your assistance is appreciated. Do come back whenever you like, and don’t hesitate to come in. I keep odd hours.”

Prompto left with his head buzzing. He could hardly wait until he had a chance to talk about it. Which was having lunch with the guys, so he did more gesturing with his fork than eating.

“And there’s this thing where you think of a big rectangle, and you think of a square inside it, and then inside that there’s a smaller-”

Noctis raised his hand. “Question. Are you high?”

“He isn’t,” said Ignis, who must have known enough about those moments when you snap your fingers and your eyes light up that he could recognize it from the outside. “He's inspired.”
It was a lot harder to do on purpose. You had to get the angle and the framing just right, and you had to wait for the right opportunity. The first one Prompto was really happy with was a picture of Gladio ripping into a roast chickatrice leg. He posted it and waited patiently. Well, as patient as Prompto got.

“Did you see the comments?” he said for the third time in fifteen minutes, hanging off Gladio’s shoulder.

Gladio said, “You mean the one that's all, 'looks juicy and delicious, and the food isn't bad either?'”

“Why do we get so many perverts?” Noct said.

“A known side effect of popularity,” said Ignis, “and of not deigning to wear a shirt.”

“I didn't wanna get grease all over it,” Gladio said. “Huh, this one's weird. What's 'Ifrit Feasting on the Mortals' supposed to mean?”

Prompto cackled in triumph. “It means he got it!”

It was pure opportunity. They were racing up a hillside when Noct's chocobo scrabbled in the shale and did a little hop that made Noct toss his arm up to keep his balance. Prompto managed to grab his camera and snap off the picture.

To get the shot and lose his balance was a fair trade. He hit the ground and rolled some to protect his spine, and more importantly, the camera.

“Woah!” Noct pulled his bird up next to him. “You okay?”

“Worth it,” Prompto said, dazed. His chocobo kweh'd and gnawed on his hair, because she cared.

Since Ignis kept a strict no-texting-and-chocodriving policy, he had to wait until they'd stopped for a while to put it up.

- lol the prince dyes his bird purple
- That is terrible riding posture.
- look at him go
- A striking likeness of The Conqueror Traversing Ravatogh. (ice cream) (sunflower) (caterpillar) (goat)

Prompto let out a whistle. “He's quick. I thought that one would be tougher.”

“It's no surprise that his grace's breadth of knowledge extends to the arts,” Ignis said, examining his chocobo's claws. Poor little guys picked up ticks sometimes in the tall grasses. Ignis could get his to hold out its foot and stand there like a lady getting a manicure.

“Is that what you're supposed to call him?” Prompto said.

“I've told you you should memorize the chart.”
“What're you calling him anything for?” Noct said, lounging on a pile of gysahl greens. “I have to put up with him cause he's family, but you don't.”

Prompto scrolled through the comments with one hand and scratched under his chocobo's feathers with the other. “He hung out with me and told me a whole bunch of this stuff.”

It had been like they were scheming together. Like Prompto was a real artist worth his time, and worth showing how to open up all these new ways of seeing.

“Try throwing erasers at him,” Noct said. “That usually gets him to go away.”

“Nah,” Prompto said, as close as he could get to saying what it'd been like, “it was cool.”

Noct shrugged. “Just don't believe everything he tells you. This is the guy who goes around convincing kids soda comes from milking daemon spiders.”

“That's your fault for believing it,” said Gladio.

Noct flicked greens at him. “Shut up, I was like seven.”

“You sure you don't want to come cliff diving?” Noct said. The wind off the sea flipped up the corner of the towel he had over his shoulder.

“If I'll get hair on your chest,” said Gladio.

“Nah. I'll stay right on nice solid ground, thanks.” Prompto looked over at those cliffs and blanched. He wasn't a big fan of heights. Or depths. Why couldn't everything just stay flattish like it was supposed to? “Nobody needs chest hair that bad.”

“Suit yourself,” Gladio said.

“I'll get some good action shots.” Once he got the tripod to stay steady on the rocky ground.

He got some great ones, in fact, and then one where he waited and watched Ignis soar down toward the water until he hit the surface with hardly a splash.

- Boring, there's not even anybody in this one.
- Look down in the lower right in the water there's legs
- Nice view of the sea.
- Hey, I know that weapon cart guy.
- My room mate Cassia makes 9,000 gil a day over the internet 3-5hours job a day with weekly payout simplest. job I have ever do
- Haha you took it a second too late my bro!
- Landscape and the Descent of the Flighted One. (lady waving) (four-leaf clover) You're going to have to go farther afield to confound me. (umbrella)

“That,” Prompto said to his phone screen, “is a challenge.”

“Eyugh. Pungent is right.” Noctis was holding his fork dagger-style, ready to stab the chunks of tofu if they tried anything funny.

“It's...pretty strong, Iggy,” Prompto said. He took a closer whiff. That was a big mistake.

“Why does this exist?” Noct said. “How does this exist? What do you even do to innocent little
cubes of stuff to make this happen?”

“Fermentation is a fascinating process,” Ignis said. He was resting his plate on his knees like it was normal food you could trust.

“There's no way this could get you drunk enough to be worth it,” said Noct.

“Distinctive as the odor may be, the flavor is in fact quite mellow.”

“Mellow? No way. It smells like stress.”

“Buck up, buttercup,” Gladio said, trying some. “’s not bad.”

“You just put that in your mouth.”

Prompto just set his plate down quietly. For, uh, later. Nobody noticed him getting his camera out. That tofu took up all your senses at once.

While he was getting his equipment together, Noct must have gotten his courage up and given it a shot. That was, judging from the “Urrgegh” and the sharp, concerned “Highness!”

This one he had to show in person.

For once Prompto wasn't dreading getting back home and splitting up. As soon as Noct, Ignis, and Gladio went their separate ways in the palace, he made tracks toward the library.

Ardyn was at his desk. He looked up from something he was writing in cursive so fancy it might've been a foreign language, and Prompto was half expecting a not right now, but instead he got, “Good evening, Prompto. I see you've returned from your expedition.”

Prompto didn't say anything. He just laid down the set of four pictures between a couple cactuar figures and the lamp that must've cost more than a month's rent on a downtown apartment.

“Oh? What's this?” Ardyn's fingers spread out the four photos.

Prompto grinned and bounced on the balls of his feet.

Ardyn rested his chin on his fist and said, “Hm.” He tapped on the desk while his eyes went from one photo to another. There was Ignis coming out of the tent. Him offering the plate of tofu to Gladio, who was pointing out of the frame to the next vict-- to Noct. Ignis and Noct standing beside each other, both wearing looks of growing unease. Ignis standing with his hands reaching out helplessly above where Noct was doubled over.

Ardyn burst out laughing.

“It's the Kadamitas Tetraptych,” he said. “Oh, clever boy.”

“Are you sure you're not high?” Noct said the next day, when they were both sweaty and breathing hard from a training session. Gladio wasn't even winded, obviously, the jerk. Not that Prompto held it against him. He couldn't hold much of anything against anybody right now.

“High on life, buddy,” Prompto said and hopped back up for another go, because he'd made the Royal Archivist laugh and he was clever.
Chapter End Notes

Art references and possibly the longest walk anyone has ever taken to this joke. Come say hi to me at higharollakockamamie.tumblr.com.
The library was a good place to hang out. Prompto was around the palace a lot anyway, so it was easy to wander by and drop in when the guys were busy, during those pieces of downtime he used to feed to games on his phone. He kept setting records for the longest he'd ever spent in a library without getting shushed. Ardyn wasn't always there, but he always had time for Prompto when he was. He'd look at his photos and show him art stuff, and they'd end up spending ages just talking about color and lighting.

“You see, the contrast draws the eye to the enigmatic expression.”

“Yeah, yeah! I get it. And the jacket color changes there...you know, there are those things that look like they're completely different colors depending on what light they're in.” Prompto tapped his fingers on his lips and looked up at the light fixtures on the walls between the shelves. “It'd be interesting to try something like that in different conditions. See how it turns out.”

Ardyn tucked a piece of maroon hair behind his ear. “Such as?”

Prompto said, “Wanna model for me?”

The minute Ardyn was out of the warm, yellowish lamps of the library you could see the difference. It was textbook. Not that Prompto ever read those.

In the gallery, with its white stone and big, high-up windows, Ardyn's hair looked pure purple. He looked an extra kind of alive next to all the big portraits of stiff, glowering important people. Like always when he was really feeling it, Prompto barely noticed how the people around stopped to watch him come in for a closeup. He didn't have eyes for anything outside his lens.

“Turn your head a little.”

“Like this?”


In the shade in the courtyard, his hair looked like a normal auburn. Ardyn leaned against the wall and let Prompto fool around trying to make that triangle ratio thing work. His coat was amazing for that.

“Now what I really want to work with is direct sunlight,” Prompto said, flipping through the ones he'd gotten. This was a man who was born to pose.

“There's plenty of that by the stables,” Ardyn said.

Prompto's eyes lit up. He felt his head whirring, and the image jumped into existence behind his eyes. “Wait. I have an idea.”

They ended up in the pasture, a big open place where the palace's chocobos pecked at the grass and Prompto tried not to think too much about how much this much space in the middle of the city must cost. That was royalty for you; even their lawns were expensive.

Prompto got the black chocobo chick arranged just right in Ardyn's arms. Well, part of it was arranging. Ten minutes or so was petting it and scratching it and asking it who has the best little beaky face yes you do, because there were rules of nature you could fight and ones you couldn't. He knew he shouldn't go cooing at a bird in front of a guy so much higher ranked than him they
wouldn’t fit on the same spreadsheet, who was also brilliant and could cure diseases and helped keep the whole government running. On the other hand, when he scratched the chocobo under the neck feathers, it scrunched its eyes up and went chirp. You couldn’t argue with that.

“Okay,” Prompto said, done petting the bird (for now) and hopping over to his equipment, “look off to the right. I mean, left. Your left. Loosen your scarf some. Yeah, perfect!”

In the full light, his hair was deep plum with mauve highlights where the sun struck. The small part of Prompto’s brain that was left to the world outside the frame picked up the sound of somebody walking through the grass and ignored it, since it didn’t have anything to do with getting this angle right.

“What are you doing?” Noct’s voice called.

“Maiden Holding a Weasel, I presume,” Ardyn said. He nudged the chocobo away from trying to eat his shirt.

“That doesn't help and you know it doesn't help.”

“Hey Noct,” Prompto said. He straightened up from his camera and saw his friend standing a few feet away looking dubious. Well, he thought it was dubious. Even if you had a degree in Noctology, it was still tough to tell sceptical from just took a nap. “I'm getting some really good shots here.”

“I've been called 'strikingly photogenic,'” Ardyn said. The chocobo had given up on his shirt and was rubbing its head against his chin.

“You've been called a lot of stuff,” said Noct. “Anyway, Prompto, we're heading over to the arcade. Gladio beat me in the ring so now I have to go beat him at air hockey.”

Prompto fiddled with a tripod leg that didn’t really need it. Its shadow on the grass was long and skinny. “Can I get a rain check on that? There's a couple more shots I want to get before the sun goes down.”

“With him?”

Nod.

Okay, that look was definitely prime Dubious.

Noct turned it onto Ardyn and the chocobo he was petting. “Don't you have other stuff to do? Like, work?”

Prompto’s face fell along with his heart. He’d gotten so caught up he’d forgotten he was wasting an important guy’s time.

“Encouraging the city's artistic development is among my responsibilities, in fact,” Ardyn said. “It would be a pity to lose the opportunity.”

“It'd just be one more, I swear,” Prompto said with fresh hope jumping up his chest. He got the tripod collapsed in record time. “Oh, man, the best thing would be somewhere high up with a good clear view...”

“I know just the place,” Ardyn said. He handed the chick to Noct, straightened his sleeves, and came over to set his hand on Prompto’s arm.
“Hey, wait a minute–” Noctis said around an armful of bird.

“Later, Noct!” Prompto called over his shoulder. He looked at Ardyn. “You're really in charge of art stuff?”

“That is among my designated sphere of influence, yes,” Ardyn said. “I also have the authority to christen bridges and to bequeath people the rights to swans.”

He led Prompto back toward the castle and its towers. He had a long stride, and keeping up with it made Prompto's heart beat kind of fast.

“What do people even do with the rights to swans?” Prompto said.

Ardyn said, “Lord it over them, presumably.”

It probably wasn't really that high, as bell towers went. You didn't even notice it among the rest of the palace. But it was pretty impressive from the bottom looking up.

“I was thinking the roof would have ideal conditions,” said Ardyn.

“Yeah, that would get us some really interesting light.” Prompto shaded his eyes. “Is there even a way up there, though?”

Ardyn smiled. “There is my way.”

He gestured like somebody conducting a band, and a magenta outline appeared for a second before turning into a crossbow. Freaky if you'd never seen it before, but Prompto had gotten used to that kind of thing way back when he'd forgotten a pencil and Noct pulled one for him out of nowhere. It was normal to him by the time he'd tried out getting his own weapon linked up to Noct's powers by wooshing it in and out of his hand like fifty times. Ardyn's power was like that, just a different color. He put his arm around Prompto and shot an arrow up, and up, until it slowed and curved and landed on the roof.

Wait. Prompto's brain stalled. There was something important.

Ardyn had an arm around him, and crossbow arrows were called bolts.

Everything around Prompto forgot to exist. The ground was gone. Up and down were on vacation, and gravity ceased to be a thing.

In the shaved half of a millisecond the world was back. His feet hit stone, and his knees thought that was such a great idea they had to go next. He heaved in some good old beautiful existing air and felt his body drink it in all up and tell him it was still in one piece.

“That was so cool!” Prompto gasped. “That was amazing! I think I'm gonna hork.”

“Take deep breaths and focus on the horizon,” Ardyn said, reaching down to help him up like he hadn't just flung them both through the X-Zone. “It is instrumental in the prevention of horking.”

Prompto stood up, looked out over the waist-high wall, and forgot all about how his organs had been put back in upside-down.

“Woah,” he said. From up here you could see the whole city spread out, all metal and glass under the setting sun.
“A remarkable view, isn't it?” Ardyn said. “I used to escape here when I was young, when company became oppressive. No one but Regis ever thought to look up.”

He was leaning on the wall, looking out with his face resting on his hand. The breeze was stirring his hair and the ends of his scarf. The light brought out the warmth in his face and deepened the color of his eyes.

“Wait,” Prompto said, very quietly, like his voice could break the spell. “Stay just like that.”

He got a dozen shots. He could feel which one was perfect even before he looked.

“This one,” he said, holding the camera towards Ardyn so he could see the image displayed on the back. “That's the one. You look all...enigmatic.”

Ardyn leaned close by him and looked down at the little rectangular image of himself.

“So, hey,” Prompto said suddenly, making sure not to think before he did it, “Thanks for all this. I mean, today. Running around all over the place and all.”

“It was terribly troublesome,” Ardyn said.

Prompto dropped his eyes and made himself look busy by putting his camera away. Yeah. Of course.

Ardyn's hand lifted his face. There was a black feather caught in the lacy stuff on his sleeve, but Prompto didn't much see that. Most of what Prompto saw was the look on his lips, a half-smile like they were sharing a joke.

Ardyn said, “Being paid attention by a handsome young man.”

Prompto was warping again. This time it was his head alone, going to a place in the future where he was yelling at his past self for being such a coward that he didn't even try. If he took a second to think about it he'd talk himself out of doing it, and there'd never be another chance.

Ardyn must have been able to feel it in his fingertips when Prompto swallowed. He didn't smell like a tree today. More like oranges.

“I gotta warn you,” Prompto said, with his heart thudding against his ribcage, “if you stay right there a second longer, I'm gonna kiss you.”

Ardyn said, “Then I had better keep very still.”

It was about half a second, actually.

Ardyn's hands rested on his shoulders. Prompto's tangled in the front of his coat harder than he meant to. He found out he liked the way Ardyn's stubble scratched.

Up close, when the sun was under the horizon, his hair was almost black.
They sat at their usual table at the coffee shop, but this time only three chairs were taken.

“It's not like Prompto to be late,” Ignis said. He was drinking a wheatgrass something, like he did sometimes even though it had “grass” right there in the name as a warning.

“Didn't used to be,” Gladio said. He'd looked at the giant menu and ordered a coffee like always, because 'coffee is coffee,' aka he was boring.

“He's not coming,” Noctis said. He had something with whipped cream that was way too expensive, because if you weren't going to get one of those, what were coffee shops even for? Prompto understood that. “He's out seeing some old movie.”

“On a date?” Gladio said. “Good for him.”

“What? No way. It's with Ardyn.” Noct pulled his straw back and forth through the hole in the lid and made the plastic squeak. “He's been hanging out with him a lot lately, but it's not like they're...”

The straw stopped moving.

“They can't be dating,” Noctis said. He looked straight ahead at the splotchy abstract painting on the wall. “Tell me they're not dating.”

“What were Prompto's exact words?” Ignis said.

Noct took his phone out and showed them the text. “See for yourself.”

Gladio laughed, his shoulders relaxing. “You got nothing to worry about. When's it start?”

“Seven thirty, looks like.”

“Prompto'll be out of there by seven forty-five. That is not a date movie.”

Noct let out a long breath. “Then that's one less really weird thing to worry about.”

He figured they'd be hearing from Prompto pretty soon, but when their drinks were dregs and Gladio had told them all about where the new recruits fell along the spectrum from having some potential to pain in the ass, there still wasn't any word. It wasn't until the next day that he got the Noct is stuff I GOTTA tell you.

Noct couldn't say he was exactly happy that his weird uncle had freaked out his best friend with some bizarre thing. On the other hand, Prompto had a talent for telling great trainwreck stories, and this was going to have to be a good one.

Prompto filled the fourth corner at the coffee shop where he was supposed to be, holding some icy thing with whipped cream on top because he knew how to live a little.

“You guys aren't going to believe this,” Prompto said.

“How bad was it?” Noctis said.

Prompto set his drink down on the table and spread his hands out. “It. Was. Amazing.”
Noctis said, “What.”

“I’d never seen anything like it before. Seriously, the cinematography- I didn't even know you could do that kind of stuff.” He whipped his straw around and flicked bits of whipped cream all over the place. He looked like energy was going to jump right out of him and zap somebody. “There’s this shot with this guy watching TV, see, except you're from his viewpoint, so you're actually looking between his feet, and there's this picture above it and these two lamps on the sides, and it's all symmetrical and totally perfect-”

“Wait,” Gladio said. He leaned forward with his arm on the table. “Are we talking about the same movie? The one with the crazy guy with the axe?”

Prompto paused halfway through a gesture. “Yeah, that was one part. And oh man there's this shot with him framed in a hole in the-”

Gladio held his hand up. “The one with the cackling zombie lady in the bathtub.”

Prompto blinked big blue eyes way too innocent to belong to a person and not a kitten on somebody's sweater. “Yep. What's your point, buddy?”

“It sounds somewhat outside your usual range of interest,” Ignis said.

“You hate that kind of stuff,” Noctis said, making it direct. He looked to the other guys. “We saw Nightmare at Cape Caem years ago, and he still doesn't trust people in red and green striped shirts.”

“Reasonable, for the poor taste alone,” said Ignis.

“Come on,” Prompto protested, “I'm not that bad.”

Noctis said, “You get sad when people on sitcoms aren't responsible pet owners.”

“They had zero toys for that monkey!”

Gladio kept his focus. “You really liked it?”

“Well, yeah.” Prompto's vest rustled when he shrugged. “I guess the rough stuff didn't seem that bad with Ardyn around.”

“Like, by comparison?” said Noctis.

“Would you say you're dating, then?” said Ignis.

What? Prompto said and burst out laughing, back in normal reality. Dude, no, I am not dating an old man. If I was dating anybody it’d be [insert normal person who never did a filibuster by reading some scientist's 200-page paper about frogs spawning]. Don't be gross, Iggy.

Here in the weird black-and-white episode of the X-Zone where they were apparently living now, Prompto's ears turned pink, he rolled up the paper straw wrapper between his fingers, and he said, “I guess we are. I didn't wanna jinx it.”

Noctis stared until he felt his eyeballs drying out. Then he kept right on staring. “ Seriously?”

Prompto smiled down into his cup. “ Seriously.”

Lazy guitar rambled around over the soundsystem. A fan turned above them. Ignis coughed.
Noct made a whole lot of clashing thoughts harmonize into a single heartfelt, “Why?”

Prompto looked from Noct’s face to Ignis to Gladio and got three flavors of baffled. He deflated a little. “Look, I know he's way out of my league.”

“Are you kidding me?” Noctis said. “You're not even in the same sport.”

Gladio said, “We're talking about the guy who told Iris that abandoned umbrellas come to life and go hopping around looking for revenge.”

Ignis said, “I never imagined you taking an interest in someone who has a personal poet.”

“If you're baseball, he's, like, underwater soccer. From a thousand years ago.”

“She spent a week leaving umbrellas around trying to make it happen.”

“Who he pays in sherry.”

“Or a card game where they're all random. And made out of monsters.”

Prompto said, “Okay, one, that can happen but you can't force it, you have to really forget about the umbrella, two, come on, having a poet is classy, and three, that sounds awesome.”

“Seriously, though,” Noct said, deep in denial and not coming up any time soon, “you're joking, right? You can do way better than a guy who sells his own line of bath salts.”

“The lavender ones are pretty nice,” said Gladio.

“It's called curation,” Ignis said, “and if you gave it a try I'm sure you'd have your own success.”

“You should do it!” Prompto said, bouncing in his seat and making his hair wave back and forth. “You could have a monthly subscription thing. A Noctbox.”

“No happening,” Noctis said before he could get caught up thinking about what he'd even put in one. “Isn't there somebody else you could be dating? Say, anybody?”

“Nyx is single,” Gladio pointed out. “He's a sweet guy.”

“He has a good job with reliable benefits,” said Ignis.

“Jeez, Iggy, somebody gets brought up and bam, you have us married for forty years. But anyway, I like Ardyn.”

He dropped that like it was a normal thing people said.

“And you don't have to freak out. It's super caj.”

They all looked at him.

“Casual,” Prompto clarified, kind of defeating the point of making it shorter in the first place. “I don't know if he's even serious. He might just be being nice.”

That was true, when Noctis thought about it. The only person he knew who picked up and dropped new fads as often as his uncle was, well, Prompto. The odds of Ardyn taking anything on the planet seriously were basically nil, and if there was anything you could rely on, it was that he'd do something weird enough to send Prompto running within a couple days. So it wasn't that bad. They'd
laugh about this by next week.

Noctis was just going to concentrate on that thought.

“So anyway,” Prompto said, leaning forward over the table with his eyes bright, “there's this carpet...”
Angel's Snack

Even in the downtimes the palace's kitchens weren't really quiet. There was always somebody putting something in the oven or stirring one of the huge soup vats. In the early afternoon, though, as long as there wasn't any big banquet or anything that night, it was slow enough that Prompto could come hang around. He liked the kitchens. It was like going backstage at a concert, except with giant cakes instead of amps and stuff. Today was normal; there were some people going back and forth doing stuff with bread dough, but Ignis mostly had one corner to himself. Prompto hadn't made any attempt at cooking since the time he'd tried to fry something in what must've been the wrong kind of oil and ended up with a ringing fire alarm and a patient explanation of what a “low smoke point” was, but he could carry stuff. Bringing vegetables and pots to Iggy was something to do with all this energy.

“Aren't we in high spirits,” Ignis said.

“Just having a real good day,” Prompto said. “Catch!”

Ignis could grab a bell pepper out of the air with one hand without looking up from chopping.

It really was a good day, even if Ardyn was busy off doing healer stuff. Prompto had a secret. Usually he told the guys everything, but none of them had any idea he'd kissed a prince, and that without being frogged or anything. (Though being frogged was kind of fun. You got a different perspective on life and your eyes felt all swivelly for a while.) Keeping it to himself for a while felt right. It was going to take a bit for the guys to deal with them dating at all, though Prompto couldn't really blame them. He could hardly believe it himself. Noct would give him crap about it for a while, but that was basically friend law. You had to goof around about that kind of thing.

Prompto kept having to think about it over and over again to try to make himself believe it'd happened. He'd kissed a guy. A guy liked him. A super handsome guy who was funny and who knew stuff, and who let him rest his head on his shoulder during movies. Prompto had even used the word dating about it. He tried it again silently to himself. Dating.

“If you'd like to make yourself useful,” Ignis said, “you could take that to his grace. He should be finished by now.”

That was a covered silvery tray that was surprisingly heavy. Prompto carried it out of the kitchen and down the halls at a trot.

“Hey Nyx,” he called as he went by a couple Glaives, “hey Libertus.”

“Hey Prompto,” Libertus said, and waved at him before turning back to Nyx. “Seriously, if you have anything to get the prince's approval on, now's the time. He's in some kind of crazy good mood. I finally got him to give us clearance to take a look at the old stuff in the armory, plus I got 'bequeathed the rights to a swan,' whatever that's code for.”

Prompto turned a corner and headed out into the gardens. His arms were sore by the time he got to the white thing that they called a pavilion, though to Prompto it just looked like a big tent. Was there a difference? Ardyn would know.

There wasn't a line out front anymore, so Prompto pushed the flap out of the way and went in. It was bright inside, full of sun filtered by the cloth. There was a folding table in the middle with a pitcher of ice water with a lemon wedge in it on top. Ardyn was sitting in a chair beside it.
“Have a seat, don't be shy,” he said, writing something in a book with a pen that had a feather on the end. It might've been the light that made him look pale. “What seems to be the trouble?”

“Just lunch here,” Prompto said.

Ardyn looked up, and his polite smile changed to something that gave a little heel-kick to Prompto's heart. “Ah, Prompto. You're an angel in the flesh. Has the stream of the afflicted run dry for the day?”

“Yep, you're all done.” Prompto set the tray down on the table and looked around, watching the walls ripple in the breeze. “Huh, you know, I've never actually been in here before. Never had anything a potion couldn't handle.”

“I know,” Ardyn said. “I would remember.”

“You never forget a healing, huh?”

“Oh, all the time,” he said, lifting the cover on the tray, “but you, I would remember. My, is this dualhorn?”

It was, in thick slices with the bone sticking out. Also a bunch of potatoes, a bowl of bean stew, some kind of little savory-smelling pastries, a pile of glazed carrots, some rolls, and a little delicate slice of spongecake with whipped cream.

“Woah,” Prompto said. “No wonder that was heavy.”

“The prolonged use of curative energies has certain metabolic effects,” Ardyn said. He tucked a white napkin by his neck.

“Oh,” Prompto said, nodding. Then: “Which, uh, means..?”

“That you may want to avert your eyes.”

He couldn't have looked away if he tried.

It was like seeing a pile of sticks fed through a wood chipper. Prompto had heard of people attacking food, but this was like one of those comic books where at the very end the hero got the magic sword and weed-whacker'd right through the goblin army. It was an event.

In a minute there was just a plate with a neat pile of cracked, hollow bones resting in the middle. Ardyn removed the napkin and wiped his fingertips.

“Well then,” he said contentedly, “that's much better.”

“Woah,” said Prompto.

“I did warn you.” He pushed his chair back from the table. “Now, what shall we put before your lens today? I was thinking we could attempt The Trio at Their Instruments, though it would require we find two volunteers and a table that can be seen from all directions at once.”

Prompto nudged his toe against the grass underfoot. He said, “Actually.”

Something of his nerves must've made it into his voice. Ardyn's eyes were intrigued, and even more amber than usual in this light. Amberer. “Yes?”

“I kind of had an idea. For something I wanted to try. If it's okay.” He shuffled closer and dug his
phone out of his pocket.

“You are going to slay me with curiosity if you don't show your hand.”

Okay. What could it hurt? Well, a lot, if Ardyn was put off, or if he laughed at him, or if Prompto was barking up the absolutely wrong tree. But asking for a kiss had been risky and crazy, and that'd turned out good. Really good.

Prompto pulled up the painting he had in mind and showed it to Ardyn.

It was silly to be this nervous. It wasn't like it had anybody naked on a clam or anything. It was just a guy with a bare shoulder. There was something about it that seemed so personal, though, how he was half in the dark and had that look on his face like he and the painter were sharing a secret. Maybe because it was an expression he’d seen on Ardyn, and one that he’d like to see some more.

“Oh,” Ardyn said. The lines by his eyes deepened when he thought something was interesting or funny. “An old favorite. You'd like me to pose this way?”

Prompto didn't trust his voice, so he nodded. A couple too many times.

Ardyn standing up meant a whole lot of cloth fluttering and swaying around him. “Then we shall need a more private location.”

Prompto was just going to stand and stare in the doorway for a while. It was even an impressive doorway. All carved wood and way taller than a normal one.

“Surely you've visited a prince's apartments before,” Ardyn said. His boots sank into the carpet and his steps didn't make a sound.

“Just Noct's apartment,” Prompto said. He let the door fall closed and edged inside, then walked a little more confidently when he didn't get swallowed up by a pit trap or anything. “But his place is just normal. And it has a lot more laundry on the floor.”

Ardyn laughed softly. “I would expect no less.”

Really, the place was amazing. Prompto’s eyes couldn't even process much except fancy. It even smelled nice. It was pretty high up in the castle, and if you peeked around the heavy curtains you could see the gardens outside. All the furniture was the kind that had people's names, like, a Whoever the Twelfth chair. There was art on the wall, though he didn't have a chance to look close enough to see if they had interesting composition. There were vases.

What was Prompto doing here?

“This way,” Ardyn called.

Prompto followed his voice into a room that looked like a study. There was a desk that shone like the wood was being expensive on purpose. There was also a bookshelf full of books exactly like the ones in the library, all leatherbound in different colors, just not stacked as neatly. All of a sudden that made Prompto feel better. The library was basically a place he belonged now. This was the same guy and the same idea.

There was a snowglobe from Ghorovas Rift, too.

Ardyn was standing by the fireplace, watching Prompto. All while Prompto was setting up his
camera equipment he felt his eyes, and of course that was when his body decided to be clumsy and take twice as long to do everything.

It was a good thing everything was steady when Ardyn shrugged off his coat and said, “Why don't you lend me a hand?”

Prompto took his coat from him and hung it up in the wardrobe. Of course he had a wardrobe. A guy like this wouldn't settle for a closet. The fabric was soft in his hands, but Prompto already knew that from holding onto it when he'd kissed him. He knew lots of stuff like that now. His coat was soft, and his stubble was scratchy.

Ardyn was in front of him, looking big and broad-shouldered and very undeniably man-shaped, and he didn't just mean the coat.

Prompto suddenly forgot what human beings did with hands. “Do you want me to...?”

Ardyn smiled and said, “Yes.”

He took Prompto's hands and guided them up to his scarf. It felt thin and silky, and it draped over Prompto's wrists when he took it off. Then the ruffly neck of Ardyn's shirt was open and loose, showing his neck and the stubble you'd be able to feel if you put your face there. Today he smelled like water. Like, the kind Prompto had seen once in a cave they'd all been exploring, when suddenly all the narrow dark little passages he could barely get through (who knows how Gladio did it) turned into this place like a cathedral with a hole in the top open to the sky, and this lake that threw wavy patterns of light on the wall and smelled so fresh and clean you could barely believe it. Prompto put Ardyn's scarf around his own neck to free his hands up. It smelled like him, too.

Ardyn's hands guided his to the buckle of his vest. They were big hands, and not as soft as you'd figure from a guy who spent most of his time with books or healing people. Crowe said she'd seen him practicing with a five-foot long sword one-handed, but then again Crowe had also once said that the sewers were full of albino sahagins.

Prompto's fingers moved over the buckle. They felt the cool metal and the texture of the design.

They moved some more.

“Uh,” he said.

“There's a catch at the back,” Ardyn offered.

“Yeah, okay, I feel it-” He also felt the warmth of Ardyn's skin through his shirt, which was not helping with concentration any. “Just gotta get it to...ahh, this is worse than unhooking a bra!”

When Ardyn laughed it moved the target around, but it was nice, anyway. “Press in the middle and pull to either side.”

“Hah!” The buckle slid apart, and Prompto jabbed his fist in the air in triumph. “I win, hella-complicated buckle thing!”

“Well done,” Ardyn said, and let the vest slide off his shoulders. He tossed it aside and it landed neatly over the arm of a chair, though he wasn't paying any attention where he threw it. He was looking at Prompto.

That left his shirt. For a second the way it folded all over like an accordion fooled Prompto's eye and made it look like it was solid in front, but then he found the opening. The buttons were all hidden
underneath, but they were just normal buttons, so that wasn't hard. Not even with how he could feel the slow rise and fall of Ardyn's chest as he breathed.

When it hung loose, Ardyn spread his arms and let Prompto take it off. Going and setting it down by the vest was good way to keep himself from being too obvious about staring.

That was a bare chest, all right. A whole torso. Yep. Prompto now knew that the healer prince had nipples. That is, he'd known that before, but just, like, in theory. He was a big guy, and it wasn't only the coat that made him look that way. He was also built. Not the bodybuilder kind. It was more of a suggestion in the way he took up space that made you know there was muscle there, though it was softer than with someone like Gladio. Not that Prompto had a thing for Gladio especially. It was an objective thing. You measured weather in degrees, chocobo class from C to S even if they were all S in your heart, and male jackedness in centiGladios. A lot of Ardyn was really different from Gladio, besides the obvious. Like...

“Care to share the joke?” Ardyn said, looking more curious than offended.

“Dude,” said Prompto, “your arm hair is purple. I, I don't even know why that's funny.”

Ardyn looked down at his own arm and said, “It is rather distinctive, isn't it.”

To get the lighting right they had to shut all the curtains. They were thick enough it left the room almost completely dark. They found a lamp that would work, and then got Ardyn positioned so that the top half of him was in the pool of light with all the dramatic shade behind.

“Turn a little,” Prompto said, hands on his arm, getting caught up in positioning him and forgetting to be nervous. “Put your right hand up here, pointing – yeah, like that.”

“A pity we have no holy symbol,” Ardyn said as Prompto went behind the camera. “Perhaps this can suffice.”

Magenta light morphed into a silver staff in his hand. It was bigger and flashier than the thing in the painting, but then again, so was Ardyn. Here, in the light that fell over his shoulders, his hair looked violet.

“Perfect,” Prompto said. He got all the adjustments made to his equipment and looked through the viewfinder, so the whole world he saw was Ardyn in his splash of light. “Now look at me and look...”

He didn't have words for that playful, promising look, like there was something between the model and the painter that only the two of them would ever know. Ardyn did it anyway.

The shutter was as loud as Prompto's heartbeat.

Within five minutes he knew he had one that was perfect. He kept going. He didn't want to stop.

“Hold it just like that,” Prompto said, with the shutter clicking. His voice was soft and his throat was dry. “Beautiful.”

He kept going as long as he dared. Photos were for remembering, and he wanted to remember all of this.

When he straightened up and looked at Ardyn with nothing but his own eyes again, with his back sore from bending over, he knew he should say something. He couldn't do anything but look.
“Done so soon?” Ardyn said, teasing him. He must've been sore from standing in the same position for this long, too.

Before he could let himself think about it, Prompto said, “There's one more thing.”

Ardyn opened his hand. The staff flashed away. “Yes?”

Prompto breathed in deep. When it came to asking Ardyn risky things and seeing if it turned out okay, he was two for two now. With the dark all around them, it was like they were alone out in space, not in the middle of a palace full of people. No time like the present, Prompto thought, and it was a phrase he'd heard a thousand times but lately it was always Ignis's voice he heard it in.

He looked Ardyn in the eye for a second, then admitted, “I'm trying to think of a cool, sexy way to say this.”

“Give me the basic idea,” Ardyn said. He let his arm fall and rolled his shoulders. His pants settled low on his hips. “We can workshop it.”

Prompto's heart must have sounded like a guy banging coconut halves together.

Prompto said, “I want to have sex with you.”

Ardyn's eyebrows jumped up. For a second, Prompto could see a whole lot of his eyes.

A slow smile spread across his lips.

“I,” Ardyn said, “think that is just fine as it is.”
Roses and Wine

Prompto had just about enough time to start getting nervous about being in the prince's bedroom before he burst out laughing.

“You would have a bed with a roof, you dork.”

“Believe it or not,” Ardyn said, “it was once a practical consideration. This dates from the era when there was never a time without attendants at hand, so privacy was taken where it could be had.”

“Old-timey people had the worst jobs,” Prompto said. He couldn't quite imagine just sitting there all night while somebody on the other side of some curtains had sex. Ignis he could picture, though. He'd do a crossword puzzle or something.

“The division of labor was rather skewed,” Ardyn said. “Sloth is ever the curse of the blood royal. Speaking of which, care to finish the job you began?”

“Y, yeah,” Prompto said, turning away from the paintings on the wall to get back to what he was here for.

Ardyn was standing there half-naked, and he was waiting for Prompto to get him the other half. Prompto could do that. He'd done that plenty of times. Mostly just himself, except for like that one time when Noct had gotten the range of a fire spell a little off and they'd had to all yank off Gladio's burning pants, but that had been terrifyingly not sexy, so it wasn't really the same idea.

Prompto tried to breathe slow and calm his heart down a little, though that wasn't easy when he was looking straight at Ardyn's chest. Wow, he was a big guy. Prompto wanted to touch him, and he couldn't quite make himself believe that he was going to get to.

“Okay,” he said half to himself, “step one, shoes.”

Those had buckles too, in the weirdest possible way. It took some concentration, though never quite enough to make him forget about Ardyn looking down at him. Ardyn lifted his feet to help get them off. They were normal feet that sank into the thick carpet. Black socks.

“Does the lack of hooves surprise you?” Ardyn said.

“Nah, that rumor never made any sense,” said Prompto. “How’d that even get started?”

“There was a tip from an inside man,” Ardyn said with a kind of significance, and when Prompto looked up there was a slant to his lips.

“No way,” Prompto said.

“Catching the ones trying to examine my feet was an excellent way to discover who reads the tabloids.” He tilted his head forward secretively, and maroon hair fell across his eyes. “Drautos does.”

“I am so remembering that,” Prompto said, while he was undoing the bands of elastic around Ardyn's calves. “But how come your legs have little belts?”

“I know secret techniques that have fallen out of use,” Ardyn said. “That's for keeping one's socks up.”
Prompto stood and rested his hands on Ardyn's belt. He was relieved at how easily the buckle came undone. It made a little metallic click. "Good, this one's normal. Why are your clothes so complicated?"

Ardyn said, "You have my promise that all of your labor will be rewarded."

Prompto couldn't quite think that far ahead. Not and get anything done. Putting all his attention into looking serious and sexy, he worked Ardyn's belt open and pushed his pants down.

Then ruined it by bursting out laughing.

"My," said Ardyn, "should my feelings be hurt?"

"No," Prompto caught his breath enough to say, as his head fell forward onto Ardyn's chest, "no, you're amazing, just- did you know you were gonna get laid, or do you seriously wear black silk boxers all the time?"

"They're comfortable," Ardyn said, with a hand resting on his back.

Prompto had to keep going while he had the momentum. "All right, all right, gonna be naked in three, two...wow."

He wasn't kidding about him being hot. The legs that stepped out of those boxers were real sturdy ones, with real interesting muscle and, yeah, some purple hair, and Prompto had to work hard to keep from laughing like an idiot again. He was interesting to look at, all together. Just a whole collection of shapes and interplay of light that Prompto's eyes didn't want to leave. He wanted pictures, he realized. He wanted to own this way of seeing him.

"Wow," he said again, softer.

"High praise indeed," said Ardyn. He wasn't the kind of guy to get embarrassed about being stared at. "You are welcome to touch as well as look."

"I'm getting there." There was so much to take in. All the angles. Prompto kept wanting to stop and figure out the ratios Ardyn's body was arranged in, and that was before even thinking about how he was allowed to go exploring. But it gave him something to do with his hands, and that was good. He rested them on Ardyn's chest, and was planning on doing something from there but got distracted. "Oh. Wow. Damn. That's nice."

"I have never been described with such eloquence," Ardyn said. No matter what light you were in, his eyes really were yellow.

"Dude, shut up. I'm trying to..." Prompto let his gaze go down further and let himself focus, and swallowed. "Wow."

Yeah. That was his prince's dick. His brain had to work through this step by step. He was hard, that meant he was turned on. He was turned on, and that meant he thought Prompto – scrawny, fidgety, can't-stop-laughing-at-everything Prompto – was sexy.

"Now," Ardyn said, in a low voice that must've hit some special frequency for making people's spines tingle, "what is going on in that head of yours?"

"That you're stupid hot." Prompto's hands ran down his ribs just to feel them. "And that the carpet matches the drapes."
Ardyn laughed, wound his hands in the scarf around Prompto’s neck, and pulled him in for a kiss. He had to lean down some. His fault for being tall. Prompto was braver this time, since now he didn’t have to worry it might be the only one. Heck, now the number of kisses he’d gotten from the prince was double. It felt strange to have Ardyn's bare body against him when he was fully clothed. Ardyn didn't look like he felt naked, though. Maybe a guy like that never did. He wasn’t afraid of looking stupid. He could just do anything he wanted.

Maybe that was contagious.

“So, hey,” Prompto said, spreading his arms out, his heart thudding so hard it made him half drunk, “you gonna go next or what?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Ardyn said.

He pulled the scarf from Prompto's neck with a shuffling sound. He tossed it, and Prompto was watching it waft over the chair and wondering how he managed to aim like that when his vest getting pushed off his shoulders caught him by surprise.

Prompto's clothes were a lot simpler. Ardyn's hands could move fast without ever looking like he was in a hurry. Then he was naked and Ardyn was looking at him and yeah, he was very, very naked.

“Ah,” Ardyn said softly. The light made his eyes look deep and warm. “Exquisite creature.”

“Uh,” Prompto said while he tried to figure that out.

“That is to say,” Ardyn said, lifting Prompto's chin up with his fingers, “you, my dear, are ’stupid hot.’”

Well, he had to kiss him for that. And then keep kissing him out of habit.

The big, ridiculous bed went fwump when he fell back on it, like the time Gladio'd dropped him in a snowbank. He kept a hold on the backs of Ardyn's arms. Ardyn rubbed his face against his neck and the scratch of his stubble made him break out in goosebumps.

“Okay,” Prompto said, a little out of breath, with his fingers going through Ardyn's hair just to feel all the directions it went in, “I'm ready for this. I'm good. I am DTF and I want to climb you like a tree. Everything. Lifesreamflick and chill.”

Ardyn had his face against his shoulder and he was laughing. “I am decoding these from context.”

“You're a smart guy,” Prompto wriggled under him. He was big and heavy, and Prompto liked that. “I bet you can figure it out.”

When the prince's palm slid over his cock, Prompto made this weird keening noise right in his face. It was a good thing that Ardyn's face was elsewhere when he got really loud. That is, he'd slid down Prompto's body and between his legs. He went “Mm, what have we here?” and then he was licking Prompto's cock from root to tip, and Prompto grabbed onto his hair so hard his nails must have been digging into his scalp. Part of him noticed that there were some weird marks on Ardyn's back but the rest of him was all kinds of not paying attention.

“S, sorry,” he got out in between gulps for air. He tried to loosen his grip but his fingers weren't getting the message. They were clinging onto Ardyn's silky hair – did he use conditioner? He definitely used conditioner – and riding along with his head's motion as he moved around and kissed the inside of Prompto's thigh.
“I am far from averse to a little rough treatment,” Ardyn said, kissing the other thigh to make things even, and that was a good thing because there was definitely some hair-pulling going on when Ardyn took his cock in his mouth.

Prompto's yelping noise went right up to the roof on the bed.

“Okay,” he breathed out, and combed his fingers through Ardyn's hair while he moved back and forth and made showers of sparks go up Prompto's spine. “Okay. Okay.”

He didn't want to go anywhere but he couldn't stop his hips from squirming around. The cover on the bed was slippery under his ass. Ardyn helped out by caressing his hips and holding him steady. Wow, he had big hands.

Prompto's legs twitched and closed around Ardyn's head, and now he would always know what that stubble felt like on the inside of his thighs. Ardyn's shoulders were broad and what the marks on them were was long, pale scars.

Then his hands were sliding under Prompto and fitting right around his ass, and right as he sucked he squeezed and Prompto's body went off the rails. Before he could even think about trying to hold back he thrashed and arched, and pleasure knocked his brain pure blank as he came down Ardyn's throat.

Ardyn didn't even sound surprised.

Feeling good came first. Feeling dizzy, at about the same time. Then feeling Ardyn climb up and lay beside him, with his weight making the bed dip. Then, finally, feeling embarrassed.

“Shit,” he mumbled. “I didn't mean to...have it over that quick.”

“Over?” Ardyn raised himself up on his elbow and looked down with his eyebrows arched. Purple eyebrows. “Not at all. Did you think me so miserly I would be satisfied bringing a lover to ecstasy only once?”

“I never really thought about it in math,” Prompto said, goofy from the relief that he was going to get to stay. And also from the blowjob.

It was a stupid thing to say but it made Ardyn smile. A lot of the stupid things he said did that. It was so strange to look at his mouth and think about what he'd just done. Besides being naked, he looked so normal. The only hint was his lips were redder than usual, though they were always pretty nice.

“Besides,” Ardyn said, running one hand down the center of Prompto's chest, which felt sensitive now so it made him shiver, “I have barely begun to sample your charms.”

“You know there's not that much, right? This is pretty much it.”

“A vast array, when every inch deserves appreciation.”

Ardyn rolled on top of him across his legs, one knee to either side. His hard cock rested on Prompto's thigh, but like he said, he just...explored. His hands moved across Prompto's shoulders and down his arms, with his thumbs working over the inside of Prompto's elbows, and then his fingers trailing down his inner wrists. His fingers tangled through Prompto's and made his hands feel tiny in comparison. On impulse, Prompto lifted one up to his face so he could kiss the back. They were rougher hands than you'd expect, but he really took care of his nails.

“Ah,” Ardyn said softly, and shifted his weight on top of him.
Could you swoon romantically and notice a guy had a nice butt at the same time?

Ardyn disentangled his hands and ran them down Prompto's torso, making him feel framed in his touch. His fingertips flickered around in a way that seemed random until Prompto realized he was tapping on his freckles.

“They say,” Ardyn said, in that way like he was letting you in on something good, “that these are the sparks of the Infernian. His way of marking his especial beloved.”

Prompto said, “Nobody has said that in the history of ever.”

“True,” Ardyn said, “and fortunately so. I would not share you with a god.”

He said both parts of that so easily.

Prompto's hand rested on his shoulder. It filled his whole palm. “I never know when to take you seriously.”

“Oh, don’t bother with answerless riddles right now. I'm trying to choose a favorite set.” He kissed a spot on Prompto's ribs. “Perhaps these. They're shaped rather like a teacup.”

“Huh, really?” Prompto rose up on his elbows and looked down at his own chest. “They all just look like blotches to me.”

“Then you are not employing your fine artist's eye. Oh, what's this?” His fingers trailed over a spot on the left side of Prompto's stomach, by his hip. “Hold still. I've found the Portraitist.”

“Not my fault, man, that tickles. The who?”

“The constellation.” Ardyn tapped a couple freckles, which was not helping the tickling and squirming around situation, though his weight kept Prompto good and pinned down. “You see? There is her brush, and there is her palette.”

“Huh.” Prompto craned his head. “I kinda see it.”

“Do you know her tale?” He didn't wait for an answer, which, yeah, was a pretty safe bet. “It's said she attempted to paint the unseeable and shattered the world. It's all put back together by now, more or less. A few errors crop up now and then. Whenever you find something in a place you did not leave it, that's why.”

Prompto was mostly just listening to the sound of his voice. He couldn't remember what his body felt like without Ardyn's hands on it, probably because he wasn't trying very hard.

“Hey,” he said, and swallowed. The smile on his lips wasn't real steady. “Are you gonna tell stories or are we gonna bang?”

Ardyn moved up his body. He kissed him firm enough that Prompto's head squashed into the pillow, and said, “I have a strict policy of making time for both.”

He gestured, and there was a second of a magenta shine. Then there were things in his hand.

Prompto had just been raising himself up on his elbows when he had to fall back laughing. “You keep condoms and lube in the Armiger?”

“When what one has is a hammer,” Ardyn said with a guileless smile, and for some reason that was what made Prompto's heart flip, “everything looks like a nail.”
Prompto twisted and turned over beneath him. It was easy to do that on the slippery fancy blanket. “Then hurry up and nail me.”

Ardyn draped himself over him. His body basically engulfed Prompto's, and something about that was surreally exciting. “No need to be impatient. I shall grant your wish.”

His fingers trailed down Prompto's spine, full of promise.

This wasn't totally new to Prompto. He'd experimented some, and like a lot of experiments, some of them had turned out spectacular, some had fizzled out, and a couple had kind of awkwardly exploded. Everybody was different. It'd never been somebody like Ardyn before, if there even was anybody else in the world you could call “like Ardyn.”

He sucked in air through his teeth when he felt Ardyn's fingers. Big hands, big fingers. That followed pretty logically. It was just that it was two different things, seeing and feeling.

“How is that?” Ardyn said, working them in and out.

Prompto shifted his hips back and inadequately summed things up as, “Good.”

Ardyn didn't rush him. Actually it was the opposite of rushing, thorough and steady enough to make Prompto lower his head onto his arms on the silky pillow and fall into a trance. He was really definitely hard by now, and only half aware of each time his breathing made a quiet little “oh.” Ardyn's other hand resting on his hip was the only thing that kept him steady.

“Beautiful,” Ardyn murmured. “Your body is so very honest.”

“C, can't really lie with my ass,” Prompto said.

Ardyn laughed and kissed the back of his neck. The cool spot he left made Prompto's hairs stand up.

He took his fingers out, which got a complaining noise from Prompto because hey he wasn't done yet. Wait, no, he was going to get dick now. So that was okay.

The sound of the package opening was as loud as Prompto's breathing.

He looked back over his shoulder. Ardyn was on his knees with the light through the gap in the curtains framing him, and as soon as he knew he had an audience he put on a show. He shot Prompto a knowing smirk that made his pulse go haywire and rolled the condom down over his cock. He slicked himself up, moving slow, with pleasure crinkling the corners of his eyes. The motion of his hand was easy and familiar. Would Prompto ever have the practice to touch him like that?

“Come on,” Prompto said softly.

Ardyn position himself on his knees between Prompto's calves. He rested a hand on the small of Prompto's back and leaned over him, warm and close, with his hair brushing Prompto's neck.

He buried his hand in Prompto's hair, held on just tight enough to twinge, and murmured in his ear, “What do we say?”

*That you're a dork* he wanted to say and laugh, but what came out was, “Please.”

You know what was another thing that should have been ridiculous to hear? “Good boy.”

Maybe it was the subterranean purr in his voice, or just the feeling of Ardyn's cock filling him up
slow. Prompto grabbed onto the headboard hard enough that the carvings bit into his palm. Ardyn pulled back just as slow, like they had all the time in the world and this was how he was going to spend it. Prompto breathed in time with Ardyn's cock working in and out of him and couldn't do it without whimpering sounds sneaking in at the edges.

“I will take such good care of you,” Ardyn said, and it shot Prompto's ego to the moon to hear his voice unraveling just a little. “I shall ruin you for anyone else's attentions.”

Right now Prompto didn't give a damn about anything in the world but Ardyn's hips fitting up against the backs of his thighs. When Ardyn started speeding up there was no way on the planet Prompto was going to be able to hold still. He used his hand on the headboard for leverage and pushed back hard, and some old Lucis Caelum crest was going to stay printed on his palm for a week. His other hand made it halfway to his cock before Ardyn caught his wrist.

Ardyn chuckled in his ear and said, “Including your own.”

Then he learned that when Ardyn really meant it, he could make the whole bedframe rattle. If there had been servants and stuff around, all the curtains in the world wouldn't've helped.

Prompto was panting just to get breath to cry out with. Ardyn was murmuring If you could see yourself, my dear artist. He didn't know how anybody could this and talk at the same time but he hoped Ardyn never stopped, and it was a good time for getting wishes granted because that was when Ardyn wrapped his hand around his cock and now that made his voice go reach down to the bottom of his heart and moan a noise he couldn't even remember to be embarrassed by. He rocked back into Ardyn's body every time he moved, like he was another part of him on a split-second delay. The muscles in his legs were trembling, and when people talked about seeing stars they weren't just being fancy. It was flashes of brightness when he closed his eyes. It really was.

Pleasure hit him like an open hand across the face, too much and too hard to handle, and he grabbed backwards like a drowning man and managed to yank Ardyn's arm up to his face where he bit down over and over and the feeling of spilling on the royal bed was the same burst of joy as the taste of salt on his skin.

The word Ardyn'd said, he remembered through the haze, was 'ecstasy.'

Ardyn wrapped both arms around Prompto's waist and pulled him into long, hard strokes, and just being manhandled around by him felt good. Ardyn's face was pressed to the back of his neck and he was just breathing now, rough gulps for air, until he went still and there was a soft little sound that was for Prompto and nobody else.

Prompto was half-aware of feeling himself getting set down on the bed. He sprawled out like something that'd melted there. Just a sweaty naked pile of bliss without a single damn left to give.

Except for Ardyn settling down next to him, and his arm resting against his. That was worth a couple dozen damn, no matter what.

His mouth worked for a while before he could figure out how to talk.

“I bit you,” he said.

Ardyn held his arm up. Under the purple hair, there was a set of red semi-circles. “I shall wear the marks with pride.”

Prompto lay there looking at the pillow that took up the side of his vision and Ardyn's hair that took
up the front, and thought about how there were probably a lot of sexy or romantic things he was supposed to do right now. What he actually ended up doing was catnapping. Not a real sleep or anything. He just let his attention slip away for a while, and let himself feel good.

His eyes opened on the crack in the curtains. The light coming through was yellowy, now. His body felt heavy in a nice way. The air was cool on his bare skin.

He wished he could have looked at Ardyn longer than he did. His hair was wine-colored now, and kind of tangled up in a way that made Prompto a little proud. Asleep was the most serious Prompto had ever seen him looking. His eyes opened and caught Prompto watching.

He took Prompto's hand and pressed a kiss to the back. “Hello, my dear.”

His voice was thick and blurry from sleep.

Prompto's lips twitched around, and he said, “Hey.”

Ardyn sat up and stretched, and that was a hell of a thing to watch all on its own. His arms had all kinds of hills and valleys of muscle. The scars on his back were like tally marks on a chalkboard. They were light-colored, the kind that healing spells or potions left behind sometimes.

“Ah,” Ardyn said, looking back at him, “you've noticed my decorations.”

Caught staring again. “Sorry. I just...that must've hurt.”

They all moved in an interesting way when Ardyn rolled his shoulders.

“There are worse things, especially for a young man imprudent enough to venture into enemy territory alone. It was a fascinating conundrum to find a way out without revealing the identity of who they had captured. Lucis Caelum talents tend to be as useful as they are indiscreet.” He stood up and pulled on pants. “Coffee?”

“Yeah,” Prompto said, glad for something to focus on to push away the image of Ardyn getting hit. Him hurting. “Sure.”

Besides the prince part, it wasn't really fairy taleish. Fairy tale didn't have bathrooms where you could get cleaned up, especially not with a big ridiculous tub with a bunch of jars of bath salts beside it (For external use only. Leastweasel Holdings, LLC is not responsible if ingested) and a mirror where you could take a good look at your weirdly flattened messed-up hair and be giddy for a second.

You just made it with a super hot older guy, Prompto thought, pointing at himself in the mirror with both hands. Go you.

Fairy tale princes also didn't have drawers full of old band shirts that they let you borrow. Prompto picked out an Ajora Saint one that smelled like the cedar of the closet and draped over him like a robe. They didn't have fancy coffee makers, and they didn't sit and talk with you and sip out of tiny little cups.

That was all good. Fairy tales were always really messed up when you thought about it.

Prompto was so far from the real world he didn't recognize the little song at first. Then it sank in.

“Shit, that's my phone,” he said, and went and dug through the pile of his clothes until he found it. There were a bunch of messages. He must not've heard the beep since he was busy. Having sex.
With Ardyn. Sorry, Noct. “Oh man, I totally forgot. I said I'd go meet up with Noct and the guys.”

“Then you had best not keep them waiting,” Ardyn said. He looked at Prompto with a curl to his lips and added, “As much as I would like to keep you to myself.”

That made Prompto's heart do some acrobatic stuff while he hurried to get dressed.

“You think the coast is clear?” he said, getting his vest settled on his shoulders. “If somebody sees me, it might, uh, make stuff weird.”

Ardyn just smiled and led him to the bookcase. He reached behind a volume and did something. The heavy-looking shelves slid aside to show a door.

“Woah,” said Prompto, eyes wide.

“What sort of proper castle doesn't have a few secret passages?” Ardyn said.

“That is so cool.”

“It is kept locked, of course.” He gestured, and a little magenta flash turned into a tiny silver star-shaped charm. He took Prompto's arm and attached the charm to his wristband. “Only touch this to that silver plate.”

He lifted up Prompto's arm to demonstrate. Something went click and the door swung open.

Not to go repeating himself or anything, Prompto said, “Woah.”

“It will bring you out into a secluded place in the gardens. I trust you can keep a secret.”

“Promise,” Prompto said, and leaned up to kiss him goodbye. Then he hopped away, full of a fresh wild energy. “Okay, gotta go! See ya!”

He headed down the passage at a jog. It was dim and stone and straight out of King's Knight.

“Yes,” he heard faintly behind him, just before the door closed. “Be seeing you.”
Noctis had never noticed how much of a pattern there was to his life until it was thrown off. It was all small things, like wrong notes in a song, but the clashes were adding up.

Like hanging out in front of a diner until Prompto came jogging up out of breath, saying he'd lost track of time with Ardyn.

Or a laugh and a waved hand and a “Sorry, I gotta pass.” He was going to another old movie with Ardyn.

Or a text that said, “Can’t make it tonight. Next time!” And the lack of a reason that made a negative-space outline in the shape of Ardyn.

That wasn't what brought Noctis stomping into Ardyn's lair. The picture was.

“Library's closed,” Noct said to the couple people around. They took one look at his face and took his word for it. Using his royal authority to push people around was another thing he'd resent Ardyn for making him do. He shoved the door shut behind them.

“Prince Noctis,” Ardyn said, looking up from under a mild arch of maroon eyebrows, “what a pleasantly unusual surprise. How might I assist you?”

“Did you see Eos Weekly today?”

“Certainly not,” Ardyn said with a thick layer of innocent surprise that meant he definitely had. “I only read, ah...” -his eyes wandered over the hundreds of books lined up on the shelves- “...scrawled manifestos and eccentric soap labels.”

Noctis yanked the magazine out of the Armiger and slapped it down onto his desk, face up.

Ardyn set his pen down. He said, “Was there something interesting in the pet horoscopes?”

“This.” Noct opened it to a page in the middle a re-smacked it down. On one side of the page there was a photo through the window of a restaurant. It showed Prompto on one side of a table, gesturing with a fork and looking like he always did when he was in the middle of a story, and Ardyn on the other, resting his face in his hand and wearing a half-smile that was a cross between the kind you saw on dreamy fifteen-year-old girls watching boy band videos and the kind you saw on comic book villains about to pull a pit trap lever.

Headline: **Royal May-December Romance! Is The Archivist Smitten With A Blond Punk Kitten?** Then, like they needed to go making it worse: **Provocative Purple-Plaited Prince Poaches Nephew's BFF!**

Ardyn's eyes skimmed the text. “That's hardly accurate. My hair is burgundy and I am October at the very latest. What in the world is a biff?”

Noctis planted his hands on top of the desk. “Right now it stands for Better Fucking Forget it.”

“My. Such strong language, and such awkward grammar.”

“Prompto said he was going to the gym that night.” Of course Ardyn was treating this like a joke. It made anger rise up in the back of Noctis's throat. “Look, hanging around him is one thing, but where
Noct's voice had more heat in it than he meant to put there.

"Is that the issue? There is a simple explanation." Ardyn tapped the picture with a finger, right around where there was a bowl of weird translucent round things. "The secrecy was at Prompto's request. He wanted to sample molecular gastronomy and was adamant that it be kept in confidence."

"He...oh." Noctis winced. That actually made some sense. *Absurd, elaborate science experiments are not food.* "Ignis has opinions."

*You're supposed to be feeding your guests, not your own ego!*

"There you are, then." Ardyn shuffled some papers around in a way that was barely trying to look necessary. "Now, with that settled, may I help you find a book? We have a wide variety of volumes on all sorts of useful subjects. Botany, political science, minding your own business..."

*The entire point is to harmonize the natural flavors of the ingredients, not boil and pulverize them into unrecognizable self-aggrandizement orbs.*

"Uh-uh." Noctis made a gesture that was sharp enough to be a weapon in its own right. He shook Ignis's voice out of his head and focused on what he came here for. No letting Ardyn sidetrack him. This was important. "Stay away from Prompto."

Ardyn tapped the sheaf of papers against the desk. "As the thirteenth oracle said to the Queen when issued a writ to testify before the grand tribunal in the case of the succession; why should I?"

"Because Prompto," Noctis said, taking a deep breath, "is a good person. He trusts people. You know those guys who sell stuff they say fell off the back of a truck? You ever wonder who believes them? Prompto does. He turns over beetles that're on their backs. He cares about things. He doesn't deserve to get toyed around with and then dropped once you get bored using him to mess with me."

"Oh my dear Prince Noctis," said Ardyn, and it wasn't a coincidence that basically rhymed with *I'm about to say something obnoxious,* "would I spend weeks becoming romantically entwined with a young man merely to antagonize you?"

Noct took a second to realize that was a real question. "Yes?"

"Well, this time I'm not." Ardyn had one of those little green-shaded lamps that grew up from desks like mushrooms growing out of damp logs. It lit him from one side and shadowed half his face when he steepled his fingers in a way nobody up to any good had ever done.

Noctis said, "Excuse me if I don't have a lot of faith in somebody who sells ridiculously expensive machines that squash juice bags, honesty-wise."

"I contend that the fault there lies with the people who bought them." He tilted his head. Noct knew he knew how suspicious trying to look innocent made him look, and that he did it anyway. "But I must admit, I'm hurt you would think me so ill-willed. Haven't I always been a friend to you?"

He did kind of have a point, though Noctis wouldn't go crazy and say "friend." This was the guy who'd healed the injury Noctis had gotten from a daemon as a kid, who'd showed him how to warp with thumbtacks and paperclips, and who'd once stolen a hairpin out of a countess's bun and dared Noct to use it to warp out of the middle of a reception. (He'd gotten it clean out the window.) He'd told Noct all kinds of things about the history of the family that they didn't put in any official books, and also, maybe even on purpose, taught him how to figure out the difference between the truth and
things somebody'd made up on the spot. And he was the one who was always healing Noct's dad, as little as Noct liked to think about why that was necessary.

“Look,” Noctis said. He sighed and his shoulders fell some, so he was standing less like somebody about to get in a fistfight. “I don't think you’re actually out to hurt anybody. You just think weird stuff is funny. Like that movie with the guy wearing the dead anak.”

“An underappreciated surrealist classic,” Ardyn said. His sleeves swept over the whole desk when he leaned back in his chair. Noctis had no idea how he kept from knocking stuff over all the time with those.

“I mean,” Noctis said, “whatever you’re doing, I don't want to see Prompto turning into collateral damage. So just leave him alone.”

Ardyn said, “All right.”

“If you- what?”

Ardyn swept his hands out wide and still somehow didn't hit anything. The collar on his weird ruffly shirt shifted down, and Noctis got the horrible realization that necks were a place hickeys could be. He kept his eyes locked straight ahead, because no matter how unlikely it might be you still should not ask questions you absolutely do not want the answer to.

“If that's what you wish, that's what I will do. For no reason whatsoever, I shall abruptly cease giving him time of day. No contact at all. Surely that won't break his heart.”

Noctis got the feeling he hadn't really thought this through. “Not like that.”

“Then like what, exactly?” Ardyn spent so much time talking like nothing mattered that it jarred you when an edge got into his voice. It was like stepping down onto the landing when your feet expected another stair. “As family, let us be honest about your objection. The name of this beast is jealousy.”

That caught Noct like one of Gladio's elbows.

“Are you crazy?” he said, and he was glad the only person around to get mad at him for being loud in a library was a guy he didn't have to listen to. “I do not have a thing for Prompto!”

“Oh, I don't mean romantically,” said Ardyn, who could have clarified that before giving Noct a heart attack. “But you have been the center of his world for...what is it, several years? And now, after you’ve come to take it for granted, he is giving his attention to someone else. It's only natural to be dismayed.”

“I'm not dismayed,” Noctis said, “and I don't take him for granted.”

It was just a fact that whenever he wanted to do something or to talk to somebody, Prompto was always around. He was just there, like gravity. At least he had been, until lately.

Noctis didn't have to like that.

“Don't fret,” Ardyn soothed aggravatingly, “I'm not going to steal him from you. I couldn't even if I so desired. The boy thinks you lit the sun.”

“This isn’t about me,” Noct said. Ardyn was pushing him off course. He was good at that. “It's about Prompto. This isn't going to end well for him and you know it.”
“I see.” Ardyn looked thoughtful. “You must have something on which you base that assumption. Has he seemed different lately? Upset, withdrawn? Have I been making him miserable?”

“No,” Noctis said, the word dragging itself out reluctantly. “He's been-- fine.”

That was almost true. He'd been different. Some of the edge of his nervous energy was smoother. He didn't work so hard to fill silences. He'd dragged Noct, Ignis, and Gladio all over town so he could experiment taking pictures with different kinds of framing, and had them wait while he ran up to the top of a building to try getting a super long shot like one of these guys in a jungle in some movie he'd seen with Ardyn. (“Hey, don't worry, I'm not going to try to get anything like the part where the guy punches a mirror and bleeds all over the place. Ardyn says that wasn't even in the script. The actor was just super drunk and doing that that day.”) He'd been whistling a lot.

Noctis had never seen him happier.

Ardyn said, “Then there is little to be concerned about, is there? Perhaps your friend, a grown man in possession of all his faculties, can make his own decisions regarding the company he keeps.”

Frustration snapped at Noct's guts. “If it's not just to get on my nerves--” -which was working- “-what do you want with him anyway?”

“Noctis.” Ardyn folded his hands together and leaned forward over the desk, framed in the old books on the shelves behind him. He'd put them there on purpose, Noct knew it. “Let me tell you about the Prompto I know. He never stops moving, yet he'll spend half the day waiting for the lighting conditions at a certain spot to become just right. He has theories about what each variety of daemon flan tastes like. He made up a little song about stairs. Also, I suspect I shall never get my favorite Captain Leaferheart shirt back.”

“Look, I know he can be annoying--”

“I'm saying that I adore him.”

Noctis searched Ardyn's face. It looked totally open and honest, which didn't mean much when you were talking about a guy who'd suggested the new Revenue Department motto should be Pedicabo Ego Vos Et Irrumabo. He'd said it meant serving the populace with rigor and sobriety and had almost gotten believed until somebody looked it up.

Noctis's head dropped. He looked down at the open page of the magazine, where somebody'd put a picture of Clarus Amicitia walking his dog, like that was worth printing.

Noctis said mournfully, “Can't you do normal evil uncle stuff, like try to steal the throne or something?”

“Good gracious, no. You're welcome to be the one trapped on that ungainly thing. And I wouldn't say 'evil,' precisely.” Ardyn craned his head to look at the article. “This puts it as 'intriguingly amoral.' Oh, I like that.”

“Keep it,” Noctis said as he walked away, out of the library and hopefully into a life where he'd never have to see that picture again.

He saw it four hours later.

He was talking to Prompto and Gladio like everything was normal, and it really felt like it was. Then a magazine smacked down on the table between them.
When Noct looked up, it was into Ignis's look of betrayal and disappointment. It wasn't him it was pointed at.

Ignis said, “Molecular gastronomy, Prompto?”
“Hah!” Noct said. “Got you.”

Prompto flopped back on the couch. “Aw, c'mon, I'm out of practice. I haven't played this in, like, forever.”

Three losses in a row, but honestly, Prompto couldn't really care. It was nice to be over at Noct's, just the two of them, same as always. Plus he was mostly thinking about how he had something he wanted to tell Noct. That was, he told Noct everything, but this was big and different. It was in him like a jarred firefly, buzzing around and tapping on the glass. He was scared to tell him but excited too, like when you had a new move to use in a fight and you didn't know whether it was going to look really cool or get your head bitten off while you were looking really cool. He just needed a chance. Noct'd say something like, So how're things going with Ardyn? and he'd say, Good. Really good.

“Whose fault is that?” Noct said. He pushed some dirty laundry off the arm of the couch and leaned over while he set King's Knight back to the versus menu.

“Uh, Iggy's, for making you do all the stuff to get ready for the trip?”

Prompto was in Ignis's good graces again. He'd gotten his ear talked off for a while there, but Ignis had calmed down some once he admitted he didn't really get why anybody'd suck the flavor out of a strawberry and turn it into a gel and then mold it into a strawberry shape instead of just giving you a strawberry. It'd been fun to try that stuff, though. Some of it fizzed.

“Oh, you know who you-know-who.”

Prompto laughed. “What is he, an evil wizard now?”

*He's really funny and he knows all kinds of cool stuff. He never acts like he's sick of me, or like I'm less important than him, even though I am. He acts like he likes being with me. Like I'm somebody.*

“You know, I could see it.” Noct gestured with the controller. “That is a man who'd own a cauldron and put stuff in it.”

“Like, eye of newt.”

“Oh, totally. *You know* that coat has a whole pocket for newt eyes.”

Prompto fell back laughing and knocked a sock off the back. “Dude, gross!”

*He makes me feel like I'm somebody, too.*

“Come on, it explains so much! He totally does spells and hypnotizes people. 'Looook into my eeeeyes, I'm nooooot a creepy oooold duuude.'”

Prompto said, laughing less, “He's not creepy.”

“See, he already got you! He evil wizarded you into this as a really complicated scheme to take over the world or something. 'Get this guy to date you' is probably around step five thousand and fifty.”
I didn't even know feeling this way was something that really happened. Like I can do anything, when I'm around him.

All of a sudden there was something heavy in Prompto's stomach. Maybe it was aftereffects from the artichoke foam the other day. “Dating me's not a scheme.”

“Have you met the guy?” Noctis was gesturing around, caught up. “Everything's a scheme. There's no way he's on the up and up. Ulterior motives are his thing.”

Prompto's smile stuck to his face like a wet dead leaf. “Noct.”

Noctis scrolled through the character select. Faces flashed up in the little close-up box. “Seriously, look out, I bet he got some whole evil wizard spy network to find him a boyfriend for some plan. Eye of newt, tongue of dog, hair of blond guy...”

Prompto was staring down at his hands.

Noct, I think I'm in love.

He said, “Is it that weird that somebody likes me?”

Something in his voice must have gotten Noct's attention. The scrolling bleeps stopped, and there was just the little tune in the background. That thing always got stuck in your head.

“Hey,” Noct said, “I didn't mean it like that. I was just joking around.”

The remorse in his voice made Prompto feel guilty, but this had been bothering him for a while. Usually he didn't bring up stuff like that with Noct. He hated people arguing, and it'd never been worth making a whole thing out of. He didn't want to be the killjoy who made a big deal out of everything. Nobody wanted to be around that guy.

“Yeah,” Prompto said dully. His thumb ran around the face of the controller. “You make a lot of that kind of joke about him.”

“Prompto-”

“I know you don't like this, okay?” Prompto caught him straight in the eye. He didn't want to fight but he had to say this before he lost his nerve. “You think he's being creepy and you think he's too old for me. I get it.”

“That's not it,” Noct said. “The thing is you don't know what you're getting into. He's...”

He didn't say taking advantage of you, but it was there on his tongue. Prompto hurried to talk before he could spit it out.

“I know what he's like. He has signature scents. As in, more than one. He calls things 'splendid.' He collects old religious books with typos in them, like the one that accidentally tells people to cheat on their wives, or the one where they keep saying 'safer' instead of 'savior.' He seriously has his own poet, and it's a guy who almost got sent to jail for writing something about hysterical naked people and guys on motorcycles. Ardyn's the one who paid for his lawyer. He loves thrift stores, and last time I was with him we had to go into one so he could buy the worst hat I've ever seen.”

Noctis said, “I know, right? You shouldn't have to deal with all that.”

“Noct.” Prompto's voice was edged with frustration. “I mean I like him. He's nice to me. He's weird,
and he knows he's weird, and he doesn't let anybody make him feel bad about that.

That, out of all the magic powers and prince stuff, was the really amazing talent.

The thing about Noct was he didn't barrel over you. Even when he was arguing he listened. His elbows were resting on his knees, and he was thinking.

“I just don't want to see him being a jerk,” Noct said finally. “He treats everything like a joke. I don't want that to happen to you.”

Prompto shrugged. “Nah. He can take stuff seriously, he just likes to act like he never does. Same as you.”

“What?” His double-take was pretty funny, especially when it was for pointing out something obvious. “Come on, I am not like him.”

“Nope, sorry. One hundred percent. “Same 'oh I don't really care about stuff' thing and everything.” Something occurred to Prompto, and he smiled lopsidedly. “Wait a minute, are you worried about me? That's sweet.”

Noct shoved his arm. “Shut up.”

“It's adorable! Aw, my prince in shining armor.”

“Hurry up and choose your guy, cause now I gotta kick your ass for that.”

Prompto won that round, actually. Then they went on co-op quest mode for a while. It was pretty chill, just going around killing monsters.

Prompto's mind went back to the kinds of things Noct pretended not to be serious about, and he said, “I guess we're gonna be out there for a while, going all over the country finding swords and stuff.”

“Not just swords,” Noct said. “There's, like...axes.”

“And seriously real dungeons?” Prompto didn't have Noct's knack for pretending not to be excited. He was kind of sad about being away from Ardyn for so long just as things were getting really good, but it was an adventure. How many of those did anybody get in a lifetime?

“That's what my dad said. Shit, watch out!”

“Oh, crap.” Prompto almost got cornered by some of the little jerks that stunlock you, but Noct got him out of it. “So we finally get to do all this stuff for real.”

“Got a full party and everything.” Noctis said.

“Yeah,” Prompto said, getting his guy's combo lined up. “There's you the main character, then Gladio's the tank, and Iggy's the mage.”

“Iggy's got the daggers, so he's the rogue.” Noct pushed his hair out of his eyes and got his hand back on the controller without even taking a hit.

“Hey, I'm the rogue.” He was little and quick and everything.

“You've got the distance weapon and the thing for animals. You're the ranger.”

Now that took some debate. After a while they'd worked out that Iggy was duelclassed, Gladio was
more of a fighter than a paladin, and at some point Prompto was definitely going to get a chocobo familiar.

They'd looted and were halfway back to town when Prompto got an idea. Something crazy. Something great. It fell into his head right out of the sky.

“You know,” Prompto said slowly, “our party comp's a little off.”

“Hm?” Noct said.

“I mean, think of every MMORPG you've ever played.”

Prompto kept his eyes on what he was doing, no matter how much he wanted to glance at Noct and gauge his reaction. His heart was starting to go quick. Noct just needed to see more of him. Get to know him better. Then he'd understand.

Prompto said, “You'd never in a million years go into a dungeon without a healer.”

Chapter End Notes

The Wicked Bible is a real thing; the printers were putting in the "thou shalt not commit adultery" commandment and forgot the "not." Have you ever typoed so bad you got yelled at by the Archbishop of Canterbury?
Brotherly Love

“And he's done it before, right?” Prompto said. He stole a french fry from Noctis's plate but also took a slice of tomato, so the karma evened out. “He knows where they all are. A guide'd be super useful.”

“I'm not supposed to have anybody holding my hand through this thing.” There was doubt on Noct's face, but he'd quit borderlining on being a jerk about Ardyn since they'd talked the other night.

“I doubt his grace is the kind to be helpful to excess,” said Ignis.

“Yeah,” Prompto said, “he wouldn't go giving anything away. He loves riddles. Like the one about the spiracorn that walks on four legs in the morning.”

Noct said, “The what?”

“You know, cause in the morning it's walking normal, then at noon is when a bunch of hunters come out so it rears up for fighting-” -Prompto pawed his hands up in the air- “-and then at night it gets a leg bit off by a daemon.”

Gladio swallowed a mouthful of burger and said, “That's, uh, not how that one goes.”

“Ardyn said I was right.” Prompto was next to the big guy, since balancing out the sizes was the only way to fit them all in one booth. “Plus, he knows all kinds of stuff, and he's been everywhere, and he's funny, and...”

Noct said, “We're going to be hearing about him the whole time no matter what, aren't we.”

“Yep!” Prompto said cheerfully. He dug his phone out of his pocket. “And look, he sends me stuff.”

Noct shielded his eyes until Ignis gave him the all clear. Honestly, it wasn't like Prompto was going to go flashing dirty selfies of Ardyn around. He had some common sense.

He kept those in a different folder.

The one he showed was a picture of a dog with the word bird written over its head.

“He doesn't really get memes,” Prompto said, beaming.

Ignis adjusted his glasses as he peered at the screen. “Or else he gets them extraordinarily well.”

“So have you asked him?” Gladio said.

“About going with us?” Prompto pocketed his phone and tapped his fingers on the linoleum table. “Not yet. I wanted to get your guys's opinion first.”

Just the idea of asking him made Prompto half nervous and half excited. Ever since Noct had told him about it, Prompto had been getting used to everything the trip meant: going farther than a day's trip outside of Insomnia for the first time in his adult life, acting as a representative for the kingdom, his first real job protecting Noctis. On the downside, it meant being away from Ardyn for who knew how long. No sneaking around the dark, echoey secret passages like somebody in one of Gladio's romance novels. No going out to really interestingly shot movies with flying guys fighting mechanical Ronin daemons. No waking up half on top of Ardyn, feeling how huge he was, no hearing him yawn in his ear and feeling his arm around his middle, which was the closest a human
being could feel to the otter floating on the other otter in that video Prompto might've watched somewhere north of thirty times. No laying on Ardyn's bed in a borrowed Maiden's KISS shirt with his head on his lap, with Ardyn running his hand through hair all messed up from sex and reading him poems about Mammon, whose tendrils are two armies and Mammon, whose energies dream and shake beneath the sea. Prompto didn't pretend to understand any of it. He just liked to hear his voice.

Ardyn had said to send pictures and bring him back a souvenir from Leide.

But if he went with them, everything would be different. He'd be part of the whole adventure.

“My vote's no, if anybody's asking,” Noct said, though he didn't have to vote at all. He could've said no and that would've been game over.

Ignis said, “His skills could be a valuable asset, especially with the reports of increasing Niflheimian incursions beyond the wall. I would say yes.”

“The question is if he can handle it,” Gladio said, in his I Am The King's Shield And Don't You Forget It voice. “They say he could fight back in the day, but that was before twenty years of a desk job. We have a job to do and we can’t have anybody slowing us down. So put me down for a ‘depends on if he can keep up.’”

“Woo-hoo!” Prompto fistpumped. “That adds up to a maybe!”

Of course Prompto was going to be the one who had to go bring it up. Somehow his brain had skipped over that part.

He shouldn't have been nervous. It was just Ardyn. It wasn't like he hadn't talked to him plenty before. Or had a bunch of sex with him. Once you'd touched somebody's butt, you couldn't worry that much about just asking them something, right?

Also, he had a really nice butt. That might not be relevant but it was important.

Crowe said she'd seen Ardyn headed to the garden a bit ago. Prompto trotted out a few steps into the courtyard and stopped in his tracks, since it hadn't occurred to him he might not be alone.

Ardyn was there, all right, sitting beside a table with a pitcher of tea and a silver tray full of little square sandwiches. He wasn't paying any attention to those, though, or to Prompto appearing. His eyes were closed and his hands were on the king's knee. The magenta glow was faint in the sun. You never thought about the two of them looking like one another, but side by side you could see the resemblance.

It smelled green out here, and it was quiet. It was amazing how the palace's white walls held out the city's noise. There were just the chirps of some birds in the rosebushes, and King Regis's sigh.

“You haven't been doing the stretches I've told you,” Ardyn said reproachfully.

“It's difficult to find the time,” the king said.

“Put more effort into searching,” said Ardyn. He opened his eyes, and the glow around his hands started fading. “I urge you on my authority as your physician.”

The corner of the king's mouth curved. “Does anyone listen to doctors?”
“Then on my authority as your gadfly.”

“All right, all right.” Just as Prompto was thinking he should clear his throat or something, King Regis caught sight of him. “Ah, Prompto.”

Ardyn met his eyes, too, and yeah Prompto might be the one who needed a healer next, because the sudden warmth there made his heart do a twist that functioning organs weren’t supposed to.

Prompto snapped to attention with his fist over his chest. The protocol was actually kind of reassuring; there was exactly one thing you were supposed to do, so you didn't have to worry about doing the wrong thing. Heels together, spine straight, just like Ignis had made him practice.

Except he also had to talk, and that was harder. “Sorry, Your Majesty. I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“It's all right,” the king said. He flexed his leg back and forth. “We've finished here.”

Prompto looked at Ardyn and said, “If I could speak to you, your grace?”

“At your service in just a moment.” Ardyn was over at the table, and a bunch of the little sandwiches were vanishing. He held the tray out toward Regis, who shook his head. “Really, if you aren't going to have absurd little sandwiches, why even be a monarch?”

Prompto dropped the salute and waited with his hands behind his back, being unobtrusive like you were supposed to. Just hang out and don't obtrude.

Ardyn picked his terrible hat off a chair and set it on his head with this little adjustment he did that was seriously too cute to handle. He said, “Don't overtax it, ice any swelling, and do your stretches.”

“Yes, yes, I will,” the king said, sounding so much like Noct telling Ignis he'd do the laundry that Prompto had to do some work to keep a straight face. “Oh, Prompto? A word.”

Oh shit. Was he in trouble? Was he in serious royal trouble? Prompto booked it over to him and almost got thwacked by a branch full of flowers on the way. “Yes, sir?”

The king looked up at him. The crown over his right ear was a lighter shade of silver than his hair. “There's something I'd like you to do.”

A thing to do. He could do that. Prompto straightened up and tried to look capable. “Yes, sir.”

It was hard to know how to see somebody who you knew half as “His Majesty King Regis Lucis Caelum CXIII” from the news reports and half as “my dad” from your best friend. He looked a lot more like the second one when he leaned toward Prompto, sent his eyes meaningfully toward Ardyn, and said, “Be a good influence on him.”

Prompto said, “I'll do my best, Your Majesty!”

“How optimistic,” Ardyn called over his shoulder. “It won't work.”

Regis said, “Why not? It worked with Noctis.”

Prompto caught up with Ardyn at the edge of the garden. “Do you- is that a thing you do a lot?”

“On a fairly regular basis, yes.” Ardyn snapped dead buds off the plants they passed. He kept up his quick pace and didn’t settle into the saunter he usually used when Prompto was by his side. “Most often as a prelude to his visiting the Crystal.”
“The Crystal?” Prompto had only ever seen it in pictures. He knew what everyone knew – just that one way or another it was basically the engine that kept the kingdom running. Noct had seen it in person, and he said there was a feeling it gave off through the whole room. When Prompto asked him what it felt like, he'd thought for a while and eventually said, Creepy.

“Yes.” Ardyn turned into one of the bright-lit hallways that ran around the courtyard, and Prompto followed. “My brother must pay his due obeisance to the thing that's killing him.”

Prompto's throat seized up. “He's...?”

Ardyn glanced at him, and seemed to remember himself. “Ah. Forgive the melodrama of the phrasing. It is not quite so dire.”

His steps slowed to something Prompto could keep up with better. Squares of light from the high windows slid over Ardyn's face as they walked. It was a quiet part of the palace, and they had the hall to themselves.

Ardyn kept his eyes forward as he said, “The gifts of the gods do not take into account the limitations of mere mortal flesh. The ring gives its blessings and takes its toll, but my own god-granted abilities can counteract the effects somewhat. In my brother's case, the weak point where the strain concentrates happens to be his right knee. And so, the gods and I skirmish now and then on the battlefield of his patellar tendon. It's a little pageant of irony we enact.”

So that was why the king walked sort of lopsided sometimes. The Crystal was supposed to be a good thing, this big, shining treasure that protected everybody. The idea of it sucking at somebody's health was awful. Everybody knew the king carried a lot, and that there was a reason Regis looked so much older than Ardyn even though they were only a few years apart. But nobody'd ever said it like it was anybody's fault.

Quietly, Prompto said, “Is that what's gonna happen to Noct?”

Ardyn's expression softened. “I cannot say. It depends on many things. Were the war to end, the upkeep of the Wall would not make such demands. In any case, that is far in the future, and I won't let the throne devour either of them. In this divine competition, I intend to keep winning.”

He straightened his coat and brushed off his hands.

“Now,” he added brightly, “what is it you wished to discuss?”

Ardyn strode into the center of the sparring ring and declared, “I have gathered you all here for a reason.”

“Is it something we can do without you making a whole speech about it?” said Noct. Him, Prompto, and the other two guys were all in a line, like an audience. The ring smelled dusty, and the hard-packed dirt was springy under Prompto's feet.

“No,” Ardyn flourished his hands. He looked like the guy in the middle of the circus ring just as the spotlight came on. “Now, I have been informed that we have a dilemma on hand. The prospect has been raised that I might accompany you on your quest. Yet there remains dissent in the ranks as to whose preference shall be honored in the matter, as well as to whether my skills are up to the task. I propose we settle both at a blow.”

He gestured, and a pink flash turned into a red rose in his hand. He tucked it into the silver stuff on the shoulder of his coat.
“We shall spar. My dear nephew will take the side of the nays, and his adviser shall represent the ayes. Whosoever parts this rose from its stem shall have his wish.”

“Understood,” said Ignis.

“Quit watching weird foreign cartoons,” said Noct.

“Prompto,” Ardyn said, and he'd barely begun a yeah? before a gold thing was flying at him.

He snatched it out of the air. It was an old pocketwatch, the kind that had lacy hands and little tick marks at the edges because it was too fancy for numbers.


“Keep the time,” Ardyn directed. “If I am able to protect my token for, oh, let's say fifteen minutes, then the prerogative shall be mine.”

Meaning he'd come. Prompto's heart sped up.

“Roger!” Prompto said. He looked from Noct and Ignis to Ardyn. “Wait. Isn't two on one kind of unfair?”

“Ah, you have a point,” Ardyn said. “This is hardly balanced. You there. Nasturtium.”

“That's not my name,” Gladio said.

“Take their side as well.”

“If you say so,” said Gladio. He had that this'll-be-quick look on his face.

Prompto skipped back out of the ring as they huddled up to strategize. Well, it wasn't totally hopeless. Gladio was on the fence, and if Ignis was quickest, they were good. Ardyn just had to prove he could put up enough of a fight to not get in the way, and if even Prompto could do that, it'd be no problem for a guy like him.

“Whenever you're ready,” Ardyn called. He was standing in the center of the ring, filing his nails. “Begin the clock, my dear.”

Prompto hit the button on the side of the watch and put all his hopes on Iggy.

The three of them got their weapons in hand and fanned out just like when they were hunting big game. Ardyn was humming to himself.

“Come along now,” he said without looking up, “we haven't all day.”

Noctis looked at the others, shrugged, and darted forward to swipe his sword out and pluck the rose in one cut.

Ardyn wasn't there. He was a magenta flash ten feet away where he'd tossed the nail file.

“Oh,” he said, glancing up with a mild look on his face. “Are you about prepared to begin?”

Noctis lunged like he meant it. His sword smacked against the enormous one Ardyn pulled out of thin air, and rang.

That was when it got started for real.
Ardyn seriously did swing that huge thing around one-handed. Like it was nothing.

Prompto didn't have many chances to just stand back and watch the guys fight. Usually he was busy fighting himself, or scanning for an opening. One second of really watching and you got hit by how differently they moved. Ignis was all speed and flexibility, where Gladio was power and the judgment that put that power in the right place, and Noct was somebody moving half in another world, in and out of warps, grabbing different weapons out of nowhere without breaking his momentum. Prompto wondered if he could make any of that difference come across in a still shot.

He tried a couple, with one eye on the watch. He still had his job to do.

Five minutes and the rose was still one piece, because Ardyn, now...Ardyn was something else.

He was like trying to catch a lizard. Every time they should've been fast enough to snip off the rose, he was a step away. He always had a way to get them on the wrong foot or going off in a direction he looked like he was heading but wasn't. Prompto had never realized before that Noct's warp took a split-second delay to pull off, though now that he knew what it felt like he knew how impressive that was, but Ardyn did it easy as a heartbeat. They were both flashing all over the place, leaving afterimages of pink and blue that Prompto had to blink away.

“Slippery bastard,” Gladio grunted when his sword wooshed an inch above the rose.

“Why thank you, Hyacinth,” Ardyn said, sidestepping so Noct's thrust took him right into Ignis's way. “I take pride in remaining limber for my age.”

“Ten minutes down!” Prompto called. He shifted from foot to foot. This could work. It could really happen. He was fending off all three of them. It seemed like Ardyn's giant sword just appeared in the right place to deflect without any work on his part. It was incredible.

Also kind of hot, but that wasn't important right now.

From his viewpoint, Prompto could see the exact moment when the guys started to catch on. They were getting a feel for Ardyn's style of warping, and it wasn't taking them off balance as much. They were starting to hem him in. Of course it was Ignis who was figuring out what parts of the arena had fewer good places to warp to. There were a lot more of them than him. Extremely cool magic powers or not, Ardyn was going to end up cornered.

“Two minutes left!” Prompto called, a little nervously. He stared at the skinny curlicued second hand hard enough that it had to make it go faster.

Even from this distance he could see that look Noct got on his face when he was determined.

Ignis and Gladio had Ardyn boxed in to either side. Noct flung his sword right behind Ardyn and as he was turning-

-didn't warp, but full-body barreled into him.

“Gladio!” Noct shouted.

Ardyn was knocked into a backwards stumble and his sword was caught on the wrong side to block when Gladio's weapon swept up. The very tip caught the rose and sent it soaring into the air. It hung there, a red speck in the blue.

Four faces turned toward the sound of the gunshot.

Red petals pattered down.
Prompto posed with gun in hand and grinned.

“Better get packed,” he said, and snapped the pocketwatch shut.
“Ready, steady...push!”

“It's so heavy!”

“Unbelievable.”

“Brute labor is not what I imagined I signed on for.”

“Not exactly a fairy tale beginning, huh Prince Noctis?”

“We let ourselves get carried away.”

“Look, these things happen.”

“Let's just hope this isn't some omen.”

“I assure you omens are far more dramatic.”

“Gladio, do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Push this thing by yourself.”

“By myself?”

“You won't even notice if we just let go.”

“Prompto, don't even think about it.”

“Save some breath for pushing.”

“If only there were someone older and wiser to mention that one should take the opportunity to top off the tank, and if only he were listened to.”

“Wait a minute, you didn't say anything back there!”

“Didn't I? ...oh. I didn't. Well, I meant to.”

“Focus on not throwing your back out, old man.”

“Follow your own advice, Chrysanthemum.”

“Isn't Hammerhead supposed to be close to here?”

“I'll check the map.”

“I can verify it is just around the corner.”

“...I'll check the map.”
“Don’t you trust me?”

“Ignis?”

“Yes, your highness?”

“Check the map.”

When they got to Hammerhead about a million years later, Prompto collapsed.

“Ground sweet ground,” he sighed. Every muscle he owned hurt. The pavement was hot and full of pebbles and he did not even care. “I'm never moving again.”

“We made it.” Noct didn't sound a whole lot better. He was draped over the side of the Regalia like a pair of sneakers hanging from a telephone wire.

“Bury me somewhere scenic,” Ardyn said, keeping himself up with hands planted on the trunk. “Claim I perished in service of something noble, so that young romantics will pay pilgrimage and weep.”

“Howdy there strangers! What can we do you for?”

Prompto was glad Ignis was the one she asked, since with a girl that cute, his answer would've been something like *Car not go? Thing dead. Not with the moving. Help.* Ignis got the basics across quick. It wasn't really a long story.

He was almost done when an old man's voice broke in.

“Well I'll be damned. Ardy, you old son of a bitch! How has nobody murdered you yet?”

From below, Prompto got a good view of Ardyn straightening up and spreading his hands as he strutted toward the old guy in the baseball cap. “Because miracles never cease.”

Prompto sat up and said, “You know this guy?”

Noctis said, “‘Ardy?’”

Ardyn clasped arms with the old guy and said, “Gentlemen, this is Cid, an old compatriot.”

The old guy said, “I thought you had a cushy job back in the capitol. What are you doing running around out here?”

“Keeping a watchful eye on the youth, providing guidance. We could hardly send the young prince to gallivant on his own.”

Cid squinted at Noct. “No kidding, is that Reggie's boy?”

“That'd be me,” Noctis said.

Ignis said, “‘Reggie?’”

“Don't worry, me and Cindy'll get your ride back in working order. I've still got yours somewhere around here too, Ardy. Just needs a couple touch ups to get back on the road after all this time.”

“Triage,” Ardyn said. He stepped back and patted the Regalia's hood. “Tend to the more grievously
injured first.”

“We’ll take care of her. Can’t promise it’ll be cheap, though.”

Ardyn gave a charming smile. “Wouldn’t you extend a line of credit to a comrade in arms?”

“You? Nope.”

“So he does know you,” said Ignis.

Noct asked how much, and the answer was in whatever the heck gil was.

“You got any?” Gladio said.

“Carry cash?” Ardyn said, with offense. “Like a common encyclopedia salesman?”

Cid clapped Ardyn on the shoulder and said, “Looks like you’re going to have to work a day in your life.”

They ended up headed toward a shack where a hunter was supposed to be holed up. The porch creaked when they stepped onto it, and the place smelled like sun and dust were baked into the old wood.

Ardyn peered in through the door and shook his head. “Dave’s not here, man.”

They gave him a set of blank looks.

“Oh, you’re all too young,” he sighed.

Dave wasn’t in the next shack, either, but a whole lot of monsters were.

Prompto had never thought about if it would be possible to fling a Sabertusk up in the air and catch it skewered on a giant sword.

Turns out for Ardyn it was.

“Dude,” he yelled as he vanished his gun after the battle, “that was metal as hell!”

“Show-off,” said Noct.

They came back to the garage sandy, a little bit clawed up, and with a chunk of gil to their name. The Regalia was waiting for them, bright and shiny. So was something else.

Gladio went, “Huh.” Ignis coughed into his glove. Noct, though, just straight out might laugh until he died.

“Woah!” Prompto said. He had to run up and get his hands on this thing. “It’s so cool!”

“That’s your car?” Noctis managed.

“Why yes,” Ardyn went and rested a hand on the striped hood. “I’ve left the dear old thing here for safekeeping for some time. Is there something odd?”

Ardyn looked mildly curious. Prompto felt up the upholstery while Noct kept barely breathing.
“It's...of course you have a...do you have to show proof you've had like three divorces before they even let you buy that?”

“Dude,” Prompto said, “there's a cassette deck!”

“Take a look in the glove compartment,” said Ardyn.

It was one of those old ones that fell open with a satisfying kachunk, and it was full of tapes.

“Iggy, look at these!” Prompto said, leaning over the side door to flick through the cases. Ignis didn't pay any attention, though. He was on his phone, going Mm-hm, mm-hm. “There's a ton of cool old stuff. Mog Dylan, Holy Jam, Clap Your Hands Say Kweh...”

“Or did you just steal it from the parking lot outside somebody's sock hop?”

“Nah,” said Gladio, “that definitely came from a police auction after they busted a drug lord.”

“Hm. I see. Yes.”

“Bachman Turner Limit Break, Vaan Halen...”

“Come now,” Ardyn said, “it's a classic.”

“It's what the bad guy with slicked-back hair in an old movie would use to take somebody to prom!”

“Not a classy drug lord, either. The kind of guy who owns a tiger.”

“I see. I'll tell him.”

“GuardianForce, Vivi Hendrix, Tom Yeti and the Blizzard Orb Breakers...”

There was the sound of brisk footsteps as Ignis came toward Ardyn.

“That was three female private investigators, working on the behalf of a mysterious man who is heard but never seen.” Ignis snapped his phone shut. “They'd like their car back.”

“Score!” Prompto pulled out a tape and waved it around. “The Curaga! We are so listening to this.”

“You seriously want to ride in the midlife-crisis-mobile?” Noct said. He was wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

Prompto hopped over the door into the passenger seat. “I call shotgun!”

The midlife-crisis-mobile was amazing. It was loud and the wind tossed Ardyn's hair around so much that one of the times they stopped for scenic selfies (there was a maximum quota of three per day's journey. Ignis wasn't there to keep count, but he would know) Prompto had to try to run his fingers through and fix it, and that turned into running his fingers through his hair a lot, and that led to making out on the hood of the car.

It was easy to slide around on that. He had to hold onto Ardyn's shoulders tight.

The haven was a big, flat rocky area with some symbols on it that glowed in the dusk, just like the ones closer to home. The wide, open sky was orange with the sunset. Prompto hopped out of the car, ran out ahead, and slung his arm around Ignis.
“Hey guys! What's for dinner?”

“Risotto,” Ignis said, straightening the pan and stirring steadily, “assuming it doesn't end up on the ground.”

“Oh, sorry,” Prompto said, though he knew he didn't sound it. “Hey, Noct! You gotta hear this song!”

Verdict, risotto: also amazing. They ate around the campfire under the stars, talking about this tomb where there was supposed to be a big magic sword. It was the kind of thing that was usually “favorite part in a cartoon,” not “where we're going tomorrow.”

“Is there a whole dungeon?” Prompto said. “Oh, oh, tell me there's a boss monster!”

Ardyn said, “I would never spoil the surprise.”

They talked and made plans until Noct was nodding off over his bowl, then all headed off to sleep.

“One thing,” Gladio said outside the tent, with one significant look towards Prompto and another at Ardyn. “No funny stuff. My roof, my rules.”

“Why, my dear Crocus,” Ardyn said, “I wouldn't dream of it.”

“Total agreement,” Noctis said, “but how's it your roof?”

“Because I'm the only one who knows how to put the tent up.”

“That's true,” Prompto said.

It wasn't like he was going to make out with his boyfriend in the middle of a room full of his buddies. He had some class, jeez. Even if his boyfriend was a guy who gave him secret playful looks that kind of made him want to jump him all the time.

They were good and they totally behaved. Besides, there was a ton of stuff to do tomorrow. The adventure was just getting started.

Chapter End Notes

Rejected band names include:

- The Brian Setzer Gabbiani Orchestra
- Frank Thundaga
- The Jidoors
- Creedence Holywater Revivify, which I kept trying to make work but never quite did
- Pandemonia Apple
- Jefferson LunarWhale
- Rhinotaur Adams, which would have been way better with Rhyhorn but then I remembered that's a Pokemon
- Tom Wights
- Led Falcon
Noctis was in the tomb for a while, feeling the air prickle his skin and the silence lean down on him, before he realized why it felt familiar. It was made from the same kind of stone as the palace.

There was no epitaph. Not even a name. Just a statue that lay with a sword in its hands. A numb feeling laddered slowly up Noct's spine. This marble face was a family member.

“Here lies the Wise,” said Ardyn, and the room was small and closed enough that his soft voice filled the space, “as dead as the foolish.”

Noct was about to ask if he was seriously supposed to grave-rob here. Instead, he found himself putting his hand out, as much a reflex as steadying yourself when you fall.

It only took a second. The sword lifted itself into the air, then, with a shock like ice water, it was his. He tried pulling it out and there it was, appearing from the Armiger like anything else. It felt different in his hand. Heavy. Expectant. He ran his other hand down the length. It was cool to the touch, and the symbols were a texture his fingertips could almost read.

“A curiously familiar model,” Ignis said.

“It's a dead ringer for Ardyn's,” said Gladio.

“It is his,” Noctis said. He remembered.

He'd gotten a good look at Ardyn's sword plenty of times since when he was a kid and had first demanded to see. Ardyn had let him touch it, probably hoping he'd either learn something about his ancestors or cut himself and learn to leave him alone. Noctis had been fascinated, running his hands over the carvings along the flat. They felt the same, though his fingers had been smaller then.

“How's that possible?” Noct said. He had a feeling like he knew. He wanted to hear it out loud.

“What you hold is not mere steel,” said Ardyn, gesturing along the length of the sword, “but memory made manifest. It is forged of the will of kings. A limitless substance. Your father wields an aspect, as do I. As, now, do you.”

“Oh, like instanced loot!” Prompto said, and suddenly Noct knew crystal clear that if Ardyn was a dick to him about breaking into the serious royal family talk, Noctis was going to shove him and his garbage car off a cliff and never look back.

Ardyn smiled and said, “Precisely.”

“So hey,” Gladio said. “Are you gonna try that thing out or what?”

Say one thing about the manifest will of the ancestors or whatever, it hit hard. Noctis knew he didn't have the kind of strength that could send a voretooth flying, but there the monster went, slamming into a tree trunk and making the branches tremble. It was like somebody else had slipped beside his body and was either guiding his hand or wearing it like a glove. The jarring thud carried up his arms when he and Ardyn warped from opposite directions and skewered a monster from both sides.

That was the last. Nothing with four legs was moving. Noctis dropped down onto his knees and jabbed the sword into the ground for something to lean on. Catching his breath was harder than it
should have been. He felt thin and drained, like he should be half transparent. His skeleton felt gummy.

“Noct, that was so badass!” Prompto’s voice went from a whoop to concern in a split second. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Noct said faintly. His stayed looking down at the moss over the hard-packed dirt. “Just need a second.”

The slow footsteps toward him could only be Ardyn.

He said, with something too much like sympathy to be sincere, “The key is moderation.”

Nost made the sword vanish and rested his hands on his knees. “You use yours all the time.”

“The old adage applies.” Ardyn took Noct’s elbow and levered him up. The woods revolved a half-turn around him before staying still. “Do as I say, not as I do.”

“Lousy ground to go over on foot,” Gladio said, clambering up on chocobo-back. Noctis always half expected the thing to just lay down and quit when somebody Gladio’s size climbed on, but it just squawked and ruffled its feathers some. “Hey, Ardyn, you remember to rent a bird?”

“No need,” Ardyn said. “I have my own.”

He whistled. Not through his fingers, like a normal person, but with a little song. There was a sound of claws clambering over the shale.

The chocobo that showed up was a huge, black, shiny thing. It had glaring glittery eyes like the kind of person who had really judgmental opinions about literature. It bent its head toward Ardyn, and he stroked its crest feathers.

“Meet Antesignatus Illustris,” he said.

“Wow,” said Prompto, holding the reins of his and scratching her neck like he always had to do for about ten minutes before getting on, “I just call mine Spot.”

“Yours doesn’t even have spots,” Noct said.

“Yeah, but it makes you look!”

“A remarkable specimen,” said Ignis. He was coming closer. The bird tilted its head and eyed him. “A product of the royal stables, I pres-- excuse me?!”

That was for when the bird darted its head out and snatched the glasses off his face. Ignis grabbed for them and it danced back, wings out.

“She’s a touch inquisitive,” Ardyn said. “And rather possessive.”

“Make her give them back,” Noct said. He was staring hard at Ignis. “Iggy looks weird.”

“Very helpful, Your Highness.” Ignis feinted left and grabbed right. The bird dodged like a boxer.

“I’d advise against antagonizing her,” Ardyn said. “She’ll relinquish them sooner or later.”

“Aw, come on, Auntie,” Prompto said. He walked up to the big bird. She had the glasses dangling
by the arm from her beak. He held his hand out, and she backed up a step. “Let them go, huh?”

His attention was all on the chocobo. You would have had to be watching close, like the bird was, to see the quick gesture Ardyn made.

The glasses dropped into Prompto's hands. Right after that, the chocobo headbutted him in the chest to demand a scratch.

“Why, look at that,” Ardyn said, his voice full of delighted surprise, “she really likes you. That's very rare, you know.”

“Aw, really?” Prompto's face lit up as his fingers sank into the bird's feathers and she chirped. “Guess I'm special!”

“You must be,” Ardyn said, and smiled benignly right past Noct's narrow-eyed look.

The upshot was Ignis got his glasses back. He needed them, too, since they had to do a lot of hunting around looking for that lost chocobo.

“Do you think it's hurt?” Prompto said. He was worrying the reins in his hands.

“Never you fear,” said Ardyn, while his bird stepped over a rock and he was really annoyingly graceful about keeping his balance. “If any harm has come to the poor thing, we shall aid it straightaway.”

Ignis said, “I had no idea you had such a fondness for animals, your grace.”

“That part's honest,” Noctis said. His chocobo kept trying to go off in the direction of any interesting bug it heard, so he was pretty busy keeping it heading straight. “He gets mad at TV shows about it.”

“That apartment did not have anywhere near sufficient space for a monkey.” Ardyn's eyebrows met. “Wait, what do you mean, 'that part'?”

“Guys, guys! I heard a distress kweh!” Prompto's bird shot off, and Noct had his hands full keeping up.

They found the bird huddled against a rock face, a round ragged ball of yellow against the sandy gray. They dismounted to go slow and keep from spooking it. It was making raspy, pained chirps with every breath, and yeah they were going to have to help it fast before Prompto's eyes drowned the countryside. Noct hissed air through his teeth when they got close enough to see the angle its leg was bent to.

“Oh, poor little guy,” Prompto said to a bird that would have been seven feet if it could stand up. He knelt down and stroked the chocobo's head. Its eyes rolled toward him and it kwehed faintly through a barely-open beak. “Noct, we gotta do something.”

“Shit,” Gladio said. “Can a potion fix that?”

“Perhaps I may be of assistance,” Ardyn said.

He pushed past Noctis, who said, “You could've just walked around-”

“Shh, shh.” Noctis was about to tell him where he could shove his shush, but he was talking to the chocobo.

Ardyn crouched by the bird and put his hand on its leg. It made a keening noise and tried to cringe
away, with the claw of its good leg scraping a gouge in the soil.

“It's all right,” Ardyn said in a soothing murmur. “Just trust me a moment, and all will be well.”

Noct shrugged to resettle his shirt on his shoulders. The scar on his back tingled. He wondered if Ardyn had talked to him like that, too, back when he'd been injured as a kid. His memory went from running as hard as he could, to pain, to staring up at the stars in the dark and hearing Ardyn somewhere close say let me see him, to the hurt gone and his face squashed against his dad's chest. The pictures were all one right after another, like the version of a movie with scenes taken out for TV.

In the shade of the rock you could just make out the faint pink glow around Ardyn's hands. The bird went quiet and blinked fast. Prompto kept smoothing the feathers on its crest.

“There,” Ardyn said, satisfied.

The chocobo's leg was straight. Noctis was as surprised as the bird, though he shouldn't have been. It chirped and sat up with a flutter of its wings for balance.

“Now,” Ardyn said gravely, looking the bird in the eye, “take it easy for a while, and call me if there's any further trouble.”

The chocobo stood up. It shook its head, ruffled its wings, and sprinted off toward Wiz's place.

Noct pitched his voice low to the others. “He helped a bird.”

“Prompto's gone,” said Gladio.

Ignis had his eyes on the look on Prompto's face, too. He said, “Gone for good.”

They got into Galdin Quay at sunset when a few lights were lit up, and faint music came on the sea-scented breeze from the restaurant over the water.

“It's so romantic,” Prompto said. He sidled close to Ardyn.

“Nope,” Noct said, shoving between them on his way toward the pier.

Halfway down there was a cat stretched out on the boards, so Noct took a fishing detour and came back with some dinner. It gave the fish a sniff and turned away to watch the waves.

“It appears it isn't hungry,” Ardyn said, while Noctis crouched in deep thought. “On our way, then-”

“Must want something better.” Noct headed for the restaurant to gather intelligence.

Behind him he heard a baffled, “But it clearly isn't in any distress...”

Gladio's voice said, with some sympathy, “Just accept that we're feeding the cat.”

It took a little effort, but a happy cat was pure victory. Noctis watched it eat with the satisfaction of a job well done. It made little murrts.

Once that was done Ardyn insisted on going to the restaurant and drinking, quote, “Something absurdly expensive with a little umbrella in it.” And if he was going to, everybody had to.

They'd barely sat down when Ardyn's eyebrows jumped up like he had an idea, and Noctis was
ready to call in princely authority to put the brakes on something insane.

It turned out it was just, “Wait, we have to take a picture. Noct, cover your face and hand me this. Ignis, sit over here. And you, Snapdragon, put your hand on my knee and look mournful.”

“Not doing that,” Gladio said.

“Well, someone must.”

Prompto got his camera out and skipped back to get the right distance. His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers a few times fast.

“Oh, oh, oh! It's the thing! The thing with the guy!”

“Exactly,” Ardyn said, and shot him a smile. He was posing with his hand pointing in the air. “Also known as The Philosopher's Demise.”

It took a few shots. Prompto had to get it right. People could get so stubborn when it came to the random stuff they wanted to do.
Prompto never knew how much he loved being on the road. Sure, he'd gone on some trips with the guys before, but they'd always had a leash attaching them to Insomnia and things they had to get back to. They couldn't meander down a shady road that smelled like trees out where there weren't people for miles, just because they felt like it.

“So as I was duly informed, 'there is a rule against it now,'” Ardyn finished. His hair was blowing around, raspberry-colored in the dappled sun.

“You seriously-- hold on,” Prompto's phone buzzed. “The guys say they're running behind. Looks like Iggy's going ingredient-hunting. We better wait up.”

Shadows of leaves slid over Ardyn's smile. “Hmm. And it has been so long since we had any time to ourselves.”

Yeah, that made Prompto's heart go a little quicker.

They turned off the main road as the song on the radio turned into *Niflheim forces have been spotted on the outskirts of* and into then the sound of Ardyn snapping it off. Then there was just the the tires crunching over gravel. They stopped in a shady place that was probably as close to privacy as you could get without four walls. The engine went silent, and it was real still. All you could hear was the birds in the branches.

“So.” Prompto shifted in his seat. “Hey.”

Ardyn smiled and rested his arm on the top of the car door. “Hey.”

Prompto hopped over the center console and landed in his lap. He liked how Ardyn's hands came and held onto his waist like it a reflex. Prompto straddled him and grabbed a kiss like he'd been wanting to all day.

“You know how it is,” Prompto said in between kissing his mouth, and the side of his mouth, and the other side of his mouth, “going around with you right there. Without getting my hands on you or anything. Kinda driving me crazy. Kinda wanna jump your bones twenty-four seven.”

Ardyn's mouth twitched up into a smirk. “Man, double then.”

Prompto rubbed his cheek against Ardyn's face. “Man, double then.”

Prompto rocked his hips against him. Being on top of him made you really feel how huge he was. Prompto felt like he was riding him like a raft, or climbing the wall in the gym, except hot.

“Slaying a thousand daemons would be no effort at all,” Ardyn said, with his hands drifting up and down Prompto's back, “compared to suppressing my desire for you.”

He could just say stuff like that. He was fearless. If he could do that, then Prompto could wrap his arms around his neck and kiss him all he wanted. Ardyn surged up to meet him, grabbing him tight and kissing him back with enough passion to knock him into the steering wheel.

The blast of the horn shook the birds out of the tree, and Prompto nearly jumped a foot. He landed back on Ardyn's lap hard enough to make him grunt. They tried to catch their breath and stared at one another close up in the sudden silence. In this light, Ardyn's eyes were dark gold.
“Back seat?” Prompto said.

Ardyn nodded quickly. “Back seat.”

There was a lot more room to work with there.

That was where Prompto rode him, with his bare knees sinking into the sun-warmed leather of the seat and the tail of his shirt brushing his ass when he moved, with the fabric of Ardyn's coat rustling between his thighs because when he'd started undressing him he'd said don't bother, just come and take your pleasure from me and opened up his pants so they just did it like that, with Prompto clawing onto all the fancy lacy stuff on Ardyn's shoulders and pushing himself up and taking him in. He let loose everything that had been curling up tighter and tighter inside him every night when he could hear him breathe but couldn't come close, and watched how his face tipped back and pleasure made him sigh and it was all Prompto doing it, making his prince's throat jump like that, until biting his lip didn't work anymore and Prompto's shout scared the birds away again.

Then, clear-headed and hazed over with pleasure at the same time, with his thighs trembling and sweat making his shirt stick to his back, it was Ardyn he could focus on. He put all his work into using his body to bring him off. Ardyn's head was lolling back and forth on the black pad thing that went across the back of the seat. His eyes were closed, and Prompto's hands had yanked his clothes askew so it was bunched up on the left side of his neck and you could see part of his shoulder on the right.

He whispered things, when he got close. Just gibberish like beautiful boy.

His hands moved down to Prompto's ass and started lifting him and moving him to take over the pace, but Prompto latched his hands around his wrists and shook his head.

“Leave it to me,” Prompto said. “Lemme handle you.”

Ardyn's eyes slitted open and watched him like he was something strange and amazing. He let go of Prompto, laid his arms over the back over the seat, and leaned back.

“As you wish,” he said.

Prompto grabbed his coat by the front and didn't hold back. Ardyn's cock filled him, and his thighs burned.

Ardyn was never somebody you thought of as being quiet, but for all his whispering and murmuring, at the end what he gave was this soft little, “Oh.”

Prompto stayed there with his face against his shoulder, breathing hard. He had to watch out to keep from inhaling part of his coat.

He smelled like lavender today.

Prompto didn't notice when the birds and bugs started making noise again. He was sitting next to Ardyn with his head resting on him, looking up at the rustling leaves that covered half their sky. Getting his pants back on had felt like all he needed to accomplish in the world today.

“You are plagued by multiple princes, you know;” Ardyn said, his voice low and with a burr in it like it got when he was drowsy and content. “How do you ever tell them apart?”

“Easy.” The breeze shifted the leaves so the sun kept slipping through and making Prompto squint. “Noct is the prince, and you're my prince.”
“The cavalry arrives! I hope you didn't start the fun without us.”

Ardyn’s boots squelched across the marsh, and Prompto dodged around the puddles of his footprints.

Noctis was pushing through a stand of reeds with his hands. “We’ve been looking for a whi-- did you stop for smoothies?”

“Prompto wanted to,” Ardyn said innocently around the straw.

His was dark purple from the acai berries. He had a thing about acai berries. He finished it off and made the cup vanish. Noctis did that a lot, too. Prompto wondered how much garbage they both had in their Armigers.

Gladio held up a ribbiting cage. “You're already two frogs behind.”

“Here, froggy froggy!” Prompto called and splashed in. “Ahh! Cold, cold!”

“Watch it,” Gladio said, “you're gonna scare them away.”

Scaring off wasn't what these things did. What they did was taunt you by sitting real still like they weren't planning on moving for a month, then popping just out of reach.

“Your professor gave the impression this was to be a trivial task,” Ardyn said. He grabbed to the left. The frog jumped right.

“Yet I've heard you have an affinity for amphibians,” Ignis said. He was standing on the shore by a frog on a rock, both of them absolutely still.

“I can't imagine what you mean,” said Ardyn. He grabbed right. The frog jumped left.

Noctis had given up on the reeds and was scanning a clump of grass. “He's talking about the time you tossed a swamp monster through a drive-through window.”

“Appalling slander! I did no such thing.”

“Come on, buddy,” Prompto wheedled. One on a rock was looking at him with big, indifferent frog eyes. “Don't you wanna contribute to science? You'll impress all your froggy friends! Hey! Get back here!”

“I merely provided an inebriated fellow with a juvenile Sahagin and let nature take its course. Ah-ha! You can't escape me.”

Ardyn held up a squirming red frog and posed triumphantly. Prompto got off a quick sneaky picture.

Ignis burst into motion and snatched his frog in midhop. Meanwhile, Gladio was plunging into the reeds.

“Don't smash it,” Noctis said. “Sania's not gonna want to study frog goo.”

Gladio held up his soaked shirt like one of those burlap bags cartoon robbers carried out of banks. It croaked.

“Safe and sound,” Gladio said.

“Giving up already?” Ardyn said when he saw Noctis sit down on the grass.
“Nope,” said Noct, just as a frog hopped right into his lap. “Hah! Good boy. Last one's all yours, Prompto!”

“I got him in my sights,” Prompto said. The frog had splashed into the water right in front of him and was just sitting there. Water messed light up, he knew that, so it wasn't really where it looked like it was. It was really...right... “There! Ahh!”

Another important science fact was: mud is slippery.

Prompto hit the water face first. The world went cold and wet.

He came up wooshing for air and holding a frog.

“Victory!” he yelled. “Slimy cold-blooded victory!”

Ardyn tucked his hat under his arm and clapped.

On the way back the sun was setting and the wind was coming up. Prompto's shoes squelched. The breeze turned his wet clothes into a friendly hug from a blue flan.

“Cold, my darling?” Ardyn said. His coat dropped onto Prompto's shoulders with a fwump.

“Hey,” said Noct, “rules are a one my-darling per day limit.”

He didn't sound actually that irritated. He must have been fishing for a while before they got there. He had that I've-been-staring-out-at-a-lake-for-two-hours-and-for-some-reason-I-enjoy-that aura of chill.

“I caught frogs for you,” Ardyn implored. “Surely that earns some latitude.”

“Nope,” said Noctis, “no frog latitude.”

“Or gratitude,” said Ignis.

“Woah, this is warm.” Prompto stuck his arms into the coat's sleeves. It was huge on him, so he had to roll them up. There was no stopping how it dragged on the ground. It smelled like lavender, just like Ardyn. “Super cozy. Hey, there's a flask in here!”

“Somebody else carry the frog cage for a while,” Gladio said. Living stuff didn't go in the Armiger. If you tried, it just ended up vanishing, say, the shoebox, and you'd end up with, say, tiny little lizards running loose everywhere.

Prompto didn't know that for any particular reason.

“But they like you,” Noct said. “You're the one who gets frogged the most.”

“Check out all these pockets! Hairpins, movie stub, extra button, mysterious little bottle with an X on it...ooh, some gum.”

“Any eye of newt?” said Noct, who'd ended up hauling the frog cage.

“Don't be absurd,” said Ardyn, striding by him. “Those require refrigeration.”

“I am totally keeping this gum.”
Prompto woke up to a bunch of sleeping bags. They were all empty except the one topped with purple hair. The sun was coming through the fabric of the tent, and it was already warm. Like Noct, Ardyn would sleep as late as you let him. The clack of pans outside meant Ignis was making breakfast, though, and you didn't want to miss that. Prompto untwisted the Depeche Wait Mode shirt he was in, emerged from his sleeping bag, and crawled over to give Ardyn's shoulder a shake. It was like shifting a rolled-up blette.

“C'mon,” Prompto said. “Rise and shine.”

“Wind the clock,” Ardyn mumbled.

“Sorry buddy, no snooze alarm here.”

Ardyn's arm groped out of the sleeping bag, grabbed Prompto, and yanked him down. Well, at least Ardyn's eyes were open now. They were right in front of Prompto's face, sleepy and gold.

“Good morning, my darling,” he murmured.

“Yyou gonna use your quota up first thing?” Prompto said, squirming a little under his heavy arm.

“Shh, that one is our little secret.” Ardyn sat up and stretched, and the shirt of his black silk striped pajamas rode up to show the purple hair on his stomach. The pocket had his initials stitched on. He gave Prompto a sleepy smile. It should be illegal, how scruffy and cute he was first thing after waking up. “Don't I get a good morning kiss?”

Prompto basically had to crawl into his lap to give him one. While he was there, he might as well stay for a while, feeling how Ardyn's lips were soft even though his beard was prickly, holding onto his forearm to stay steady, and ignoring the sound of the tent unzipping.

“Hey guys, break-- ahh!”

Prompto turned just in time to see his best friend smack a hand over his face.

“Whoops,” Prompto said, a little sheepish.

“No, no, no,” Noctis was saying mournfully. “Why.”

“Sorry.” Prompto climbed off of Ardyn's lap. “Shoulda knocked, Noct.”

He didn't look like he was going to uncover his eyes anytime soon. “I can't knock on a tent!”

Ardyn said, “I highly advise you to find a way.”

“Remind me why we agreed to this?” Noctis said, crouching to look under a shrub.

“For the safety of the citizenry,” said Ignis. “Consider it a good deed.”

“There have to be good deeds where we don't have to hunt around for old monster traps. Why can't anybody ever need any kittens rescued from trees?”

“Less talking, more looking,” Gladio said. He poked in the underbrush with a stick.

“Here, trap trap trap,” Prompto called. The weeds were so high it was going to take ages to find any of these.
“I’ve found one,” Ardyn said.

“You sure?” said Gladio.

“Quite certain,” said Ardyn. He was standing with his back rigid, looking straight ahead. “In an unrelated matter, would any of you young men happen to have a tetanus shot?”

“You sure you’re okay?” Prompto said. He pulled his camp chair over to Ardyn's side of the fire. “Those things had nasty teeth.”

“Nothing a potion could not handle,” Ardyn assured him. “It was merely a scratch.”

“Which he probably got on purpose so you’d get all fussy over him,” Noctis said, eyeing his plate of tofu.

“My dear prince Noctis,” Ardyn said, looking affronted, “do you really suspect me capable of such subterfuge?”

“Yep.” Noctis picked up a forkful, considered it, and reconsidered. “But hey, no hard feelings. You can have my tofu.”

“Gladly,” Ardyn said.

“C’mon, it’s- wait, really?”

“Of course.” Ardyn ate a piece without even hesitating. “It may be pungent, but the flavor is in fact quite mild.”

“At least someone appreciates the delicacies,” said Ignis.

Noct got another sword, and a ninja star thing, and an axe, and a staff.

“What?” said Noctis, when he saw Prompto staring at that last one.

“Nothing,” said Prompto, who’d last seen one like that when Ardyn was posing with it half-naked. Even in a dark tomb, even when you weren’t looking, you could tell when Ardyn was smiling.

Prompto didn't always ride along in his car. The other guys got a turn in the midlife crisis mobile, too. Ignis came back talking about some historical thing Ardyn knew a lot about, and Gladio came back with a borrowed book called *Rendezvous with Ramuh*. Noctis refused to cheat on the Regalia, but he and Ardyn actually got along pretty well.

Friends, boyfriend, collecting swords and killing monsters. What more could you ask for?

Getting confused was the worst. Directions were all flipped around on you and everything went blurry. It was all patches of color, the drone of giant wasp wings, and a quick impression of Ardyn’s alarmed face.

“Get Prompto a curative,” he heard, sounding more urgent than it really needed to be. Prompto tried to say *hey that's sweet of you but I'm okay, this stuff's just annoying*, but it only came out as a groan.
Through the haze he picked up on strain in Ardyn's voice. “Quickly, if you would.”

Prompto focused on keeping a grip on his gun and trying to keep the ground from jumping up and smacking him.

“Prompto!” Glass shattered next to him. His breath whooshed in as the world snapped into focus.

“Thanks Noct!” Prompto said, and put a bullet through the last little buzzy jerk.

“Yes,” Ardyn said, almost inaudibly, as he wiped bug guts off his sword, “that is appreciated.”

“Is there something...hm,” Ignis said, like he'd just realized something.

“What?” said Prompto.

Gladio smacked him on the back. “You make sex noises when you're confused.”

“Ah,” said Ardyn, which was as good as proof. Prompto felt himself go from zero to bright red in about four seconds.

Noct groaned, “I did not need to know that.”

Nobody could be good at everything. Ardyn, it turned out, was really bad at King's Knight.

“Swipe left to block,” Ignis advised. They were all huddled over Ardyn's shoulder except Noct, who was on the caravan's other cot.

“Like this? Hm. Ineffective.”

“You have to match the timing,” Gladio said.

“Come on,” Noct said, smiling lazily, “I'm going easy on you.”

“Tap!” Prompto said, bouncing on his knees on the cot behind Ardyn. “Tap tap tap tap tap!”

“I'm tapping-”

“Swipe right to attack!” said Ignis.

“That's a wall,” said Gladio.

Ardyn said, “It knows what it did.”

“Block block block!”

The phone's little speaker made a sad dying cry.

Noctis stretched and said, “Get good, old man.”

Ardyn said, “Why don't we just play cards?”
“Are you familiar with the concept of the Glacian's Purgatory?”

“Cold sounds nice right about now.” Noct pushed sweaty hair out of his eyes and tromped down the alleyway. The sandy-colored stone Lestallum was made of seemed to breathe heat back at you. “Damn it, no valve down here.”

“We've been that way before,” Gladio said.

Ardyn said, “A reasonable assumption, but as the point is the goddess's absence, it is in fact a place of terrible heat.”

“We've been that way before, as well,” said Ignis. He had the clipboard. Seven out of eight little boxes were checked off. How long could finding one last steam valve take?

“Is that it?” Prompto said, pointing.

“We checked that one already,” said Noct.

“As the tale goes,” said Ardyn, “the deceased who have incurred her wrath are condemned to wander in a maze of confusion, forever seeking the clarity and blessed cool breath of the goddess.”

“I haven't done anything to piss off Shiva lately,” Gladio said.

“That you are aware of,” said Ardyn. “The gods are fickle beings.”

Prompto said, “Well don't call her stuff. You'll get us in more trouble!”

They went around another corner. This was the one that had that sun-bleached flyer on the wall. It felt like they'd been going in circles forever.

“Relax,” Noctis said, “purgatory's just for dead people.”

Ardyn said, “Ah, that is another interesting touch. As the story goes, those consigned there are so addled as to be unaware of their own passing.”

“Are we dead?” Prompto grabbed Ardyn's arm. “Promise you'd tell me if we were dead.”

“Quit freaking out Prompto,” said Noct. He led them down another alleyway that looked exactly like fifty other alleyways. No valve.

“No cause for alarm, my dear,” Ardyn said, slipping Prompto the little secret smile that always gave his heart a jolt like a joy buzzer. “It's only that it's a fascinating superstition.”

“Uh, guys?” Gladio's voice said from up ahead.

“Yeah?” Noct called.

“You know right where we started out? Right near where Holly was standing? By the plant?”

“The place we've walked by a hundred times?”

“Yep.”
“Well...”

Noct groaned. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Okay,” Noctis said, “after that, we are definitely hitting the bars.”

“Agreed,” said Ignis. His hair was wilted from the heat.

“I never want to think about valves again,” said Gladio.

The sky was darkening and the lights strung across the streets were going on. The heat never faded quite as much as you expected it to when the sun went down, but you started to feel a little more like a living mammal than a sweaty rug.

“I'm afraid I'll have to head straight for our lodgings,” said Ardyn. He, in like six layers of heavy clothes, somehow didn't look heat-stroked at all. “I have some correspondence to catch up on.”

“Me too,” Prompto said. He drifted in Ardyn's direction. “I just wanna go pass out.”

“Oh-huh,” Noct said, eyeing him.

“Seriously!”

“I'm going to choose to believe you,” said Noct.

It was true, though. Prompto went straight to bed, and Ardyn had work to do.

Prompto said, “Ah.”

“Shh,” Ardyn said, “I'm trying to concentrate.”

It was just the details he'd left out. Like, that the bed was one he was tied to naked, and Ardyn was at a desk where he could write with one hand and touch him with the other.

The end of Ardyn's fancy pen was dipping around so that whatever he was writing must have been coming out really loopy. He had his coat off, hung over the back of his chair, and the end of his white sleeve trailed over Prompto's chest.

Prompto bit his lip and did his best not to interrupt. He didn't even complain when Ardyn's hand went away and idly stroked one of the elemantic flasks that were lined up on the desk.

He couldn't bite back a yelp when the fingers that touched his stomach were icy.

“M, magic's not fair,” he said, twisting around to feel how the ropes around his wrists held him.

“It's a waste not to put all one's talents to use,” Ardyn said. He stroked his cold fingers down Prompto's ribs, and you never knew just how hot your skin was until you had something for contrast.

He traced paths all over Prompto's body and made him shiver, and he didn't even look up from his letter. His hair half-covered the side of his face. He looked serious and focused, and only his hand gave away the open secret that he was devious. Prompto wanted a picture.

Ardyn's fingers were just starting to warm up when he took his hand away to turn to a new sheet of paper. He wrapped his hand around another flask. Prompto knew exactly how it would feel resting on him instead, and greed rose up in him until he couldn't sit still. The ropes creaked.
“Patience, my dear,” Ardyn said, with his eyes down and the corner of his mouth curved, “ever patience.”

Prompto stared up at the white stucco ceiling. “You know I have like zero of that, right?”

“Any skill worth having must be learned.”

He took his hand off the flask and placed it flat against the center of Prompto's chest, and his skin was so hot it almost hurt. Prompto gasped at the rush of blood to his cock.

“Ah,” said Ardyn, “a blot. This is going to take quite a while if I get distracted.”

Prompto bit the inside of his cheek. Fine, he thought, with stubbornness that made his hands clench, he could be quiet. He didn't even let a whimper past his throat when Ardyn's fingers traveled between his abs, or along the crease between his hip and thigh, back and forth over his body until the heat slowly faded. His fingers were just a little too warm to be natural when they made a circle around the base of Prompto's cock.

Prompto's toes clawed into the sheets and he wanted a medal for how he didn't shout. Not even when Ardyn started stroking him. He gulped for breath as quietly as he could, and Ardyn worked him over with the kind of care that should have taken instruments and concentration or at least looking up from the other thing he was doing. Prompto had never solved the mystery of how his hand could feel so good. The heat of his hand soaked into him, and Prompto's thighs clenched, and he was just getting pushed to the peak when he gasped out, “Wait.”

Ardyn's hand sprang away. The sudden loss of sensation was a rug yanked out from under him, and the thwarted pleasure made his stomach flutter and his hips rise up in the air. It made his blood kick and his breath catch and it was either so good it hurt or vice versa.

He caught Ardyn pulling his lower lip through his teeth.

The next time he looked Ardyn's eyes were back on his work. He was petting another flask. Prompto stayed quiet at the cost of any chance of staying still, felt the ropes pulling on his wrists and the blanket scrunching up under his ass, and wanted him. He wanted to jump in his lap and knock him over in his chair, make him laugh and then grind against him and make him say oh.

Just when Prompto had recovered and gotten himself together a little, Ardyn's fingers brushed over his nipple. The touch was electric. Not the usual metaphor kind. An actual stinging snapping tingle that made a strangled bizarre noise sneak out of Prompt's throat without permission.

Ardyn's hand was quick and light. It traveled all over him and left paths down his sides that felt like they must be glowing. It stroked over his inner thigh and Prompto could feel it like a burst of sparks jumping through the muscle.

“Ardyn's hand was quick and light. It traveled all over him and left paths down his sides that felt like they must be glowing. It stroked over his inner thigh and Prompto could feel it like a burst of sparks jumping through the muscle.”

“Almost finished,” Ardyn said blithely. “It needs only a few personal touches.”

He flicked his fingers along the inside of Prompto's knee and then back up again, and while the tingle hummed and buzzed along his skin Prompto pulled at the ropes and gnawed on his lip. Even though he wasn't looking Ardyn must have been able to tell. His hand went back to Prompto's nipples, the electricity nipping right where he was sensitive, and it took all the stubbornness in his whole body to bite down hard on the word please.

Even from the weird angle with his head on the pillow, he could see the big, loopy way Ardyn finished off Caelum's M.
Prompto, if he did say so himself, put some perfect timing on that whimper.

“All finished,” Ardyn said, and his voice had a layer of casual on top of a serious amount of promise. When he took his hand away the buzz stayed.

Prompto had never watched anything as hard as he watched Ardyn slowly set his pen into its fancy holder.

“Come on,” Prompto said, with his voice unraveling at the edges, so hard he could barely see straight. “My turn.”

It was amazing how fast Ardyn could get all those clothes off. Prompto tried to pay attention to the trick with the vest buckle but he got distracted by Ardyn's hands and missed it. Now staying still was easy, since he was concentrating on seeing Ardyn naked, and on how the bed sank when Ardyn knelt over him.

Getting both of Ardyn's broad palms stroking down his sides was a luxury he could barely handle. The left still had a hint of an electric buzz to it, and the contrast with the other made him suck in as much air as he could get. Ardyn was just as hard as he was. It gave Prompto a proud little thrill to know he was sexy.

“You have been so patient,” Ardyn said, kissing the hollow of his throat, “and so good.”

Prompto used his tied-up wrists for leverage to hop up with the lower half of his body and wrap his legs around Ardyn's waist, so when he started fucking him he was laughing. After getting teased for so long the ache was heaven. There were tangles of heat and cold and electricity all over Prompto's body, and wherever Ardyn's hands traveled it all smoothed into the warmth of his skin. He could do a fair amount of the work just with his legs, like pull himself up to get Ardyn's cock deep, with his ankles locked together on the small of his back where he could feel the texture of his scars.


“Mm,” Ardyn agreed.

Prompto kept trying to catch his face to kiss him, but he was getting knocked back into the headboard and aiming wasn't going to happen real good right now, so his lips kept landing on Ardyn's jaw or his neck or his forehead. Also his hair, which made Prompto go ptah and made Ardyn laugh.

“No holding back now,” Ardyn said, rocking his body into him. “You may be as loud as you like.”

Prompto tried to say something smart but it came out as babbling that went louder and louder while his hands twisted and the ropes scraped his wrists, until his legs trembled and his head fell back, and when pleasure knocked him out of his mind he couldn't tell if it was his own yell that made his head ring.

His body felt heavy and floating at the same time. He watched Ardyn's face, his hair dark at the roots and his eyes closed, and felt him moving. Sometimes he talked during sex, but this time there was just hard breathing and wordless whispers. When he sank in deep and held still, Prompto gripped his shoulderblade tight. He hoped it would leave a bruise. He wanted his fingerprints there like a signature.

The room seemed quiet, afterwards.

The dizziness of pleasure faded away and started letting his head clear up. Ardyn was collapsed on
top of him, pressing him into the mattress. Which was nice, but also kind of hot. In the temperature way. Plus Pompto's arms were getting sore, and Ardyn's hair was tickling his face.

“Hey,” Prompto said, trying to move around under him without much luck, “you, uh, gonna untie me?”

“I'd considered it,” Ardyn said into the pillow by his ear.

Ardyn lifted his hand and summoned up a little knife to cut the ropes off. He disappeared it again, and Prompto pulled his arms down with a sigh. There was some redness there, since he'd gone a little overboard thrashing around. He was about to rub his wrists when Ardyn's hands wrapped around them. The tingle was gentler than any of the elemancy had been. There was just a feeling like cool water, and the ache was gone.

“The stuff you can do is so kickass,” Prompto sighed.

“It flatters me to think so,” Ardyn said. He closed his eyes and his breathing slowed.

“Hey, don't fall asleep on me, doofus.” Prompto pushed at him. “You're all sweaty and hairy.”

“All part of my charm,” said Ardyn. He was heavy, and reminded Prompto of the times when he got on Gladio's nerves until he got a bunch of sleeping bags dropped on top of him. “I claim this territory in the Lucis Caelum name. Shan't relinquish it.”

“All right, fine- hah!”

Prompto poked the place under Ardyn's ribs where he was ticklish and squirmed out from under him when he jumped. He rolled over and sprawled out on top of the nice cool sheets.

“That was a dirty trick,” Ardyn said. He smiled hazily. “I love those.”

“Not as dirty as making me wait so long.” The breeze from the air conditioning swept Prompto up and down. He was getting more comfortable with hanging around naked. Ardyn sure wasn't shy about it. “What were you writing, anyway?”

“Terribly important things,” Ardyn said. He groped at the desk, picked up the papers, and tossed them on Prompto.

There were a couple pages of beautiful calligraphy. It turned into beautiful gibberish halfway down the first.
The back of the Regalia was comfortable enough it was easy to fall into a trance staring out across the ocean, out at where the last orange in the sky was fading and letting out the stars. A sunset was a thing you didn't have to worry about missing the chance to get a picture of. There would always be another one. Noct was driving with one hand on the wheel. Ignis was in the front seat drinking a can of coffee, thinking about either smart guy stuff or where to get more coffee, and Gladio was next to Prompto, reading a book called *Northcave Abbey* that he'd gotten from what must have been a whole library Ardyn carried around in his Armiger. Maybe it was the dreaminess that came from watching the bright line of the horizon went on and on, or something about how the wind pressed against Prompto's face like a cat looking for attention, but it felt like they'd always been on the road together and they always would be.

Prompto was just fine with that.

By the time they parked and met up with Ardyn the sun was down. Prompto always got the urge to run over and kiss him hello, even when it'd only been a couple hours, but he was good and kept his mouth to himself. They had a job to do, for one thing.

The hunting grounds was a stand of scraggly trees that only got spookier when the moon came out. There were shapes gliding between the trunks. Prompto's heart picked up with that combination of excitement and nerves. The contract was for a pair of nasty undead, and it wasn't going to be easy, but they were good at what they did and they did it plenty. Somewhere around taking out a giant demented spiracorn a while back, they'd all earned a right to get cocky.

Ignis pulled his daggers out. “Stay alert and follow the plan. Noct, take point.”

“Aye aye,” Noct said. He was getting good with that big old king sword.

The shapes had sight of them and were moving in their direction, tattered bits of robe fluttering behind.

Prompto got his gun ready and said, “They don't have the ghost of a chance!”

Gladio said, “That was bad and you should feel bad.”

Ardyn took a place at Prompto's side with his sword limber and said, “I don't fear the reaper.”

“That was terrible and you should feel worse.”

“Shan't.”

The monsters howled and it was on.

Prompto's blood pounded. His gun roared. The monsters glided and swung at him, but he was too quick to get caught by anything but the breeze from their scythes. He came up from a roll, and over the sounds of clashing metal he heard Ardyn call his name.

He jumped over to him and they stood back to back, Ardyn huge beside him. Their weapons glowed, vanished, reappeared, and Prompto's hand was around the grip of a crossbow so big he had
to steady it with both hands. His gun was nestled up to Ardyn's palm. His arm was braced against Ardyn's, and they drew a bead on the monster heading right toward them.

“Ready...” Ardyn said. The light flashed off the daemon's scythe. Its robes rippled. “Fire!”

The crossbow's trigger took a heavy squeeze. The *twang* went right into his bones, but all he heard was the roar of his gun and all he could feel was how the recoil made all the muscles in Ardyn's body tense.

The monster shrieked and the weapon fell out of its skeletal hands. Before it could hit the ground it was dissolving, just like the other one the guys were finishing off. Beside Prompto, pressed against him in battle stance, Ardyn was breathing quick. The flashlight on his coat made Prompto's gun glisten. Prompto barely felt the crossbow vanish out of his hand. Ardyn's eyes met his, pupils wide, and he pressed a kiss to the side of the barrel.

Prompto grabbed him by the shirtfront and hauled him behind the bushes. He didn't even care that Ardyn must have been humoring him by letting him shove him onto the ground, because he was busy climbing up on him and kissing him. The adrenaline flooding his system barely had to change direction. Ardyn's hands tangled in Prompto's hair and the gloves caught there and tugged.

“You are glorious in battle,” Ardyn breathed between hungry kisses. “Your body is motion's masterwork.”

Prompto's knees were at Ardyn's sides, pinning his coat to the ground, or he would be pinned if he weren't strong enough to lift Prompto one-handed. He nipped Ardyn all over his neck and fumbled blind with his vest buckle-

“Hey, where'd you guys go?”

That was a voice. That was definitely Noct's voice.

Prompto stopped dead with his hands on Ardyn's chest, met his wide gold eyes, and said, “Ah, crap.”

They sprang up, hands off each other like they definitely had been the whole time. The guys were a few feet away on the other side of the bush.

“Sorry,” Prompto said quickly, with his heart going fast and his skin all warm from the fight and Ardyn's hands. “We were looking for a thing.”

Ardyn said, “A bolt fell.”

Prompto said, “Out of the Armiger.”

Ardyn said, “That can happen.”

“No it can't,” said Noctis.

“Let's get going.” Gladio crossed his arms, making the light on his shirt bob and throw shadows over the lines of ink on his biceps. “We've got a bounty to turn in, if you guys're done looking for things.”

“Why my good Oleander,” Ardyn said as they headed across the dark field, “I take exception to your tone. On the matter of innocence, we are perfect paragons.”

“There are leaves in your hair, your grace,” said Ignis, wet grass swishing around his ankles with his
Ardyn touched the back of his head. “So there are.”

Noct said, “You're the worst.”

Ardyn strode by him with spread hands and moonlight glinting in his hair. “Haters will hate.”

“Stop teaching him these things,” Noct groaned.

Prompto trotted past to catch up and called, “Shan't!”

“C, can't believe...we did that,” Noct wheezed, flat on the ground.

“We got the shot,” Prompto said. He collapsed right next to Noct and held up his camera. The wet grass soaked his back.

“I can't believe you woke me up at five thirty in the morning to get me almost eaten by a lake monster.”

Prompto passed the camera over to him. “It was so worth it. Look at you, just posing all, 'oh hey, is there is a giant monster over my shoulder? I didn't notice.’” He took a deep breath and sighed it out as his heart slowed down from monster-racing speed. “So cool.”

“It's a great shot,” Noct said.

The sky over them was that cool, pure blue you only got right after the sun was up, like it was fresh and full of ideas. They should probably head back to camp pretty soon. Gladio would be doing pushups or breaking down the tent. Ignis would be going through checklists of stuff they had to do today, and Ardyn would be conjuring together some coffee.

Noct sat up and said, “So hey.”

Prompto said, “Yeah?”

“I get it.”

“Get what?” Prompto couldn't wait to show the picture to everybody.

Noct had one arm draped over his knee. He always looked the most prince-ish when he wasn't trying to. “You and Ardyn. I mean, I don't get it. But seeing you guys... I don't know. It works for you.”

“I knew you'd come around,” said Prompto, feeling an excitement and relief that told him actually he hadn't. “He's funny and smart, and he can do all kinds of amazing stuff, like warp, and heal people, and drive stick.”

“Sure, and you're really happy around him.” Noct grinned. “It's totally cute.”

Prompto reached out and smacked his leg. “Shut up.”

“I mean, he's still a weirdo,” Noct said, with his head turned to the side so Prompto got one half of his smile, “but he's crazy for you.”

That idea made Prompto a funny kind of warm and dizzy. Maybe part of that was the head rush from almost getting eaten by a monster.
“C’mon,” Prompto said. “No way.”

“I’m serious. I’ve never seen him this happy unless it’s when he’s messing with somebody. You’re good for each other. It’s, I don’t know. Sweet.”

“Oh.” Prompto had to process that for a while. He knew the whole thing wasn’t normal, for age reasons and for all kinds of reasons. Noct being okay with it... “That means a lot.” He rose up on his elbow, and his expression turned serious. “But there’s something important you should know.”

Noct focused on him. He was still slightly red from running. “Yeah?”

Prompto took a deep breath, looked Noctis in the eye, and said, “He has a great butt.”

“Gaah!” Noct fell back, groaning and laughing. “I did not need to know that.”

Prompto cackled all the way back to camp.

It couldn't be forever. Every tomb Noct opened was a good thing, right, because it made him kinglier, and the giant shield was kickass, but it also meant one step closer to being done with the whole adventure. Then, before Prompto knew it, there was only one left.

The day before they set out for Niflheim, Prompto sat by Ardyn on the hood of his car and watched the sun set. They were off by themselves; it was seven o’clock on a Sunday, and that meant no matter where they were and what they were doing, hell or high water, Noct called his dad. Maybe that was making Prompto think of home, and maybe knowing they were going out of Lucis was what made him melancholy.

“I bet when some kid first showed up in your library, you never thought we’d end up sneaking into the Empire together,” said Prompto, extra chatty and cheerful like always when he was down.

“I confess my foresight failed me in that respect,” said Ardyn. “But that was not the first time we had met.”

“I mean, it’s the first time you’d remember.” Prompto leaned back with his hands behind him. The hood of the car was warm under his palms.

“Oh, I remembered you well.” Ardyn leaned back to match him. His hair was dark in this light, a wine color, drifting in the breeze in all kinds of directions like floating kelp. “My nephew’s bright shadow, so eager for the light. I found you fascinating.”

“Me?” Prompto rolled his head away for a second. “C’mon.”

“You are one of the most committed actors I have ever seen.”

You mean I’m a liar? Prompto didn’t like the sound of that, and it made a sudden scrap of anger flick through his head like a metal shaving. He was probably taking it the wrong way.

“No way,” he tossed off. “I can't remember lines to save myself.”
Ardyn didn't look fooled at all. “It's all in the attitude. Not deception, but choice of what to display, always aware of your audience. The art of subtle exaggeration. Constructing a a line of focus to draw the eye away from the inharmonious. You, as they say, play things up.”

Prompto didn't like getting talked about like that. Like he was seen right through. He looked down at his fingers and tapped them over the white stripe on the hood of the car.

“And that's what you like about me,” Prompto said. It started in his brain as a joke but didn't make it out of his mouth that way.

Ardyn looked over as if remembering he was there. He smiled apologetically. “Ah, my dear, only a little thinking aloud. I mean no insult. Make no mistake; there are so many things I like about you.”

Prompto stretched out on his back. The metal warmed up his back through his vest. He let his eyes go sideways to Ardyn and said, “I could stand to hear a couple.”

“Hm, where shall I begin?” Ardyn turned toward him and leaned on one hand, so that his body made a triangle with the orange sky behind him. Probably that perfect ratio again. “Your courage? Your loyalty steadfast as the stars? Your smile radiant as the sun?”

Laughing, Prompto put his hands in front of his face. “Okay, okay, pull it back a little.”

“But how can I help myself?” He toyed with the edge of Prompto’s vest between his finger and thumb. “As a devilish poet once said, I can think of nothing beautiful which you do not resemble.”

Prompto, halfway along to forgetting all about actors and endings, sat up and said, “Wait, let me try!”

He pushed Ardyn over so he could climb on top of him. He planted his hands on his chest, looked down at how his wild purple hair spread out over the hood, and gave it some hard thought.

“Your eyes are yellow,” he decided, “like gold. Wait, no! Gold. Like...jewelry.”

“Is that so?” They really were a deep gold in the sunset, stealing the light like a cat's. “Keep going.”

Prompto looked down and thought harder. He snapped his fingers when he got it. “You've got a face like a friendly cactus.”

Ardyn laughed beneath him, so Prompto had to hold on tight to his coat. “What?”

Prompto rubbed his face against his cheek so the whiskers scratched. “You know. Prickly.”

“Mm,” Ardyn said, laying his head back. There was stubble all over his neck, too, looking black in this light. It was always the same length somehow. Never shaggy and never shaved clean. Prompto had tried looking close at pictures he'd taken over a span of weeks, but he never caught it looking different. Ardyn was always the same Ardyn.

“Also, you're smart. Wait, no, it has to be ‘as’ something.” Prompto smacked his hands down onto Ardyn’s chest triumphantly. “You're as smart as a raccoon!”

“A raccoon?” Ardyn echoed, laughing.

“Yeah, they're smart as hell! They can figure out how to open doors!”

“I am capable of that feat.” Ardyn threaded his fingers through Prompto's hair and pulled him down into a kiss.
Prompto stayed around there with his face resting on Ardyn's chest, pinning down his scarf. He wriggled a little to keep Ardyn's vest buckle from poking him. That thing didn't intimidate him anymore; after all this practice, he could handle it in record time.

“I bet you can do tons of things,” Prompto said. “Stuff I don't even know about.”

“I have a vast array of talents,” said Ardyn. Talking made his chest buzz against Prompto's ear.

A guy like him would have all kinds of things he could perform.

Prompto listened to the chirping of the crickets clip at the silence, looked at his and Ardyn's mingled shadow long and dark against the fuchsia of the car hood, and let Ardyn's breathing lift him up and down. He smelled like something herbish, today.

Prompto said, “There's so much I don't know about you.”

“Is that so? I thought my peccadilloes were well advertised.”

“Well, yeah, that's the thing.” Prompto looped his fingers through the lacy stuff on Ardyn's sleeve. “People're like, oh, him, that's the guy who skipped out on a budget meeting and they found him running a three-card monte table in a subway station, that tells you everything you need to know! So you don't realize that actually, it doesn't. There's way more to somebody than just the funny parts.”

“I'm here at your service. What would you like to know?”

“Like...just...aw, man, now I can't think of anything.” Prompto's brain wasn't good at being put on the spot. “I don't know. Hopes, dreams, that kind of thing?”

“Ah, then that is simple.” Ardyn's finger's stroked Prompto's shoulder, just beneath his vest. “The only dream worth telling is the one in which I am here with you always, on the cusp of the night.”

That struck Prompto quiet. He just laid there under the purpling sky and thought about being there forever. It wasn't until a long time later that it occurred to him Ardyn hadn't said anything he didn't already know.

He got some really good pictures of them there. Ardyn's car was getting to be one of his favorite backgrounds. It made Ardyn's coat look deep black and dramatic, and he had a real talent for draping himself over the hood like a supermodel.

Prompto left those out of the ones he showed Noct and Gladio at camp that night, even though they were his second favorite of the day, after the group shot of them all that hit those rule-of-threes points just right. Iggy was cooking, and since Ardyn was the only one who knew what a mirepoix was, he was helping out by chopping stuff.

“It's hard to believe it's almost over,” Noct said, leaning over the back of Prompto's camp chair and looking at that action show of him tossing a lightning flask at a bunch of voriteeths. Prompto really liked the line of action in it, but the glow from the flask made the shadows on Noct's face all weird. Could've timed it better. He flicked to a different photo. Thinking about elemancy flasks too much got Prompto kind of hot under the collar now.

“Don't jinx it,” said Gladio. “This isn't going to be easy. No counting your chickens until we've snuck into Niflheim. I don't know how you guys did it the last time.”

“The war was in one of its lull phases, then,” Ardyn said, waving the knife towards them. “Your father, Gladiolus, has an absolute gift for evading patrols, matched only by Weskham's talent for
lying at checkpoints. He claimed we were a returning ecological survey.”

“People believed that?” Prompto said.

“Regis can look very scientific.” Ardyn swept some celery into a bowl and went on humming to himself.

“That's not gonna work twice,” said Gladio.

“We'll just have to not get caught,” said Noct, confident the way somebody with half a dozen ghost king swords in his invisible arsenal could be. “Dude, if you're gonna sing the same thing over and over, at least get the words right.”

“Hm?” said Ardyn.

“He's right,” Ignis said. He was next to Ardyn, stirring something Prompto could hear sizzling from here. “You're missing a note.”

“Isn't that how it goes? Veni veni venias...”

“Yeah,” said Noct, “but there's supposed to be another bit in there.”

“A ne,” said Ignis.

“Ah. So there is.” Ardyn set the knife down and walked over. The firelight made his shadow sway from side to side behind him like a dance partner. It made his smile warm, too, when he met Prompto's eyes. “But what need have I for an old song, when I have an angel in the flesh?”

“Not real princely,” was Gladio's opinion on Noct's gagging noises.

When it came to getting into Niflheim, Prompto could have handled a chase, or a fight, or sneaking in by night and dodging searchlights. Waiting in line might kill him.

He checked the passport again. It was a dull red with the Niflheim crest embossed on the front, and with the word PASSPORT written in a font you wouldn't mess with. The picture was really him and all the details looked official, though he didn't have anything to compare it to besides the other guys’, and there wasn't much point since theirs were fake too. His birthday was wrong, but it was supposed to be.

The line moved a couple feet and stopped. Yesterday they'd gone to a town where Ardyn had a friend. He hadn't let anyone go with him. He'd just gone out with some gil and come back with the passports. In the meantime Prompto had been too antsy to play games or anything, so they'd just hung out and Ignis had told him some stuff, like how there was a tradition where Archivist also meant Spymaster.

Prompto'd spent that night in the hotel curled up close to Ardyn. He'd thought Noct would act grossed out to be funny, but he didn't seem like he noticed.

Enemy territory. It sounded weird, like the ground and the rocks were the ones who didn't like you. Territory of the enemy.

The checkpoint was by the road in basically in the middle of nowhere. They'd had to leave the Regalia and Ardyn's car behind for a while. There was no hiding those things. Most people were on foot anyway, besides a couple in trucks. There was an ugly concrete building a little ways away that
must have been for offices, or full of soldiers. There were a lot of soldiers. They walked back and forth with flat looks on their faces and rifles in their hands. Under the caps they looked young. They didn't look like the kind of people who would whip somebody until it left scars all down his back.

Prompto was glad his own weapon was tucked safe away. Noct's powers were a hell of a way of getting stuff past a metal detector. Hopefully they didn't have any Armiger detectors, if that was a thing. Everybody else was shorter and in earth-tone clothes. The five of them had way too much black. At least Gladio's tattoos were covered up. He was wearing a whole shirt, and that was weird enough all on its own. The guy up ahead at the booth was taking way too long. Something must have been wrong, and he was somebody who looked like he belonged here. Not even somebody who stuck out. Were people staring? If they were staring at anybody, it would be Noct. Prompto kept trying to look without looking like he was looking. The second he heard somebody yell Hey! It's the Lucian prince! he would yank his gun out. They could run for it. Past the guards and the tower with a guy with a machine gun. Through the open. They could make it. Prompto shifted from foot to foot and dropped his papers.

Ardyn bent down to get them. As he put them back in Prompto's hands he murmured, “Trust me. I'm an excellent liar.”

That actually kind of helped.

Forever later, they were at the window. The guy sitting in the booth was bored-looking and middle-aged, with deep lines by his mouth and a Niflheim crest pin on his uniform jacket.

He barely looked up when Ardyn pushed all their papers through the slot. He kept his eyes down and said, “Name.”

He could probably hear Prompto's heart pounding. Everybody must have. There could have been Anaks five miles away pricking their ears up at the thud, thud, thud.

“Safay Roth,” Ardyn said smoothly. He gestured an open hand at Prompto. “My secretary, Celer Hydrgaryrm. My assistant, Advoco Aduro, his husband Rhode-” -that was Ignis and Gladio- “-and my son, Philip.”

“Uh huh,” the guard said. He paged through one of the passports. He had thick, flat fingers.

“Purpose.”

“An archaeological expedition. We seek remnants of the Solheim civilization, particularly pottery that may shine light on the fascinating traditions regarding-”

“Carrying any explosives or firearms?” The guard was glancing the second page of each passport where the photo was, and giving each of them a look.

“Certainly not.”

“Carrying any plants, seeds, animal products, soil, snails, or currency over fifteen thousand marks or foreign equivalent?”

“Why, no.”

The guard looked up from the papers. He looked at Ardyn for a long, long time.

The guard shoved their papers back, looked down the line, and called, “Next!”

They walked down the concrete path. They went through a gate in the barbed wire fence with a
guard to either side and another in the tower looking down. Prompto stared straight at Gladio's back, and was sure the next step would be when the alarm would blare. It wasn't until the checkpoint was past the horizon behind them that he was quite convinced they'd made it out alive.

“I can't believe that worked,” Noct said, for the hundredth time. Prompto laughed again, half giddy and totally alive. Their chocobos darted along offroad, loping over the scrub. Nobody bothered trying to keep birds from going back and forth over the border. They just came running wherever you called them from. Didn't even have to show ID. Birds were the best. Holy shit, they were alive.

“I told you to trust me,” said Ardyn. He knew the way, so he and Auntie were in the lead. The big black chocobo looked swift and intimidating when she was loping out ground-eating strides over the land, but she was a big softie at heart. At camp she'd cuddle up to Prompto and let him pet her feathers, and then she'd hang around Ardyn and stick her beak in his hand.

Noct said, “What kind of name even is 'Safay’?”

“A perfectly reasonable one,” Ardyn answered. He faced down the wind and somehow kept his hat at exactly the same angle. “Like Altmesh, or Schmolbez."

“I could've come up with a way better one.”

“Please, do tell,” Ardyn said.

“Um...” Noct leaned over his chocobo's neck and his eyebrows knit together. “Gar.”

Ardyn looked over at him steadily. “Gar what?”


“Woo!” Prompto called, speeding up Spot so he could really feel the wind in his face. “We're archaeologists!”

“It isn't far from the truth,” Ardyn said. “We are investigating an ancient burial chamber. This one happened to be placed where precious metals salted the earth. Naturally, as time went on, it was put to use as a mine.”

“Advoco would be glad for the chance to see what remains,” said Ignis. “He's always admired the martial elegance of old Lucian architecture.”

“Should've figured your guy would have a backstory,” said Gladio.

“Doesn't yours, darling?”

“Nah. I'm just glad I got a name that wasn't...” Gladio trailed off. He grimaced and said, “Ah, damn it.”

“What?”

Gladio rubbed his face. “Rhododendron.”
Noctis said, “So we're going to have to get past a whole mining operation?”

“Oh, it was picked clean decades ago,” said Ardyn. “Now there's nothing but wildlife and rusted monuments to human greed. Though the former can be quite aggressive; on my last visit, Regis was nearly eaten by an angry plant.”

“Seriously?” Noct said. “Dad never said anything about that.”

“Clarus had to pull him from its jaws by the feet,” Ardyn said. He was sitting up high on Auntie's back and scanning the horizon. “By all means, ask him about the incident sometime.”

“Oh on a scale of one to ten,” Ignis said over the rhythm of his chocobo's stride, “how certain are you that this is a shortcut?”

Ardyn said, “More than editions of Cosmogony and less than the standard number of toes.”

“It's gotta be close,” Prompto said. He coaxed Spot faster up the incline. “I can feel it.”

They all pulled their birds up short at the top of the ridge.

It was a great view. There was a whole panorama of wide, spreading plains and low bushes, with mountains off in the distance and in the middle, the giant concrete blocks of an Imperial base.

Prompto said, “Woah.”

“That,” Ardyn said, gazing out with the wind whipping his hair back, “is new.”

Chapter End Notes

Customs really does ask you if you have snails.

The poet Ardyn talks about is (the Eos equivalent of) Ambrose Bierce, though that quote is actually from one of his short stories.
“What's the plan?” said Gladio.

They were a tight circle around the fire. The heat laid on Prompto's face, and the wide dark of the night leaned on his shoulders.

“Our options are two,” said Ignis. A piece of wood cracked and made the flames shift, and his glasses went opaque. “We avoid the base and continue on our mission to retrieve the last of Noct's weapons. As soon as we can communicate with the city without fear of the transmission being intercepted, we contact the Crownguard and let them deal with it as they see fit.”

“Or?” said Noct.

“Or we go in and investigate ourselves.”

Prompto's feet tapped on the ground. The nerves were still in him from earlier. “Okay, yeah, that's a thing we could do. Wouldn't it be, uh, dangerous? Like, just a little on the crazy side?”

“It is under especially heavy guard,” said Ardyn, “and appears unlike the standard base construction.”

“Meaning it might be something special,” said Gladio.

“Correct. Meaning that.”

“Noct?” said Ignis.

Noctis had his hands knitted in front of his face and was staring into the fire. He looked a little like his dad, like that.

He said, “We can't just walk away.”

At night the Niflheim wind had a sound to it like someone blowing over the lip of a bottle. The base was a big, bright island of daytime. The floodlights craned over like the ones at a stadium. Even from a distance you could tell there was just one team on the field, and way too many of them.

Noct took the lead. Prompto kept his eyes on the darker blob that was his hair as they crept through the scrub, the walls getting taller every foot they went closer. They took another few steps – or whatever you called it when you were crouched down almost low enough to be crawling – and the air tasted funny. It wasn't diesel fumes or anything like that, but it felt greasy. Like plastic melted on your skin, not burning, just sticking. It was his imagination.

Gladio rubbed his arm and said, real low, “The hell is that?”

Oh. Maybe not.

“I don't know,” Ignis said, “but I don't like the smell of it.”

“A processed elemantic smell,” Ardyn said, sniffing the air. “As of malign machinery.”

“Just another reason we can't let this go,” Noct said. Crouching there in the dark field he had an intense, focused look on his face, like one of those guys in a painting about to slay a beast. This
wasn't the time to take a picture. Prompto would remember it, anyway. “Come on.”

The front was right out. There was a guy to either side of the gate and it was all lit up like a stage. Instead they crept around, with nothing but the crickets to cover the sound of the crackling brush, until they found a little gate in the wall with nobody nearby.

“Must not be expecting visitors,” Noct said.

“Sloppy,” Ignis said, but he didn't sound happy about it.

Ardyn was already moving. He cracked the door open, slipped his head in, and gestured for them to follow. They each maneuvered inside. Prompto twisted his body, and the door scraped along his chest.

It turned out they didn't need to be that stealthy. The area the door went to was dark. Nobody was going to spot them, and they weren't going to have to fight anything except maybe a real aggressive shipping crate.

“Woah,” Prompto said quietly.

Shipping crates, yeah, there were a lot of those. Not organized, either, but at all different angles all over this walled-off quadrant of the base. It was all full of shadows, and those were full of crates and scrap metal.

“Whatever those were carrying,” Ignis said, “they've received a great deal of it.”

From a ways off to the left, Gladio said, “Hey.”

He was standing by a crate that towered over him, and towering over Gladio took some doing. The moonlight fell on it in weird patterns, like there were pieces missing. It took a minute to realize what it was.

“What,” Prompto said, craning his neck up and up, “was in a cage like that?”

Gladio said, “What the hell are they building here?”

Next to it, there was something broad and flat on the ground, something that caught the moonlight. It was a metal sign. It must have been thrown out because it'd gotten half melted on one side. Prompto turned his back to the active parts of the base and risked turning on the light on his jacket.

**DANGER**

Do Not Approach Specimen except On Direct Orders
Do Not Approach Specimen without Goggles and Thermal Protective Gear
Do Not Enter Specimen Chamber without a Partner in Control Room
If your equipment becomes damaged, enter Emergency Shower immediately and contact Containment Division
Do Not Tap On Glass

**DOUBLE OBSIDIAN CLASS CLEARANCE ONLY**

“Moreover,” Ardyn said quietly, “what are they raising?”

Noct said, “That's what we're going to find out.”
Prompto flicked the light off. They kept moving toward the main base, past shipping containers spilling out more cages. These ones were microwave-sized, some with bars, some mesh, lying there in piles and reflecting dull moonlight. Prompto thought he smelled something musty and animal-ish. The sticky feeling on his skin wasn't going away.

The passage to the main base was a gap in the walls where light spilled through. Guards walked by now and then, steady as a heartbeat but a whole lot slower than Prompto's right now. The five of them snuck out one by one, slipping between patrols. Prompto's body went low and silent all on its own, like Cor's training was reaching in and taking him over. The open ground felt like being in the spotlight on a stage until they were all in cover again. *There's no shame in fear, but no time for it, either.* Cor had said. *Put it away for later. You have work to do.*

It was just like a hunt, except there were people hunting them back.

They kept behind trucks and tanks that made good cover. The building with the most activity around it was a big round windowless one. All Prompto could imagine the inside looking like was that hollow amphitheater with the guy tied to a chair in the middle in that movie Ardyn had taken him to on a date. From where they were hidden, if Prompto peeked carefully around the side of the truck, he could see a soldier driving a forklift onto a huge freight elevator there, loading it with things that looked kind of like consoles with vertical fish tanks on top. Not quite big enough for a person, but close.

Ardyn said under his breath, “We stand on the tip of the iceberg.”

When the elevator was full, another soldier yanked a grating across the front. He hit a button, and it all slid down.

Noct said, “There's gotta be another way down inside.”

“There are too many of us to stay together,” Ignis said, in the quick low voice he used when a strategy had to be got across fast. “We need to split up. One group by the wall, the other between those containers.”

Straight ahead, between them and the building, was an open concrete plain where spotlights drifted back and forth. They'd have to skirt around the edges. It would be fine, as long as they weren't spotted by the soldier by the elevator, or the one walking along by the containers, or the one up on a catwalk between towers, all holding Rapidus SMGs like old buddies. It would be fine.

“You three,” Ardyn said, “you take the left. Noct, you're with me.”

The two of them darted out from behind the truck, Noct first with Ardyn behind, and disappeared behind a pallet full of barrels. Prompto followed his team, eyes on Gladio's back, keeping watch for motion in his peripheral vision. The rough part was the twenty feet of open ground between them and the containers. Couldn't even run flat out, since that would be too loud. Every second, Prompto was sure he was going to hear an alarm blaring and feel a bullet between his shoulderblades, right up until they were in cover and safe. The shipping crates were taller even than Gladio. It was like a little labyrinth they had shelter in. It'd protect them almost all the way to the door. Noct and Ardyn would be doing all right on the other side. They were both slippery when they needed to be.

They were halfway there when there was a ding. Gladio reached back and planted his hand on Prompto's chest, and he stopped in his tracks.

They each took a crate to peer around. The folded metal pressed itself hard against Prompto's cheek. He only let his left eye around the corner.
There was a man walking off of the freight elevator. Everything about him said Important, from the way he swung his steps out to the fancy armor he wore. It was an old guy, and Prompto could see the sweep of his white eyebrows all the way from there. He had white hair and a beard, too, like somebody's grandpa but dressed up to lead an army, and getting a fast salute from the soldier by the door.

“Chief Researcher Besithia,” the soldier said, voice carrying out over the open concrete, “B Group reports all tests have been successful.”

“ Took them long enough,” the old guy said.

He kept talking, a lot of stuff with numbers and codes, and the soldiers all had their eyes on him. Ignis made a come-on gesture, and the three of them crept along between the shipping containers. There was an intersection between crates, and the important guy had stopped walking for a minute to chew out the soldier about not filling out all the lists of something, so Prompto checked around the corner to make sure nobody was walking there and darted to the right.

There hadn't been anybody walking. The soldier Prompto's boot knocked into was sitting on the ground.

He was napping in the container's shadow. For the last split second when everything was okay, Prompto thought he would stay asleep. Then his lip twitched and everything went slow. The soldier made a sleep-logged grunting noise, and his eyes flickered open. You could see some dark hair sticking out from under his helmet, strands on his forehead. The instant stuck like oil on a windowpane. Prompto watched the movement of the soldier's eyelids as his face moved from recognition to surprise. He had gloves on and stocky shoulders, and green eyes, and Prompto was going to have to kill a man. He didn't tell his body what to do. Cor did, reaching out from back in the past, from the drills done at the range over and over. Prompto called his gun.

His hand closed in an empty fist.

The soldier shouted like a gunshot, “Intruders!”

Prompto's mind prayed to no one, Do something.

Spotlights swung over and he went blind. He stumbled back and his shoulder struck what had to be Gladio. His eyes were aching, and in the white blur all he could see was soldiers in every direction, blank masks and gloved hands and gun barrels, a solid mass of them that pushed into their labyrinth and filled every way out. Gladio and Ignis had nothing in their hands, no matter how many times they reached.

In the end, there wasn’t anything they could do.

They were prodded out by gun barrels. Prompto looked at Ignis and Gladio's faces, and the fear you'd only be able to find if you knew them, and took the only chance he had to say, “I'm sor-”

“Quiet,” a soldier said, and smacked Prompto in the gut with the butt of his rifle.

He doubled over around the ache and heard Gladio call out, “Get your hands off him!” then an impact and a grunt, and a hiss from Ignis.

Soldiers grabbed him from either side, and before Prompto could do anything his hands were cuffed behind his back. They hey all got hauled out into the open and shoved down. The concrete smacked hard into Prompto's knees. The floodlights made him squint and his eyes water. He blinked, and seeing the guy in charge more clearly was sure no improvement.
Up close his face was full of deep lines, like clay somebody had gouged up with their nails. He paced in heavy steps in front of them. The soldiers backed off, and the four of them were at the center of a ring of ready guns.

Prompto had never really thought much about dying. Ever since he'd been a part of Noct's Crownsguard for real, he'd figured he'd go out fighting. If it happened it'd be over before he knew it. His stomach hurt. He wasn't dead yet. His gun wasn't there and everything was wrong. Ignis and Gladio were at his sides. They were going to die because of him.

The commander stopped in front of Prompto and sneered down. He had spots on his forehead, and his eyebrows had weird wingy points in the middle.

“Three Lucian spies,” he said. “I should have known you'd come crawling into my base to disrupt my work. But you are too little and too late.”

Three.

Prompto looked at him and thought, *I know something you don't know.*

It was the perfect place for the heroes to come in.

The guy in command turned his head and barked at a soldier, “How did you allow intruders to get in here?”

The soldier opened his mouth, but it was a voice a lot more familiar that came breaking in.

“Now, now, you mustn't be so hard on your men. After all, it's worked out for the best.”

Hope rang through Prompto like a blow to the head, and his eyes flew between a gap in the soldiers toward Ardyn's voice.

There was a kind of photography where you tilted the lens around to mess with the perspective until buildings and people looked like toys and dolls. It was a cool thing to do with how you could play around with focus, but Prompto didn't use it much. He was interested in capturing a second as real as it could be, not making things seem surreal and like they were being acted out by tiny models of the people you knew, like the sight of Ardyn coming out into the open with a knife at Noct's throat.

Some of the guns pointed toward them. The guy in charge raised his hand up to those soldiers in a wait-a-minute motion. He said, “You.”

The far-away fake thing that looked like Ardyn with his grip around Noct said, “With the prince, as promised.”

Noct snarled and grabbed at the arm that held the knife. “What the hell do you think you're-”

“Ah-ah.” Ardyn pressed the knife closer. Noct hissed and froze. “You mustn't be rude in front of our host. There are so many things you should have learned; manners for one. Never to be without a spare weapon in case of unforeseen technology cutting off your powers, for another.”

“No,” Prompto said, so soft he could barely hear it. The lights were hurting his eyes and he couldn't blink. He could feel Iggy and Gladio's shock like an iron bar running through all three of them. “He isn't. He can't.”

He kept saying that while soldiers cuffed Noct and shoved him down on his knees, too.
“You son of a bitch,” Noct snarled. “You’re switching to the other side of the war?”

“They have a way to break the Wall,” Ardyn said, looking down at him with pity on his face. He patted him on the shoulder, and Noct bared his teeth. “The war is over. The only question is how many corpses it will take before His Majesty notices.”

“You guaranteed his surrender,” the guy in charge of the enemy said.

“Of course,” Ardyn said, and threw the knife.

It was a fakeout. Of course it was. Prompto didn't know how he could've thought for a second that Ardyn had really betrayed them.

The knife didn't stick in the commander where it was supposed to. It went to the side, where Ardyn warped.

“Just checking if that was still in operation,” he said to the soldiers who'd trained guns on him. He went back to talking to the Niflheim commander like they were old friends. None of this could be happening. The ache in Prompto's gut made him feel sick. He could throw up on a Niflheim soldier's boots.

The traitor with Ardyn's voice and face tossed the knife in his hand and said, “In exchange for his son's safe return, my softhearted brother will step down without a fight, and this absurd, wasteful war will be over without another shot fired. I will take his place, as, to be honest, I was always better suited to. With a friendly face on the throne, Lucis will make a smooth transition to a vassal state. Life goes on. Everyone is happy.”

“You will have the Emperor's full gratitude.” The enemy commander didn't look surprised. It was like he knew. Like everybody was in on the joke. “What I want to know is how you convinced the prince to walk straight into our hands.”

“Oh, I didn't have to convince him at all. Only his little friend.”

Ardyn turned and smiled at Prompto. It was like a metal band closing around Prompto's throat.

The base and the soldiers and the commander were gone. There was just Ardyn, and his smile, and his yellow eyes.

He'd read him poems.

“All I had to do was get close to him, and all the rest fell into place.”

He'd showed him a secret passage and given him a key.

“It was so very simple.”

He'd called him clever.

“A little kindness, and he was eating from my hand.”

Tiny pebbles on the cement dug into Prompto's knees, here where he had led them.

“Now,” Ardyn was saying, like a salesman laying out a bargain, “make sure to keep the prince away from anything metal until you find a way to prevent warping. Oh, I've brought you other valuable hostages, as well. The one with the spectacles is a count of the Scientia line, and the large one is the Amicitia's eldest. Both my gifts to you, as a symbol of my goodwill.”
“Get them into a cell,” the commander said, and they all got two soldiers each coming toward them and hauling them up. Prompto watched, helpless as somebody on the other side of a movie screen.

The soldier he'd woken up to start this nightmare prodded Prompto with his boot and said, “What about this one, Chief Researcher?”

The old guy came a few steps closer, his armor clinking every time he moved. Red and black, like a round insect. He squinted down at Prompto. “Is he anybody?”

“No at all,” Ardyn said. He looked different, looming. Prompto had never realized that the line of his jaw was cruel. “But don't harm him, as he'll be coming with us. This one is mine.”

That was when Prompto found his voice. It ripped right out of him.

“I won't do it!” he shouted. The cuffs that held him clattered and bit into the outsides of his wrists. “I'm with Noct, not you!”

“Oh, my dear boy,” Ardyn said, with something on his face that looked like sadness and that was as much a lie as everything had always been, “that is something I adore about you. You're optimistic enough to think you have a choice.”

Prompto saw the guard start swinging the butt of his rifle. He heard the crack against his temple and expected pain, but the dark got there first.
The floor Prompto's toes were scraping must have been linoleum, since the rubber of the boot soles was making a squeaking sound. Someone was holding him under either arm. The angle wasn't real comfortable, since they were stuck behind his back.

“...sks include skull fracture, subdural hematoma, brain edema, subarachnoid hemorrhage...”

Ardyn's voice was close. Prompto's head didn't hurt, but he knew it should have. His stomach didn't hurt anymore, either. A lot of work got his eyes partway open.

“...and of course chronic traumatic encephalopathy, if you make a habit of it.”

There were tiles sliding by under his feet. Little and blurry. Black and white chessboard checks. The pattern wasn't quite symmetrical. That really bugged him.

“What are you complaining about?” That was the guy in charge's growl. The loud tapping footsteps must have been his. “It took you ten seconds to heal.”

“Yes, because as luck would have it, the damage was minor. What a fascinating difference of language. I'd no idea that there were Niflheimian dialects in which 'don't harm him' could be heard as 'have one of your brutes immediately concuss him.'”

He wasn't supposed to be here. This wasn't supposed to be happening.

“He'll be put somewhere safe. Here.”

They stopped. Prompto heard something beep and a door swish.

“What an interesting lock.”

Prompto's head lolled. There were red and black armored boots ahead of him to his left. Ahead to his right were Ardyn's boots and the hem of his coat. Prompto should have known there were things hidden in there. He'd worn it and felt all the heavy pockets. There must have been secret ones, too. Ones with coins, pins, little flasks. A knife.

“This door is keyed to my blood signature. A little insurance, in case you were thinking of trying something. You won't be getting him back on your own.”

“How ingeniously macabre. I assure you, you've nothing to worry about from me. I know this is the best outcome we could hope for. I've done a great deal to bring it about.”

The soldiers were walking again, through a doorway. Prompto tried to get his feet under him. He did his best to pull at the arms holding him, but his body kept moving about a tenth as much as he told it too.

“Easy, easy,” Ardyn's voice said. There he was. His face came close, eyes wide and concerned.

Fury slapped Prompto right into the waking world.

He struggled against the guards and snarled, “Fuck you.”

Ardyn had the same face he'd always had. Scruffily handsome, expressive, the kind that looked good in any lighting, even fluorescents like this hallway. The kind that was good at showing sympathy and
regret.

“I know this is something of a shock,” he said, “but the choice was between subterfuge and annihilation. The war was lost long ago.”

The soldiers gripped Prompto's arms tight enough to bruise. He threw himself forward and didn't even feel it.

“I don't care about the war! How could you? You traitor!”

The soldiers tossed him down. He scrambled to his feet, dizzy and uncoordinated, and they were already gone. There was just Ardyn standing in the doorway, giving him that sorrowful look.

“One day you will understand.”

The door slid shut.

It was funny. Not the laughing kind of funny. The strange kind of funny. All Prompto wanted to do was curl up in a ball and hurt. From the day he'd walked into the library, Ardyn had been fooling him, hook line and sinker. Just like one of Noct's fish. Caught by something bright and shiny, stupid enough to believe their luck. The Nifs had won because Prompto had believed a prince could want him. He'd been used like a socket wrench.

But there was that funny thing.

It was how, out of all the betrayal, the thing that made him maddest was the One day you will understand. It wasn't a line from a cackling villain gloating over the hero. It was what you told a kid who asked too many questions. It made a piece of anger stick in Prompto's throat.

In his head Ignis said, The word you are looking for is 'condescending.'

Gladio said, Are you gonna sit there and take that?

Cor said, First, get your hands free.

He couldn't just break down and cry. He had to at least try to find a way out. Then he could break down and cry.

The room wasn't a cell. It was pretty big, and it looked like an old office. Nobody'd used it for a while, judging by the dust on the shelves by the folders. There was a panel by the door that was around the right size to take a handprint. At the far side there was a desk where a computer must've once been. It had some pens and stuff on top.

Ardyn, leaning over his shoulder and pointing out symbols hidden in old paintings like it was a secret between them, Ardyn smelling like pine needles, Ardyn lying by him on the hood of his car, I can think of nothing beautiful which you do not resemble

Nothing was easy with his hands behind his back, even getting drawers open. Prompto did it, though, and dug through in a weird sideways stance so he could see what he was doing.

“Cheap, shitty Nifs and your cheap, shitty paperclips,” he chanted under his breath.

Finally he found some sturdy enough to work. He did a leaning maneuver to get one out, then focused on bending it into shape. He could do this behind his back. He'd done it before. Thank you, Marshal, you ridiculous hardass.
Prompto braced himself on the edge of the desk while he worked. He stared up at the dots on the ceiling and counted. At twenty-five, he dropped the paperclip. He picked it up and started again. Just had to find that catch. Come on. He had to hurry. They could be doing something to Noct, and protecting him was Prompto's job. He had to think about that, not the knife of betrayal stuck in his back that scraped his lungs every time he breathed.

*the texture of his scars on his lips the sound of his sighs the way he smiled with half his mouth, him pointing out the stars in the sky that he said were like the freckles on Prompto's hip, so very simple a little kindness*

Ardyn said when he'd been caught he'd waited for his chance and warped his way out. Who knew if that was true, or if any of it was true. The fact was Noct didn't have anything to use with his powers and Prompto didn't have a secret heritage that was going to get him out of this. He had a paperclip.

At fifty-four, the catch went click.

When one hand was free, the other was easy. He dropped the open cuffs on the desk.

*you I would remember, I have an angel in the flesh, slaying a thousand daemons would be no effort at all, it was so very simple*

The next step was getting out of the room. No bashing through the door; it looked heavy-duty, and the hinges weren't promising, either. It'd have to be the high-tech and probably unbreakable locking mechanism.

Noct said, *You can do it. I know you can.*

He could get some idea of how the lock worked by seeing what it did when access was denied. The guy had said something about blood but it didn't look like you had to actually bleed on the thing. Prompto would open it up to fool with the wiring, but first he tried slapping his hand against the flat part, just to see what happened. A bar of light appeared behind the translucent screen and scanned along his palm.

*here with you always on the cusp of the night*

The screen lit up.

**Chief Researcher Besithia. Access Granted.**

Prompto stared at the bright blue text as the door slid wide open.

It was stuck on the last thing it'd read. They'd put him in a room with a broken lock.

That was a gift he wasn't going to let go by. With a scan to either side to check for guards, Prompto was out and was on the move. All he had to do was stay too mad to be afraid.

*just trust me a moment and all will be well beautiful boy all part of my charm all I had to do was get close*

*Next step,* said Prompto, loud and clear over the tap of his footsteps and the thud of his broken heart, *kick Ardyn's ass.*

Two men walked along the corridors in the depths of the base. Chief Researcher Besithia spoke with pride of his creations.
“The lighting is specially formulated not to harm the specimens.”

“Very clever,” said Ardyn, examining a caged ronin under low blue lights that anyone who cared for the composition of an image would despise. The creature sat with its legs folded, silent, as patient as vengeance.

They moved on past other cages. Some large, some small. Some rattling and emitting screeches. Some motionless.

On the far side of another wall, there was a young man who would despise Ardyn as long as he lived. There was no time for indulgence in that. There remained so much to be done before the last step.

The heart of the base pulsated. Each moment it shuddered more strongly in the floor.

“This,” said Besithia, a man who could never resist rolling out the banner of victory by hand, “is what you came to see.”

Once, three philosophers stood on a road, exchanging obvious things.

One said, A runner must always cross half the remaining distance, and thus can never reach his goal.

Another said, Logically an arrow is trapped in time and cannot move.

Said another, To trade one man's heart for a kingdom would be worth it.

The Wall Breaker had a room of its own, round and tall enough to allow its spires. It was a jagged monolith of red and black. It emitted a deep hum and a sensation like a coating of oil on the skin. Just as in the agent's description, sections of the structure slowly revolved about its circumference.

“Transport is being prepared as we speak,” Besithia said. “We'll give King Regis a show of force before the offer of mercy. The vaunted Wall will crumble in an instant.”

Ardyn walked a circuit around the device. At the far side, one hand rested against metal smooth to the touch. Despite its vibrations it was cold and lifeless, quite unlike the small flask in Ardyn's pocket that tingled against his stroking fingertips. He took a moment to slot the flask into a crevice in the workings. Beneath the hum of machinery, it was difficult to hear the tiny clink when the device's moving part passed across and left a hairline crack in the glass.

“Marvelous,” Ardyn said, looking upwards at the matte material that absorbed the light. “Simply marvelous.”

“That son of a bitch,” Noctis said again.

He kept sitting down on the bench against the wall for about ten seconds before he started tapping his feet and had to get up and pace around the cell again. Even with his hands behind his back throwing his balance off, he had to move.

“How could he...how could I fall for it?”

“We all fell for it,” Gladio said. “Complaining isn't getting us out of this.”

Like there was anything he could do now. The kingdom was going to be lost because he'd been careless. Because he'd trusted a guy who was family, and who'd made Prompto happy.
The feeling of the knife was still on his neck. It was all bound up with the sight of his friends on their knees at gunpoint and that look of blank, flat horror on Prompto’s face. And then the son of a bitch had patted him like he was still his uncle. Noct should've bitten his hand off.

Noctis wanted to hit something in general. He wanted to throttle somebody specific. He couldn't do either, so he kicked the cell door and made it rattle in its frame.

“Quiet in there,” the guard called from around the corner.

Noct sat down again. He stood up and started pacing again.

“He won't get away with this,” he said. “I'll never forgive him. Not for what he did to Prompto.”

Who even knew where Prompto was now, or what was happening to him? Ardyn said not to hurt him, but then they'd hit him and dragged him away, so that was just another lie. They had to find him. They had to get out of here, but there wasn't any way out.

“Noct,” said Ignis.

“What?” Noctis bit out.

Ignis didn't say anything. He just looked at Noct's right shoulder, where there was a hairpin stuck on the collar of his shirt.

Prompto had no idea where he was going and kept moving anyway. The lighting was a weird, eye-aching blue, and all the halls looked the same. There was only so big the base could be, and the others had to be around there somewhere. First he'd find them, and then they'd deal with the betrayal carving him hollow inside.

At a corner, he flattened himself against the wall and peeked around. There was a single guard standing with his back to him. Prompto waited for him to move along his patrol, saw he wasn't going to anytime soon, and jumped him.

A hit knocked him down, a yank got the rifle out of his hands, and a smack with it across his head knocked him out.

“Sorry about the subdural hematoma or whatever,” Prompto said, and hopped up. He felt less naked with a gun in his hands.

He was halfway to the door at the end of the hall when a a long, ripping rumble shook the floors and knocked him off his feet.

The sticky feeling in the air went away. There was a long second of silence before the alarms went off.
Five minutes.

That was how long they had before the guard did his walk by again. Noctis had just gotten the hairpin off his shirt with his teeth, and he had to hold it in his mouth and wait while the soldier peered in at them like they were an exhibit at a low-rent zoo. Noct sat there multitasking by trying to look the right kind of angrily resigned while also trying not to swallow the thing. *Here lies Noctis Lucis Caelum, Crown Prince of the realm, who choked on beauty supplies because his uncle is an asshole. In his honor stands the Tomb of the Idiot.*

Noct waited until the guard was out of sight, counted out ten seconds, then spat the hairpin out into Ignis's hand.

“Remind me to wash these gloves thoroughly,” Ignis said under his breath while he worked. Noct had his back turned, so Ignis couldn't see him roll his eyes. He couldn't give Specs too much crap, though, seeing as he could pick someone else's handcuffs without looking.

The next time the guard came by they were all sitting in the same places, heads down and quiet.

Just before he walked away, Noct said, “Hey.”

The guard turned toward the cell. He had just a second to look down at the hairpin that bounced off his chest.

Noct warped him a knee in the stomach. That knocked the air out of him long enough to get him in a good hard choke until he went ragdoll. Noct let him slide to the floor and ran his hands over him until he felt keys.

“No bad,” Gladio said when he got the door open.

“We gotta get moving,” Noct said. “We have to find Prompto, and there's telling how long that guy's gonna stay out.”

“It appears Ardyn is playing a deeper game,” said Ignis, shaking his freed hands and scanning the guard room for anything useful.

“And we're the pieces,” said Noct.

Gladio said, “You got a plan?”

“Yeah,” said Noct. “Figure out what Ardyn's trying to do, before or after kicking his ass.”

Gladio's reply got buried under the the explosion.

For all the generals, emperors, and figureheads with their posturing and bombast, it was the Verstael Besithias of the world who did the real work. While they on the front lines threw an endless procession of lives away, he was at this moment bringing this idiotic war to a close. He would not be celebrated, anymore than he ever was. His brilliance was the grinding, unpicturesque sort. Though in all likelihood someone else would get the credit, for the rest of his life in a world united under the Empire, he would always know.
“This area,” said Verstael, “is for mammalian experiments. We've had some success with daemonic and cybernetic enhancements.”

“Nature presents infinite possibilities,” said the elder Lucian prince, a man as trustworthy as a frayed wire swinging above running water, “for those with the courage to seize them.”

There was no need to trust him. Slippery as he was, he was no idiot. Self-preservation was the rule of that sort, and by the end of this little tour, he would know exactly what attempting to cross Verstael would bring down on him. Practicality and self-interest were more reliable than fickle virtue.

Verstael was in the middle of describing the experiments with lesser primates when a roar from below made the room shudder. A beaker fell from the shelf and shattered on the floor as Verstael caught himself on the edge of a table.

Over the blaring of the alarms the Lucian said, “What in the world was that?”

“Exactly what I intend to find out,” Verstael growled.

A soldier burst in with a hasty salute and said, “Chief Researcher, there's been an explosion—”

“I can see that much! Where and how? Give me the full report!”

It took too much damn time to get enough basic information out of the stammering idiot to confirm his fears. Verstael had known where the damage was as soon as the air felt abruptly dry and thin. A malfunction? Impossible.

He sent the soldier to find out more. As the door closed behind him, Verstael turned to the Lucian and said—

“Ardyn? Where are you?”

The room was empty. When Verstael went swiftly to the door the soldier can gone through, the indicator turned red and it beeped, motionless. Slapping his hand against the sensor brought up the words QUARANTINE LOCK. Damned emergency protocols.

“Oh dear,” said the Lucian's voice, coming over the speaker with a crackle and cutting through the alarm. “There seems to be a problem. Luckily I've found a console. Let me see what I can do.”

“Get the damned door open,” Verstael said to the camera high in the corner.

“Like this?” A door opened at the far side of the room.

Careless idiot. Close enough. There was a way back through that way, as well.

“I've almost got it...” the voice said from the speaker in the next room. “Here, this way.”

“That's back toward the daemon wing,” Verstael said as he went. The door made an erratic jolt. Lucians had no idea how to handle real military-grade technology. They were practically still working with punch cards.

“Let me keep trying. I believe this is the right direction.”

Verstael moved in haste. There were things to do, and something had gone wrong with his dearest and most important project. He didn't have time to waste running in circles past the cages while the howling daemons conspired with the alarms to half deafen him and the Lucian opened doors at random. He bulled through the nearest open door and felt it nearly catch his heels as it shut.
There were no others.

“Oh dear,” said the voice over the speaker. “That appears to be a dead end.”

The alarm cut off and left a ringing silence.

“Ah. Well, at least that is taken care of.”

This room was a fairly small one, sectioned off into cages. In each there was the steady point of light of a lantern and the glint of a knife. As the echoes died from Verstael's ears, he made out the shuffling slap of amphibian feet and the soft drag of burlap on tile.

“Open the door,” Verstael growled. The blue of the main lighting was lurid against the QUARANTINE LOCK's red.

“I'm doing my very best,” said the Lucian's voice, warm and playful through its tinny tinge. “After all, Chief Researcher, whatever would we do without you?”

Verstael's gauntlet made a resonant bang on the door. He could not be here. There was too much to do. Whatever the traitor prince was playing at, he couldn't intend to leave him trapped in here.

“Without me there will be no crown and no peace,” he said. “You would lose everything you've worked for.”

The speaker in the wall said, “You have no idea what I have lost.”

Verstael flattened his back against the useless door. One of the creatures stood close by the wire frame of its cage, watching the source of noise in silence. Obstacles. Always obstacles and interruptions, when he was so close.

“Leave me locked in here,” he said, “and you'll never see your little pet again.”

There was silence, then the crackle of a long breath.

“Now, now, you didn't need to say that,” said Ardyn. His voice had lowered, as though he was leaning close to the microphone to tell a secret. “I already wasn't going to feel bad about this.”

There was the cascading click of a dozen locks. The cages swung open.

Rushing was not in the creatures' behavior. One shuffled forward, bearing before it a lantern that made the shadows sway like the needle on a fluctuating dial. Behind his back, Verstael's hand clawed at the door.

“There is too much to be done,” said Verstael, a reasonable man, at last and always a reasonable man. “Without my patronage and protection you have nothing.”

Ardyn did not seem to be paying attention. “Oh, look at that, he's already out. Such a clever young man. You should be proud.”

Verstael Besithia was a man of mental clarity. It was his fortune and his pride. Whatever the circumstances, he could think well enough to ensure he would, in one manner or another, have his victory. The boy was out. The creatures were out. So, then, should one more door be opened.

“So be it,” Verstael said. The creatures were shuffling from their cages and into a tightening semi-circle. He reached into an inner pocket for a small, unassuming device. This was something he kept to himself, a direct connection to the recipient of the rest of his resources. The button depressed with
a private finality. “Enjoy yourself for as long as you can, before you meet my masterpiece.”

“I’m sure it will be an interesting encounter,” the voice from the speaker said. “Daemons have many more dimensions than your research gives them credit for. Fascinating creatures, all with their own little quirks. Quite human in many ways. Take these, for example.”

One of the creatures turned its head to the side and held its lantern high. The flame illuminated two dozen round, black eyes, and the primitive opposable thumbs that allowed the daemons to hold a knife.

“They hold a grudge.”

Prompto was flat against a wall with a soldier running by close enough that he could hear the pound of his boots over the alarm, and mostly what he was thinking about was how it couldn't all have been a lie.

*Think about it logically,* said Ignis. It'd been too much and too long. There had to be something there. If it'd always been a put-on, something would have slipped. If there was anything Prompto was good at, it was telling when people were just putting up with him. It had been months, and Ardyn had been happy. That didn't make it hurt any less. Just put a different edge on the pain he breathed in and the anger he breathed out.

Ardyn had a lot to answer for.

That soldier didn't look anywhere near him. None of them had. They were all focused on wherever the alarm was calling them, which must have been the thing that had exploded. Noct and the guys couldn't have broken out and blown something up. At least, not this fast. Prompto kept moving. He had people to find.

The place was a labyrinth. Doors in every direction, all leading to more little rooms with more doors, and soldiers all going ways that felt random. The blue light and the noise pressing down on him made the whole thing feel like the half-finished demo stage of a game without enough budget. The farther Prompto went the fewer soldiers he had to duck, and the darker it got. Whatever the explosion had been, it must have knocked out some of the wiring along with whatever was keeping him from summoning his weapon. He kept the rifle in his hands anyway. Right now the weight of a big gun felt good.

A lot of the doors were darkened. Prompto found himself following the lighted ones until he came out on a wide, round area with a grate for a floor and darkness underneath. The alarm was echoey here, and Prompto moved across the open space like an insect picking its way through the shoulder gears of a metal giant. In the center was an elevator that didn’t open no matter what he hit. He didn't have time to try to mess with it. There were no soldiers in sight, but that wasn't the kind of thing that would last forever.

Paths radiated out of the center like spokes. Above one door, a panel of blue light glowed like the north star.

The hall was lighted and empty. Prompto jogged down it with the rifle swaying from his hands. Between one step and the next, the alarm shut off, and then he could hear his breath huffing against the close walls and the white silence stopping up his ears. His steps clanged.

There was a voice coming from the far end of the hall. Prompto made himself slow down and creep closer, listening. It was hard to tell, since it started and stopped.
He made out two things at about the same time: that the voice was coming through a soundsystem, and that it was Ardyn's.

The door closed behind Prompto when he walked in, and he breathed a little easier to know that if any soldiers came he'd hear the swish. The room held a machine that filled most of the center, and he had to stop and take it in for a minute. Meters, buttons, broad screen that were all gray and blank. Little needles flicked hello. Prompto knew Niflheim was ahead of them technology-wise, going by the computer parts you could only get shipped across the border from slightly shady websites, but this was something else. It looked powerful and expensive, like something that should have five people with headsets tapping buttons twenty-four hours a day to keep the facility's blood running. There was nothing in front of it but an empty chair.

High on the wall to the right there was a speaker, and Ardyn's voice wrenched Prompto's guts around when he said, “After all, Chief Researcher, whatever would we do without you?”

“Shut up,” Prompto whispered. It wasn't for him. He didn't have time to listen or think.

Cor said, Use your eyes.

The console was covered in dials and switches he wouldn't know how to read if he had the manual and a week. There was a wide, flat touchscreen in the middle, though, and a panel like the one from the office he'd busted out of. Prompto flicked the safety on the rifle, set it on the chair, and leaned forward for a closer look.

Noct said, You're good with this stuff.

Ardyn kept talking through the speaker, sounding like half of a conversation with somebody the microphone wasn't picking up. Prompto swiped his fingers over the touchscreen and ignored the voice that jabbed the sore places in his heart. Heavy red letters said LOCKED. Before he could think too much about how there was no way his luck would be that good twice, Prompto slapped his hand down on the scanner.

CHIEF RESEARCHER BESITHIA. ACCESS GRANTED.

Prompto bit back a crazy laugh. As top of the line as everything else was, their security system had some serious bugs.

Ardyn was telling someone he'd lost something.

“I'm in,” Prompto whispered to nobody, because you had to do that.

For all the good it did him. The system was totally foreign, and he didn't even know where to start. There was no way he could figure out how to do anything right. His fingers hovered over the screen. There couldn't be much time.

Ardyn said, If you can't use it properly, break it usefully.

Screw it.

Prompto jumped in like Ignis diving off a cliff all that time ago, for the picture he'd been so proud of.

His fingers flicked across the screen and through incomprehensible menus. As far as he could tell it was hooked right into the base's guts, a whole treasure trove, but he didn't even know the operating system. A promising-looking lead took him to a dead end for the fourth time, and Ardyn was talking about how he wouldn't feel bad.
Prompto wanted to smash his fists into the screens and cry. He breathed in and started from the beginning.

Schematics, power grids, something called Project Barbarus that was marked off in red and wouldn't let him do anything with it even when he smacked his hand on the scanner panel again, a lot of other things he didn't dare mess with out of fear he'd make the whole place collapse or explode. This looked like the kind of thing that could run a self destruct. But give him some time and he could run Doomgaze on it, Prompto thought, and had to swallow down another crazy laugh.

Ardyn talked about a clever young man and knew that Prompto was out.

*oh clever boy he'd said and laughed and Prompto had been so proud*

The back of Prompto's neck went cold. He turned hyperaware of any hint of a sound of the door opening behind him. They were going to be after him. Unless Ardyn was the one who had screwed with the door to where he'd been locked up in the first place. It was all too much for Prompto to try to untangle. Whatever he was doing, he'd better do it now. He could. He was clever, damn it.

He hit an input and a screen on the upper left came alive with a chessboard of security camera feeds. Rooms of monsters. Empty labs. Corridors with soldiers tramping through. There, one that stomped Prompto in the middle of the chest – Ardyn from above and behind, with his flaring coat and wild hair, bent over a console that looked like a smaller version of the one Prompto was at. He wasn't talking about Prompto anymore. He was talking about daemons. Other cameras showed soldiers. A whole cluster of screens was full of them. Then there was the camera that showed an empty office, with a big desk that Iggy, Noct, and Gladio were crouched behind.

Prompto's heart kicked into high gear. He barely noticed that Ardyn was quiet. His throat jumped and he wanted to yell that he was here and he was gonna go find them, right at the location the camera feed told him.

That was the area where more soldiers were headed every minute. He could see them in black and white, from all different angles, swarming like ants around a sandwich. They passed the office door three times as he watched. As soon as they knew there were escaped prisoners, or sooner, somebody would give a more thorough look around. His friends were pinned down.

Prompto would never make it, let alone through a squad of Niflheimians. There had to be something he could do from here. His fingers jabbed at the screen, flying through the lists of commands. Emergency, that had to be useful.

That one.

Before he could think too much, Prompto hit the command.

The lights plunged into red. A mechanical voice blared out of the speakers.

“Commencing evacuation procedures. All units evacuate immediately. Repeat, commencing-”

The soldiers must have practiced this. They looked up for a second, then all started moving in the same direction.

Prompto grabbed the rifle and checked the monitors one more time. He needed to make sure he knew where he was going so he could get to Noct and the guys fast. Who to head towards wasn't really a choice. When he looked at the screen again, Ardyn was already gone.
They were in the middle of making a plan to fight their way out when all the soldiers left. The lights went from blue to red, and the speakers chanted *Evacuate, evacuate.* A bunch of boots clomped past the door. Noct waited as long as he could hold his breath, and no more came by.

Gladio snuck a look out from the side of the desk they were hiding behind. “Looks like we've got some good luck.”

“Or something has gone terribly wrong,” said Ignis.

Gladio said, “Let's not stick around to find out.”

“Agreed,” Noct said. He summoned up a sword, and it had never felt better to have a solid weapon appear in his hand when he called. He held onto it, just in case whatever had broken his powers kicked in again. “We get Prompto and we get out of here.”

Assuming Ardyn hadn't gotten there first.

The guy who'd saved him as a kid, who'd caught frogs with them and gone all over the country with them, the guy who always won at cards and who had a million stories. The guy who'd run a scheme that meant breaking Prompto's heart.

He'd better hope he had a way to heal getting punched in the head.

The soldiers' footsteps had all gone to the left, so that was where the way out must be. With Ignis and Gladio behind him, Noct headed to the right, deeper into the base. They'd scour the place room by room if they had to.

They went around the corner and into a hallway where Prompto was.

“Guys!” Prompto shouted, running toward them. His voice flew right over the robot saying *All personnel evacuate immediately.* He was all in one piece and holding a huge gun, and relief punched Noctis in the gut so hard that for a second he couldn't blink.

“Prompto!” Noctis had to smack him on the shoulder just to be sure he was real. Everything looked weird in the red emergency lighting, but it was him all right. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I just had to bust out and mess with the mainframe, no big deal.” Prompto was out of breath and there was strain around his eyes, but he was smiling, and he didn't even have a bruise on his head where they'd clocked him with the rifle butt. “Man, am I ever glad to see you. Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah,” Noct said, “we just had to do some cool action movie stuff. Ardyn-- might've helped.”

That name made Prompto's eyes go tight at the corners. “He's probably out of here by now. You're gonna have to tell me everything. But first we'd better get out of here before somebody figures out I've been screwing with the system. The elevator's gonna be full of guys, but there's stairs this way.”

They set out running, adrenaline jangling in Noct's veins with every step. There wasn't any signs of guards this way. He kept a good grip on his sword anyway. Prompto fell right back into formation. It'd felt wrong, having their five man team knocked down to three. Now Prompto was back, and the hard part was over.

The door leading to the stairwell came in sight. It wasn't easy to see through, since a black coat was taking up most of the doorway.
“Ardyn!” Prompto cried out, and the name pulled him forward like a fishhook.

Ardyn disappeared through the doorway without turning around.

Prompto sprinted after him. Noctis wasn't going to risk hitting his friend by tossing his sword, so all he he could do was run.

They charged into a gloomy shaft filled with a metal spiral staircase. Noctis lost a precious half-second looking up, seeing nobody, and taking too long for his stalled-out brain to realize that meant Ardy was going down. Noctis ran down the grated steps after him. Prompto was a few feet ahead, and Ignis and Gladio's footsteps rang out behind. No matter how hard Noctis ran he could barely catch a sight of Ardy's sleeve. His aching legs pounded out a rhythm that filled up the room as the evacuation announcement faded behind them. His head was spinning and his panting was harsh in his throat. He gave it everything he had, and all he could do was keep the skull on Prompto's back in sight. It was a chase out of a bad dream, one that turned and turned and went on forever. His sword was pulling him down and throwing him off balance, but he wasn't stupid enough to put it away. He wasn't going to be helpless again. How could Prompto go that fast with that huge gun in his arms? Keep going and don't fall, he thought over and over. Keep going and don't fall.

The concrete of the bottom landing jolted Noctis's knees half out of joint and he nearly ran right into Prompto's back. It was like being at the bottom of a well full of reddish light. When their footsteps stopped, it was suddenly silent. There was nothing but hard breathing.

Ardyn was a step away from a reinforced metal door. There was some kind of electronic pad beside it with a screen that was a blank blue, and it was covered in metal bars that all looked disengaged.

When Ardy turned, he had that same old look on his face. That sort of ironic, melancholy, we're-in-this-joke-together look he got whenever they talked about the Crystal or the Ring, or what the line of Lucis was made to do, or about the throne he'd just pretended – maybe – to try to steal.

Noctis counted how many times he'd told someone, He's not a bad guy. He just has a weird sense of humor.

Ardyn said, “I'm afraid this is where we part ways.”

“Oh no you don't.” Prompto moved forward. His voice was fierce and ragged, and he was clutching the gun like a jacket in the snow. “You get one chance to explain.”

The soft look on Ardy's face was one he'd worn plenty of times before. This time there was a whole different reason that it made Noct feel sick. “A thousand years would not suffice to tell you how sorry I am.”

“That's not good enough!” Prompto's voice ricocheted off the walls and the stairs like a stray bullet. His face crumpled. “Was all of it a lie?”

Ardyn's mouth opened.

Somewhere behind the door, something roared like a continent tearing in half.

“Later I will tell you everything,” Ardy said, “but you must make your escape. I will follow.”

“You're not in much of a position to be telling anybody 'must,'” said Gladio.

There were heavy, blunt noises from the distance behind the door, like the pounding of giant feet.
Noctis said, “What the hell is that?”

Ardyn kept half-turning toward the door, like he was impatient. “Verstael Besithia was a man of diverse efforts. There is one more project of his to put an end to. I shall rejoin you after doing so. Go.”

Ignis said, “Was?”

Anger pulsed along with Noct's heartbeat. “Yeah, I bet you will.”

“That's it?” Prompto said. The gun against his chest was shaking. “Just I'll tell you later?”

“There's no time.” Ardyn pulled his sword out of the Armiger. He swept it to the side with one hand and made a fast, hard gesture at the stairs with the other. “Get out of here immediately, all of you. That is a command from your prince.”

Ardyn was really good at always looking calm. It wasn't often Noctis had ever seen him with the whites showing around his eyes. His grip must have been as tight around the hilt of his weapon as Noct's was on his own. He looked old and ragged, all in black and red with a shine of sweat, and his stubble looked like short thin charcoal pencil lines on paper. Noctis had never thought much about how Prompto always said lighting could change everything.

It took a minute to realize he was seeing Ardyn afraid.

From behind the door, there was a low, long growl that vibrated in his bones.

Noctis said, “Well you're out of luck. I'm the Crown Prince, so I outrank you.”

“Now he remembers the charts,” Ignis murmured.

“We're not going anywhere.” Prompto scrubbed his forearm across his eyes, then got a hard grip on the gun. “Whatever that is – whatever you did – you're not handling it on your own. You don't get a choice about that.”

Gladio said, “We're not turning tail now.”

Ignis's knives were in his hands. “We will dispatch the creature, then have a thorough conversation.”

It was Prompto who Ardyn's eyes were on.

Ardyn said, “Despite it all, you would fight by my side?”

Prompto didn't give a speech or anything. There wasn't time for that, and anyway he wasn't that kind of guy. He just nodded and said, “Yeah.”

A second later he said, “And then I'm gonna kick your ass.”

The thing roared closer this time, and Ardyn was all out of arguments.

He opened up the steel door. They darted in one by one, and Noctis noticed how thick the metal was as it closed behind them.

The room was less like a lab and more like the entrance to a warehouse. There were crates and equipment all around, and to one side there was what looked like a glassed-in observation booth that looked into the main room. The place smelled like animal and old smoke. There was one of those DANGER signs like Noctis had almost stepped on out in the yard, except this one wasn't melted,
and it was up by some giant steel blast doors that would have made up most of the far wall if they hadn't been wide open.

The main area was the size of the ballroom back at the palace, but higher, and with a lattice of metal bars covering the ceiling. It was all bare dark tile and concrete. After hours trying to squint through weird colors, the plain white lights were a relief.

A while ago the beast swinging hand over hand across the bars on the ceiling must have been an ordinary ape. It would have been living in a jungle somewhere, picking fruit off the trees and bothering nobody, when the Nifs came and caught it. It wouldn't have understood anything that was happening while they stuck it with tubes and metal and shot it up with drugs until it was a half-machine thing the size of a cargo truck.

"Verstael Besithia's other work," Ardyn said, head tilted back. The beast hadn't noticed them yet. "The project known as Barbarus."

Prompto swallowed, stared up, and said, "This place is nowhere near big enough for that monkey."

The animal's head turned toward them. Between two sprays of long white fur, in place of a face, there was a metal mask with two glowing blue sockets.

It dropped down and landed with a clash of metal and an impact that made the ground shake, and its roar rattled Noctis's brain in his skull. It smelled, more than anything, like motor oil. There were thick metal bands above its hands, like disconnected shackles.

With the memory of handcuffs around his wrists, Noctis lifted his sword and struck out to kill a thing he didn't even blame.

Gladio moved in first to get its attention. It pounded toward him in a lope, its hands smacking the floor, rushing down like an avalanche on a Gladio who for once in his life looked breakable. It lifted a massive paw. Just as it was smacking down and Gladio was jumping out of the way, Noct set his aim and warped.

Like always, he took the right and Ardyn took the left. He grabbed onto the long fur with one hand and got in a jab with his sword before the creature bellowed and threw him off. He hit the ground rolling and went right back in.

They came at the thing with the muscle memory from a thousand hunts, from dodging sprays of cactuar needles and cracking their swords against bulette shells and hammering out a battle of back-and-forth attrition with an iron giant in the pouring rain until it finally broke down and they all dragged themselves to a tent where they collapsed with wet clothes all over the place and talked about how they were never going to do that again (until they did). His mind wasn't made up, but his behind-the-times body still trusted Ardyn.

The thing moved faster than any animal should. It tried to pound them into the floor with its fists and kicked out with its metal legs. It had chassis instead of hips. It was big, and the part of Noct that wasn't snapped into Fighting Mode knew that it was terrifying, but when he'd warped in and out a half dozen times and picked his target by the blood-matted spots in the thing’s fur, he knew this was a fight they could handle. It was the first thing in the chaos of the past few hours that made sense. The thing's claws clanged off Gladio's sword while Ignis darted in, Noctis and Ardyn kept it wrongfooted by warping past one another in a weave of afterimages, and by now keeping out of Prompto's line of fire was a dance his body knew all on its own. They could do this.

Noctis warped onto the thing's back, gripped onto one of the tubes sticking out of the plates over its
spine, and yelled, “Prompto! Now!”

He held on while the thing reared up, tossing the floor far away and making Noct think dizzily of the mechanical bull Gladio had once dared him to ride, and Prompto's weapon ripped a line of bullets down the monkey's front. Noctis jumped away when it lurched to its knees. He landed near Ignis and tried to catch his breath. There was a second where they watched and waited for it to fall.

The ape burst into flames.

Fire clung to its body, rising up in gouts in a ridge along its back while it roared in rage, not pain. The same flames that left its hair and armor untouched poured down its arms and blackened the floor.

“What's happening?” Prompto cried out. He had his hand up over his eyes against the waves of heat pouring off the thing.

With firelight shining off his face, Ardyn said, “The real battle has begun.”

The beast pounded toward them and there wasn't room in the world for any strategy but staying alive. Sweat stung Noctis's eyes and heat made his vision waver. Gladio had taught him there was elegant, princely swordsmanship, and then there was killing things before they killed you. He knew he was hurting but he couldn't feel it. Noctis dodged its pounding fists, and knew that if he had been alone he would already be dead.

Through the waver of the flames and the blue haze of his own afterimages, Noctis saw Ignis pull a spear from the Armiger and stab the thing in the lower back while Gladio at one side and Ardyn at the other struck deafening, screeching swipes at its metal legs and Prompto sent bursts of bullets at its chest. It was like swatting at it with a newspaper. The thing must have been made of solid steel and rage. It doubled up its fists and smashed them down towards Noct just as he was replaced by an afterimage. Heat baked Noctis's skin, and he slashed at the enormous and surreal human catchers-mitt hands. The monkey howled in pain and with a massive kick leapt up, leaving drops of blood splattered on the blackened tile. Noct craned his head back to see it grabbing the bars on the ceiling, slowed by its injured hand to an inverted limp.

It was the chance Prompto had been waiting for. He snapped the barrel of his rifle up and shot out a stream of fire. The monkey fixed its glowing eyes on him and swung straight in his direction. It twitched each time a bullet struck home, and it wasn't going to stop.

“Prompto!” Gladio shouted over the gunfire. “Get out of there!”

“It's got him!” Prompto yelled back. Where the monkey's shadow should have fallen, the light of the flames turned Prompto red and orange. It grunted with every swing. It was right above him. “Just-”

The gunshots turned into clicks as Prompto's clip ran dry.

It was strange how long and how short a second could be. Noctis's arm pulled his weapon around with nightmarish slowness, and he had what felt like ages to watch Prompto's face shift from surprise to terror as the beast dropped.

Then Ardyn was there, with a streak of magenta behind him and his sword held up sideways to block the ape's palm.

The beast pulled its hand back and swatted him aside like an empty soda can. Ardyn went flying into the wall, and Prompto was shouting his name when the ape kicked out in a frenzy. A metal claw caught Prompto in the midsection and sent him sprawling.
Noctis didn't wait for an opening. He just flung his sword in and launched himself at the monkey's face. Searing heat wrapped around him as his weapon clanged off the metal mask. Out of the corner of his streaming eyes he saw Gladio charge in and sweep his sword low at the beast's right foot while Ignis jammed his spear into the joint of its left knee, and it lost balance and crashed onto its back, flailing wild sprays of fire. Noctis grabbed its fur and put all his strength into just staying on its chest. All he could breathe was heat and chemical gas, and his face was full of the smell of blood and animal and his own burning clothes. He clung on while it thrashed, hearing metal screaming, flame billowing, and Ignis cry out in pain, until the ape went still for an instant to breathe. Noctis took his sword's hilt in both hands and jammed the blade into the beast's heart.

The flames died when it did.
The shadows of the garage were cool as water, a quiet place to watch the four young men on the other side of the sun-parched lot. He was not alone. Even after all these years, the footsteps that approached behind him had the same distinctive ambling gait.

“All right, fess up,” Cid said, taking a place beside him. “Which one is it?”

“I haven't the least idea what you mean,” said Ardyn.

Cid had a habit of snorting when he heard a lie. “I put even odds on the body-builder.”

“Muscleheads?” Half of Ardyn’s attention was on the conversation, the rest on the men pouring water on the Regalia until it glittered in the sun. “I don't care for them.”

“Hah, so it's the brains of the operation. Always figured you'd go for the intellectual type.”

“No.” A smile ghosted over Ardyn's lips. “Not him.”

Cid gave him a sidelong glance from beneath his weatherbeaten cap. “Ardy, I'll believe a mess of things about you, but I'm gonna need a minute to buy you're stepping out with the kid who spent an hour taking the old jukebox apart and screamed cause it was full of spiders.”

“No, no. I'm accompanying the young man who was able to make it work.”

Shouting and laughter reached them faintly from across the concrete.

“Something special about him, huh,” said Cid.

Ardyn's eyes were steadily forward. “He seeks nothing but beauty in this dour, relentless world. For all his fears, he fails to be cruel. He is remarkable, and he is my beacon in the night.”

Cid said, “Are we still talking about the kid chasing the prince around with a hose?”

(“Get back here!”)

Ardyn gazed out into the distant sunlight, where Prompto was laughing and dodging behind the car as the young prince prepared his counterattack.

“Speak softly, for you speak of the one who owns my heart.”

(“Ahh! Sponge!”)

Prompto's shirt was all ripped up. He could feel the ragged edges where his palms pressed over his stomach. The cold, sharp metal feeling of the monkey's kick wasn't going away. That was weird. Everything smelled like smoke. He watched Noct stagger off the ape's body and come toward him. Gladio was crouched by Ignis, who was on the ground a little ways to the right with his hands over his face, making these awful gasping, gulping sounds.

Trying to stand up was a mistake. Prompto fell back and all that came out of his throat was a whimper. He should move, he thought, and couldn't. He should be doing something.

Noct looked so scared.
Ardyn was all the way across the room. He'd hit the wall hard enough Prompto had heard the thump, but he must have been okay, since he was up. There was a glass-smashing noise. Gladio breaking a potion over Ignis. Prompto probably should have gotten one out too, but he'd have to move his hands and he didn't want to do that.

Ardyn and Noct warped toward him. Pink and blue trails. Prompto wondered if every royal got their own color. They'd have to run out of different ones sooner or later. The afterimages hurt to look at. A lot of things hurt.

Noct got down on his knees by Prompto. He smashed a potion over him and said, “You're gonna be okay.”

Well now I’m worried, Prompto was going to say, but pulling in the breath to talk was another mistake. It would have been too true, anyway. Feeling what the potion could do made him realize what it couldn't. Iggy shouldn't make those whimpering sounds and there was more glass breaking but he didn't stop.

Ardyn was on Prompto's other side. The edge of his coat was singed, and his face was so much different from usual. He'd always seemed so in control. His hands were moving close and he said, “My brave boy. Breathe, now, it's all right. I have you.”

Prompto wanted to say, Please.

One day during his Crownsguard crash course, Cor had sat him down to talk. Prompto had thought it was strange to take the time out of training just for that, but his sore muscles sure weren't complaining. Instead of showing him any freaky superpower warrior meditation or anything, what Cor said was, Someday, if that's how your luck runs, you're going to get the chance to do something stupid and good. Nobody can tell you which way to choose.

When people did noble stuff, they were firm and determined, strong and sure and full of courage.

All Prompto could think about was rushing to do it before he changed his mind.

He grabbed Ardyn by the arm and said, “Triage. Iggy first.”

In the ugly, high fluorescent lights, Ardyn's eyes were amber and his hair was beautiful. He swallowed, nodded, and kissed Prompto's hand. When he left, the lacy white stuff on his sleeve was marked with red.

Prompto wrapped his arms back around himself. Noct was there with one hand on his knee, talking in words that just fell on Prompto like hot water, his skin red and raw all over anywhere clothes didn't cover, smelling like ashes and monkey blood. Ardyn was over to the right. He pushed Gladio out of the way so he could crouch over Ignis and put his hands on his face. Magenta light poured out, and Ignis's twitching slowed as he started breathing like a person should. Noctis kept breaking potions over Prompto. It was such a strange feeling, how they took the top hot layer of pain away, so you just felt the knowledge that something deep down was wrong. The big ape's body was sprawled out over the floor in the middle of the room, all metal and white hair. The tiles under Prompto had been cool for a while, but now they'd warmed up. He wanted to move to where they were cool again. He wanted to lie down.

“You were so cool, Noct,” he said. The trick was breathing shallow. “Wish I could've gotten that shot.”

“Just a little more,” Noct said. “Just hold on.”
A little was a long time. If he'd had Ardyn's watch he could count it. The one with the fancy curlcucke
hands that went snik snik snik. His hands were slippery right now. He wouldn't be able to hold it. It
was hard to remember anything before this started. Maybe this was where he'd always been. The
light hadn't changed, but it was hard to see. Noct's face was out of focus. He wanted to close his eyes
for a minute to see if that fixed it, but Noct wouldn't let him. He kept saying look at me. Things were
flat, like Prompto was staring at a paper screen with Gladio and Ignis and Ardyn painted on, except
one where the ink moved so you could see the magenta glow fading and Ignis sitting up.

Prompto couldn't say when Ardyn got back. He must have blinked too long. But there were Ardyn's
hands pulling his arms away from his stomach and pressing his palms there, and a feeling like cool
water pouring over the heat of the hurt. Ardyn's hands held him up. There were voices all around
him. Yell and call, and Ardyn's whisper.

Hurry. You have to help him.

Prompto, keep your eyes open. Don't you fade on us now.

It was always true. Every moment.

Ardyn's hands kept holding him together, like pressing two pieces of paper together while the glue
dried. Iggy and Gladio were there too.

Is all of this his?

Just listen and hold on.

Stay, and I will give every moment of my life as proof.

Prompto.

You're almost there. You have to.

Please.

He was tying his handkerchief around the little dog's leg, and she was licking his hand.

He was wading through the Vesperpool with the warm water up to his waist and wide-leafed plants
floating on the surface all around.

He was sitting in the back row of the movie theater, the one that played those old art films. Ardyn
was next to him, and the lights were just coming down.

There was tile there again.

The pattern was still asymmetrical and that was still annoying.

Noct's feet were to the right. They moved in time with Prompto's. Prompto's arm was slung over
Noct's shoulder, and so was a lot of his weight. His muscles felt more like something inflatable than
anything solid, but he didn't hurt anymore. They were in the hall again, with the lights making
everything red, but except for footsteps it was quiet. Ardyn was out ahead. They didn't have to chase
him this time. He was moving slow.

“You with me, buddy?” Noct said.
“Yeah,” said Prompto. That didn't hurt either, though the skin on his stomach felt a little weird and tight. He got his head up and worry hit him. “Is Iggy okay?”

“I'm fine,” said Ignis, and hearing a fancy accent had never spun Prompto's head around with relief before. He was to the left, on the other side of Gladio. “Thanks to the two of you.”

“Prompto?” Ardyn must have heard, because he turned around and moved toward them. “Are you—”

Gladio stepped in front of Prompto and said, “Keep moving.”

They followed Ardyn's back. He must have known the way around here.

Prompto's stomach lurched and he said, “Iggy, your face...”

Ignis said, “Beauty is a small price to pay.”

Noct said, “You're both okay, so everything's okay. We're gonna go home.”

Prompto's head dropped to the side, by Noct's shoulder. He rested there, smiled dizzily, and said, “You smell awful.”

It was true. He reeked like sweat, blood, and burned hair.

Noct's other arm squeezed around his waist. “So do you.”

The elevator had a big iron grating Gladio pulled over to close it. It shuddered upward. In all the space meant for heavy equipment, the five of them seemed small.

Night air hit Prompto in the face. The floodlights burned over empty concrete.

Noct said, “I guess when a place with a monster like that says evacuate, you go.”

Prompto watched his feet all across the miles the courtyard must have been. The concrete looked like a good place to sleep. He found a second of sympathy for the napping guard who had started all of this. Huge metal things loomed around them. They stopped in front of one. The back opened like the flap of a cereal box, and a ramp sank down. It clanked when they walked up.

“Best strap in,” said Ignis.

Prompto and Noct fell into a pair of the seats that lined the walls. Over the back of the pilot's chair he could see Ardyn's hair. The floor hummed. They were lifting, all of them safe in the air with Niflheim down away underneath, and Prompto was thinking about going to look when sleep caught up to him.

The sky through the windshield was pink. The inside of the airship was dim, with just a couple LEDs on some things on the wall and the early morning light. The engines were a low thrum, like the heartbeat of a sleeping thing. Prompto leaned back to stretch, and felt a weird tightness on his stomach.

He pushed his ragged shirt up, and before he remembered he was already looking.

It was pretty gnarly. Lots of long, jagged pink lines, with dry blood all around. He ran his fingers over them, and they felt like the piping on the edge of a couch cushion. It was weird to feel his own
skin with his fingers without feeling anything on his stomach. He still had sweet abs, though. The scars sure weren't sexy like Gladio’s, but all in all, it could have been a lot worse.

Gladio and Ignis were on the opposite side of the airship, Gladio on his back across a few seats and Ignis dozing sitting up. Noctis was sprawled out across the seats next to Prompto. His skin was still red and shiny all over. He must not’ve taken a second to get any healing himself. Prompto unwrapped the bandanna from around his arm and poured some potion on it. He dabbed it on Noct's face and watched the color fade to normal.

“A light touch, to do that without waking your patient,” Ignis said softly. He must have come up by Prompto when he wasn't paying attention.

“Nah, this is nothing,” Prompto said. He pressed the cloth on his friend's neck. “It's Noct. You can, like, stack stuff on him.”

Ignis let out a quiet laugh. Prompto glanced over and sucked in air through his teeth.

The scar over Ignis's left eye was like a splat from a thrown tomato. It covered half the side of his face. There was no mistaking it had come from fire. The eye there looked a little lighter, though that might have been Prompto's imagination.

“Ah.” Ignis's embarrassment looked different on the new shape of his face. “Rather conspicuous, is it.”

While Prompto's brain was busy out hunting for the perfect, delicate, considerate thing to say, his mouth snuck by behind its back and said, “How do you just look more badass?”

“I'll accept that description.” Ignis said. He sat down on the side where Noct wasn't.

“But seriously. You look different. I mean, without your glasses.”

“Melted on the floor somewhere, I'm afraid,” said Ignis.

For a while he watched Prompto dabbing potion on Noct's hands. It felt nice to have something useful to do, and to see the tension on Noct's sleeping face relax. Maybe that was what it felt like to heal somebody.

Because sooner or later he would have to, Prompto asked, “Is your eye messed up?”

“The vision is imperfect,” Ignis admitted, and Prompto's heart sank. “It would have been far worse, had it not been treated immediately. Ardyn said as much.”

“Oh,” said Prompto. Noct's right hand had gotten it bad. Putting potion on that and making sure to get it in between his fingers was easier than trying to figure out how much to trust what Ardyn said.

“Prompto,” There was significance in Ignis's voice. “I know what you did.”

“I didn't really do anything,” Prompto said, getting a weird urge to cover it up. “Unless you count sitting curled up in a ball as something.”

Of course Iggy wasn't fooled. “I know what you risked. To say thank you...does not feel adequate.”

“Don't worry about it,” Prompto said, and was surprised how sure he sounded. “We look out for each other.”

“We are fortunate to have you as a comrade.”
Prompto didn't really know what to say to that. The engines hummed. On the other side of the cabin, Gladio turned in his sleep. Prompto poured some more potion on the bandanna and ran it down Noct's arm.

He said, “You wanna see my gross scars?”

Ignis said, “Absolutely.”

The sun was up, and the light slanting through the windshield was that thin morning kind that you got when it was just starting to be day for real. Ignis was sitting on the floor asleep with his head resting on Gladio, and there weren't any burns left on Noctis. There wasn't much Prompto could do about what a mess he was, but at least he could pull himself a clean, whole shirt out of the Armiger and change. The Armiger was amazing. He'd never take that for granted again.

Prompto tried to keep his steps quiet as he crossed the cabin toward the visible sky. He went up the step to the cockpit area and sat in the co-pilot's chair. The sky was wide and blue now, with layers of clouds closer than Prompto had ever seen them, over the faraway carpet of the world.

Prompto said, “Hey.”

Ardyn looked pretty rough. His cheeks were hollow and it wasn't just the angle of the light making shadows under his eyes. His stubble had crossed a line to I-haven't-slept instead of the usual I'm-not-shaving-on-purpose. One sleeve ended in singed, ragged threads. The lacy stuff on the other one had reddish stains. There was red and ash on his hands, too, though Prompto didn't look at that so much as how they moved over the controls like second nature.

“Hey,” said Ardyn.

There were lots of dials and gauges on the instrument panel. Some were mysterious, but there were more self-explanatory ones than you'd think. Altitude, airspeed in knots, the usual toggle switch between ACTIVE and WAIT.

“So. Flying an airship, huh.” Prompto's fingers tapped on the edge of the panel. “That's pretty cool.”

“One of my many talents,” said Ardyn. It was one of his standard lines.

Prompto watched patches of trees slide by beneath them.

“Oh,” he said. He reached into the Armiger and pulled a couple bars out. “Got some of Gladio's protein bar things. They taste like motor oil but they're probably food.”

He didn't meet Ardyn's eyes long enough to try to read his face. Ardyn took them and said, “Thank you.”

He barely got the plastic off before sawing through the things in a couple bites. That was always fun to watch. Then Prompto watched the instrument panel again, looking at it like a map to a place to start.

While he was looking at a needle flick back and forth a connection jumped in his brain, and he blurted out, “It was you, wasn't it?”

“Hm?” Ardyn was looking out the windshield.

“You lead me to that big computer, and you messed with the security system.”
Ardyn was tired enough that he answered a second slow. “That's right. I employed a few tricks.”

Prompto had had no idea where to go, running around scared and furious, so on instinct he'd followed... “The lights,” he realized. “How'd you even figure to do that?”

“The credit belongs to one of those games of yours,” Ardyn said. “The 'classic' with the little face-jumping beasts.”

“Oh, Demi-Life 2?” Leaning over Ardyn's shoulder, saying no no, that way. ‘How in the world am I meant to navigate?’ ‘It's easy. All you gotta do is follow the lit-up places, see? And remember to look up.’

“Yes. It was simple enough to make use of the same principle.”

“You had it all figured out, huh.” It didn't come out the way Prompto meant.

Ardyn didn't say anything.

The seal on the thing between them was pulled back, then, like peeling open the plastic on top of a yogurt container. It gave Prompto enough space to say, “How much of this was all planned out?”

“It was...roughly sketched.” Ardyn slowly pushed a lever forward with his palm. “I had hoped the ruse would not be necessary. That security would be insurmountable and the device inhibiting our powers would already be functional was the worst case scenario.”

Prompto picked at the hem of his vest. Char rubbed off on his fingers. “One you were ready for.”

“Yes.”

“How much did Noct's dad know?”

The lights on the panel cast some red and green on Ardyn's hand. He was looking down. “Very little. Only that there was a threat I was tasked to eliminate.”

The hard, ugly question tapped against the back of Prompto's teeth until he let it out. “Why didn't you tell us?”

“I could not take the risk you would refuse.”

Don't you trust us? Prompto looked out at where the Rock of Ravatogh broke the line of the horizon. He thought of Ardyn leaning towards them in the firelight and saying I have a plan. He would have said, I'm going to pretend. Prompto would have said, Yeah.

Ardyn said, “There was a superstitious element as well. I had a foolish notion that if I did not speak of it, it would not come to pass.”

Ardyn's way of talking sounded strange in that worn-out voice. Nothing like how confident he'd been standing under those floodlights like he was on a stage.

The rising sun was right in front of them. The windshield must have had some kind of tint to keep down the glare. Roads crossed the open green underneath, dotted with a few cars. There were never many other people out this early, when they'd roll out of crinkly-sheeted motel beds and Ardyn would pocket the little soaps before they'd go grab croissants from the lobby and Ignis would manage to shotgun some coffee at the same time as he herded them all out to the cars, and then they'd be on their way with the road and the world to themselves.
“It is little and it is late,” Ardyn said, almost lost in the engines, “but I am sorry.”

Prompto warped to another world.

The Prompto there shot up from the co-pilot's seat and yelled, *Oh, you're sorry? You're sorry? After you lied to us, and scared us, and let us get hauled around by Nif soldiers with giant guns like we were gonna get kept in cages forever? After you tricked me and used me, when I trusted you? Yeah, you better fucking be sorry!* That Prompto shook Ardyn by the front of his stupid coat while he yelled out everything that had been clanging around the inside of his head while he was running for his life, and it felt good.

And then what?

Then it was over. When the airship went down in that world, Prompto went one way and Ardyn went another. Except for at big official royal events or on TV, Prompto never saw him up close again. He went back to being on his own.

In this world, Prompto ran through the list of all the how-could-you's.

He was tired and things had happened. The right moment to be mad had passed by before he could take it. The skin over Prompto's stomach felt strange, like it was the pattern on a t-shirt. His eyes were gummy and the places where ash was stuck to him itched. He wanted to go somewhere safe and normal and go back to sleep. When it came down to it, it was all just words, and not even ones Ardyn had meant. Fighting over it would mean thinking more about a time he just wanted to forget. He'd known as soon as he started hanging out with Noct that for guys with a job like theirs, the kingdom would always come first. They didn't choose that. It came down to the fate of the country versus Prompto's hurt feelings. And it'd be ridiculous to still be hurt, after everything. Wouldn't it?

Prompto shoved down an anger that wouldn't do anybody any good.

He said, “It's okay.”

Ardyn paused with his hand on a lever. “What?”

“Don't worry about it.” Prompto's shrug made burned bits flake off his vest. “You didn't mean any of that, and anyway, it worked, right? Plus I can't really be mad at somebody who just saved me and Iggy's life.”

His twice. When his gun had gone dry in his hands he hadn't even had time to be scared. He'd just looked at the giant flaming monkey falling down on him and thought *yep, this is it,* right before Ardyn was in front of him with his sword held high.

The rising sun pointed the Rock's shadow towards them. All the pink was out of the sky, now. Prompto could feel Ardyn looking at him, and didn't look back.

Ardyn said, “All right.”

Prompto watched out the window for a while, then went back into the cabin with the guys.

A couple hours later they set down in a field, the nearest clear space to where they'd left the cars. A herd of garula watched them stumble down the ramp. They didn't bother closing it.

“If anyone can fly the thing,” Ardyn slurred, not doing a very good job of keeping his eyes open or walking straight by now, “they are more than welcome to it.”
Gladio took his arm to hold him up. His grip looked tighter than it needed to be.

The grass swished past their legs. They'd probably run this kind of distance easily a hundred times, but it felt far now. Finally seeing the glint of the sun off the Vixen and the Regalia was like catching a sight of home.

When Ardyn stumbled toward his car, Ignis shook his head and said, “You are in no condition to get behind the wheel.”

“I am equal to the task of-”

“I'll take it,” Prompto said quietly.

Ardyn let him take the keys from his hand.

Noct went with Prompto. It was strange to be in the driver's seat. When they pulled out onto the road, Prompto thought he might catch Ardyn's eye from the back of the Regalia, but he was either asleep or pretending to be.

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It was one of the quiet mornings that made Priscilla like this job. There were days when there were rowdy teenagers making a nuisance at three in the morning, or ones where people back from hiking trips stomped so much mud into the carpet it took three passes with the steam cleaner to see the color again, but then there were the days like this, when the air through the front window was full of the scent of pine trees, and she could just do a crossword puzzle and remember why she'd come out to T礼拜在 the first place.

She was trying to think of a four-letter word for “wise man's poultry seasoning” when a pair of convertibles drove up and stopped in the parking lot. The five men who got out of them were in clothes that looked ragged from a distance. As they got closer, Priscilla could tell that what she'd thought was the black of the fabric was scorch marks. There were two young men who looked hardly out of high school. Another, the largest human being she'd ever seen, was propping up a man in an extraordinary amount of clothing and with hair the same purple as the clematis in her back garden. The last was a man with perfect posture and a scar all across the left side of his face. All of them were smudged with ashes and dry blood. When they came to the window, they filled the whole place with the smell of sweat and smoke. Priscilla tried to get her mind to work well enough to ask if they needed an ambulance.

The purple-haired man leaned heavily on the ledge of the reception window, looked at the folded newspaper in front of her, and said, “Sage.”

The man with the scar said, “Would you happen to have any rooms available?”
Prompto woke up to a face full of darkness and clean-smelling pillow. He lay there and added things up for a while. There was a hotel bed, and Noct breathing next to him. There was the green glow of numbers on the clock radio on the bedside table, and a rectangle of streetlight around the edges of the closed blinds. It was the kind of quiet that always felt special and different to a city kid.

Everybody was there, and everybody was okay. When Prompto sat up the blankets slid down, putting his bare chest and shoulders into the cool air. He took a count, just to make sure. One two three-

Panic grabbed at him for a split second before he remembered. Not enough beds in here, so Ardyn was in another room. That was a square in the patchwork of exhaustion-soaked pictures Prompto had in his head from that last hour before crashing; putting on the parking brake, Ardyn wandering toward the car with a hazy urgent look on his face before Gladio said *Your baby's fine, Prompto didn't smash it up* and steered him in the right direction, the stunned-looking lady at the reception – man, did they owe her a tip – Ardyn ransacking the vending machine, the slide of the keycard into the door, the feeling of crawling into bed. There must have been a shower in there somewhere, since he didn't have ashes on him anymore, but honestly Prompto couldn't remember.

He looked down and ran his fingers over his new scars for a while.

They must have slept the whole day through. The clock said 3:12, but Prompto's body told him it was good to go. No point in trying to sleep more. He didn't want to bug the guys with any light in here, but he could go hang out on one of the benches outside and mess around with his phone. Quiet as he could, Prompto got up and searched through the clothes tossed on a chair until he recognized his vest by feel. He dug around and found his phone in his pocket. His fingers brushed something else, too, something pointy. That would be the little purple octopus charm. Ardyn's keys. He must've forgotten to give them back.

Prompto pulled on some clean clothes from the Armiger and slipped out the door. It was cool out and it smelled like trees. The wind was rustling in them, and there were crickets chirping. There were lights in the parking lot and alone the street, and nobody else around. The front desk had the metal shutter pulled down.

For no reason Prompto realized he knew how concrete felt on his knees now.

Yeah. He'd play a game for a while and fill up the eye in his head. Usually Prompto hopped into the front seat, but with how sore his muscles were, opening the door was a better idea. He settled down into his place. It was a comfortable seat, and something about it felt safe. He'd crossed half the country from here. Sometimes Iggy, Noct, or Gladio would be in the back seat. Sometimes it would just be the two of them, and once or twice, for no reason, Ardyn would reach over and kiss his hand.

He pulled his phone out and started up Puzzle and Daemon. Something mindless was good right now, and matching little spheres kept his attention for a while. Then he put it away and looked up at the stars.

There was the Portraitist. Prompto couldn't really tell how it was supposed to look like a girl with a paintbrush, but he remembered the pattern. That was the one Ardyn said looked like his freckles, and said there was a story that once she'd painted something that made the world fall apart and get put back together a little bit wrong.
He pulled out the little set of favorite pictures he kept in the Armiger and flicked through them in the light of the streetlamp. Him with all the guys at Hammerhead, one with Noct and Gladio hauling a giant fish out of the water, one with Iggy looking deep in thought at the stalls full of spices in the Lestallum market, the selfie he'd snagged with Ardyn right before a Bomb crashed into them from behind. Prompto flipped through the set twice, but he couldn't find the group shot in front of the Disc of Cauthess, the one where you could kind of tell he hadn't set the timer on the camera for long enough and had to scramble to get in place and get Ardyn's arm around him. He must've dropped it when he was showing them to everybody the other night. That was too bad. He was really proud of how he'd gotten the lighting to come out in that one.

Prompto put the pictures away. Couldn't seem to keep his mind in one place for long tonight. He opened the glove compartment to look at the tapes. Not to listen to or anything. Just for old times' sake. He liked the clack they made when you flicked through them, and the little bits of cover art you had to squint to see.

That was strange.

There was a cream-colored envelope stuck between Def Coewurl and Djose Temple Pilots. The fancy cursive on the front said Prompto.

Ooh, treasure! he would've said if anybody else was around, and sung the little discovering-a-secret-passage song from that old video game. Since he was alone, he just opened it.

Inside was one sheet of paper that was covered in the same fancy handwriting.

My dearest Prompto,

If this has fallen into your hands, my task is complete.

I regret the extent of what I must do, and that we could not have had a less painful parting. I beg you not to despise me for the deception. Had I the choice, I would remain with you eternally. The gods, however, are not so kind. Yet I go to my fate without fear of the future; our Noct will be a fine king, and you a splendid Crownguard at his side.

You have been my light at sunset. You, my treasure and my joy, have made my life's last days its best.

Forgive me for lacking the courage to say goodbye. Know always that I l

“No,” Prompto whispered. “No, no.”

“I see I am too late,” Ardyn said, in a voice that yanked gravity out from under Prompto's feet.

He was standing on the other side of the car. He was in a sweater that wasn't quite on straight. He must have just woken up. He must have come right out there. Prompto looked at him and couldn't understand him. He was tilt-shift again.

Prompto got out of the car. He walked across the parking lot and across the street, staring at the page and trying to force the blurry marks to make sense. He stopped at the edge of the road under the streetlight, where the wind brought the sharp smell of the trees to him and made the paper tremble in his hands. Behind him Ardyn said his name.

Ardyn was there a few steps away, pale in the streetlight, with a half-sad and half-sheepish look like he'd been caught out.
“What is this?” Prompto said numbly.

Ardyn said, “Prompto.”

“You weren't planning to trick us.” Words fell out of his mouth like marbles he couldn't hold. “You were planning to die.”

Ardyn's hand wasn't really reaching for him. It was just caught in midair. It was the same sad look as *one day you'll understand*. “At the least, read to the end.”

“How did I not see it?” His voice came out thin and dizzy. “You joke about dying all the time.”

Ardyn tried to come closer. Prompto took quick steps back.

Everybody had things locked up inside them like a handcuffed man locked in a room. The right thing was not to make a big deal. It could be all right if you let it be. You put away the feelings that aren't useful. You didn't want to make a big deal and make it all about you. Nobody wanted to be with somebody like that.

“You.” Prompto hauled in breaths that made his shoulders rise up like he was on the ocean. “You.”

There were other worlds where-

No. There was just this one.

“You unbelievable asshole!”

The shout took all the air in his lungs and slapped the insects quiet.

Ardyn said, “Prompto-”

Prompto shredded the thing to pieces and threw them at him. The ripping sound vibrated in his back teeth. Pieces fluttered to the ground, and some clung to Ardyn's clothes.

“I don't want to hear it! I don't want any fancy excuses for how you were gonna pull that whole thing and just leave! And then it'd be some whole big sacrifice, so I couldn't even be mad at you! You'd get to be the big dramatic hero. You just leave me this and it's all okay, because *you* don't have to deal with it anymore!”

All the fury in Prompto smashed through its locks and came barreling out straight at Ardyn. He vibrated with the force of his own voice. He stalked forward, his hands flying in wild gestures that made the scars on his stomach pull tight.

“What were you trying to do, one-up Noct? He ducks responsibility by taking a nap, so you have to do it by dropping dead?”

Ardyn was looking at him and not saying anything at all. There was an ugly satisfaction to making him shut up. This he wasn't ready for. This wasn't part of his plan.

Momentum carried Prompto's voice forward. He was lightheaded and stupid and he didn't care.

“You don't get to dodge your relationship problems by getting your head torn off by a monkey on fire!”

Ardyn said, “There was no other way.”
“Oh yeah, yeah, sure. Except for the million other ways there were!” Prompto’s voice tearing at his throat made his eyes stream more. “If you’d come clean to us we could’ve helped. Iggy could’ve made a way better plan. Yours doesn’t even make sense! If you’d gone in after that thing alone – what if it'd just killed you and got out? What if there're more out there? All you would've done is--”

Prompto felt his face crumple in on itself. His heart wrenched like a wrung-out dishrag.

“Ardyn, do you want to die?”

The streetlight put a pale layer on top of Ardyn. He was a bright thing in front of the backdrop of the dark woods by the road. The wind caught a torn piece of the letter stuck to his pant leg and whipped it away. The insects were silent, and Prompto trying to catch sobbing breaths was loud. He looked sad and noble, the asshole.

“I wished,” he said, “to accept the inevitability with grace.”

The wind was making Prompto shiver hard but he wasn't cold. Heat was prickling all over his skin. “Is that a yes or a no?”

Ardyn didn't meet his eyes. A moth flew by him and plinked against the streetlight above.

“No,” he admitted.

Prompto couldn't see right. Ardyn was a blurry purplish blob. He scrubbed his forearm across his face.

“Then what did you do it for? How come that was worth making me think I'd just been a toy to you?”

The blob of Ardyn's head tilted. “I thought you said that was all right.”

“Of course it's not all right! You used us, you pulled a knife on Noct, you made me feel stupid and worthless. I only said that cause I was scared you'd leave me!”

Prompto blinked fast which was a mistake, because then he could see the strange look of surprise on Ardyn's face.

Ardyn said, “You were afraid I would leave you?”

“Yes! I have issues, okay? You have to know that before you say you-- If you're gonna say that, you say it like you. Don't just make it an excuse. Don't you dare say that and, and get yourself...”

He thought of Ardyn being the one to take that monkey's kick to the gut, and bleeding there alone on the cold concrete.

Prompto’s gulp for air came in all wrong. He stepped over the metal guardrail at the side of the road and went with wet grass swishing at his ankles over to a rock where the light still reached. Last thing he needed on this shitty night was to get eaten by a daemon. He sat down and put his head in his hands. His face was a mess and he didn't have anything to wipe it off with. He didn't even have sleeves.

He heard cloth rustle. Through his fingers he saw a purple square held out to him.

“Here,” Ardyn said softly.

Prompto rubbed at his face with the handkerchief. It was shiny and soft.
“Course you have one with your initials on it.” Prompto wiped his eyes. “You dick.”

Ardyn sat beside him. The insects chirped. There were stars out, with clouds going by, and almost a full moon. You could see it all so much clearer out here in the sticks. There was an owl, too, out there somewhere.

Prompto got his eyes cleared up, but his voice was still thick and weird when he said to the ground, “Are you gonna tell me why?”

Ardyn was quiet long enough that Prompto was starting to think the answer would be no, and if it was, Prompto was going to shove him off the rock, steal his car, and drive the thing to Tenebrae.

Like somebody bracing themselves to head out into the cold, Ardyn let out a long sigh.

He said, “The Lucis Caelum name has always meant sacrifice.”

All the stuff in school about kings and queens was always about how they died. That was all history, and it was a long time ago. It was just dates Prompto had been supposed to remember.

On bad days, Noct's dad walked with a limp.

Ardyn's hair was messier than usual, from sleeping. Once you got to know him well enough you could tell the difference. He was looking off into the night.

He said, “We are the offering for the kingdom's prosperity. It is the role we fulfill, in one way or another, dating back to the ages when drops of the king's blood were given to the fields to ensure the harvest.”

Prompto sniffled. “Gross.”

“I know. But such was the belief, and the gods did little to dissuade it. In this age the methods are not so lurid, but the core remains. I thought of that often, when the reports of the Empire's secret project began to reach my hands.”

“When did you decide?” Prompto's mind ran backwards, trying to find a place where if he'd been smarter he would have seen Ardyn change. Lestallum? The Vesperpool? The last Royal Tomb they'd been to? Had he been sad? Prompto had been dating him for months and he didn't know how to tell. A thought hit him and made him go cold. “It was that night when we were on your car, wasn't it. Talking about hopes and dreams and all that stuff.”

When Ardyn had said all he wanted was to stay with him. The night went blurry again.

When he'd blinked it clear, Ardyn was looking at him with a faint, sad smile.

“My dear, it was decided before ever you walked into my library.”

The handkerchief covered Prompto's face. “You asshole,” he said, in a voice that might be muffled enough to hide how it cracked.

“My life has always been a resource of the nation.” Ardyn's voice could sound rich and calm even when he was talking about this. It wasn't fair. “As the scope of the Empire's project became clear, I became more and more aware that the time had come for me to be spent. The heir was secure on the throne, Noct had come of age, and the spare was no longer needed. I was making preparations to set out on my own, then to strike as soon as I received word Noct's pilgrimage was complete.”
All this time.

Ardyn's boot moved a little bit and dug the side into the dirt. Weird boot, with all those buckles on it. They were fun to flick when you were laying around doing nothing. For once he was in plain pants. Not striped.

“And then you appeared, like a bird through an open window. I thought it fortuitous. A last banquet. I supposed we would have our fun for a while, and when the blush faded from the rose you would be on your way, in the manner of fickle youth. I had not the least idea you would prove to be more loyal, more exceptional...in every way, more than I ever could have guessed.”

“Flattering me's not gonna help,” Prompto mumbled.

“I am only being honest. Bear with me. I have so little practice.”

He sounded different than Prompto had ever heard him before. Like he was talking to him seriously for the first time. It was good, and it was scary.

“I did not expect you would invite me along. I had no defenses in place. Hence invoking a competition I trusted myself to be wise enough to lose. Yet there I was, fighting as passionately as I ever had, as otherwise that would be the last I ever saw you.”

Prompto thought the same thing he had when he was on his knees watching Noct with a knife at his throat: he'd been the one to ask Ardyn along. He'd made that lucky shot. All the consequences of that one thing hit him again, this time from the opposite direction, like a sack of bricks swinging on a rope.

“I can't be responsible for you not being dead,” Prompto said. “I can't be responsible for a houseplant.”

“Such do small choices determine fate,” said Ardyn. “You'll drive yourself mad if you second-guess. Had I been another and a stronger man, perhaps I could have gone into the dark alone and kept my secrets. I was selfish and indulgent, and could not refuse the chance to steal a little more time. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Yeah, great job.” Prompto blew his nose. His handkerchief now, jerk. “You're batting a thousand there.”

No cars came through the tunnel. Not a lot of people would risk meeting daemons on the road this far out. From an airship the hotel and the diner would look like a little island of light in the deep dark. Down here you could hear the trees rustling, inviting you out away from the road.

“I know what I've done is not forgivable. That was, in fact, crucial. I imagined it would be easier for all involved if you hated me.” Ardyn had his head tilted up. He was looking at the moon. “I had imagined death would be my redemption.”

“Well, tough.” With his eyes all swollen up, his face wet, and his ass numb from sitting on the cold rock, for once Prompto felt more sure of himself than he'd really known he could. “You don't get to be the lady floating in the river with all the flowers. Yours is Portrait of a Guy Making Up for a Dick Move.”

Ardyn's eyes fixed on him. His lips were a little bit open, and he looked like he'd been knocked him off balance. “How may I?”

“First you gotta promise that you're not gonna...” Prompto felt a treacherous thickness rising in his
throat and swallowed it away. “...you're not gonna try to do that again. You're not a spare to me.”

“You have my vow,” Ardyn said, his voice and his eyes steady.

“Prove it,” Prompto said. “Hey. Give me that picture.”

It was a hunch. He half expected Ardyn to give him a confused look and ask what he was talking
about. What Ardyn did was reach into his pants pocket and pull out the photograph. That was them,
all right, with the Disc behind.

Prompto took it. “I'm keeping this. You're not getting it back until I let you. Got it?”

Ardyn's eyes followed Prompto putting the picture in his pocket. “Understood.”

“And second...” Prompto took a deep breath. His skin was hot, and the night air was cool. “No more
lying to me, and no more hiding stuff. That's what you meant when you were talking about me
putting on an act, right? You were trying to tell me you do that too.”

“Yes,” Ardyn said softly. The breeze made a piece of hair shift back and forth over his profile, like a
curtain covering a window. “Will I ever have your trust again?”

“I don't know,” Prompto admitted. “I want to try. But you have to trust me, too. I don't just want the
easy parts of you.”

For everything he'd been through the past twenty-four hours or so, it still felt powerful to be the one
who could put that astonished look on Ardyn's face.

“You must be aware,” Ardyn said, “that you are an extraordinary man.”

“Yeah, well I'm still mad at you.” That was true, though it felt light and clean now. Not the kind of
heavy, sinking mad that burrowed down and gnawed anymore. This was the bright sort of mad that
was like sparks running back and forth.

Ardyn gave him a searching look. He pulled his lower lip through his teeth, then said, “If we are to
be honest, there is one more thing you must know. Something I have been keeping from you about
who you are. I fear it will not be a pleasant surprise.”

The seriousness of his tone made Prompto's stomach tighten up. “If it's me being adopted, I already
know that.”

Though he didn't really get how Ardyn would know that, unless he knew everything. All that spy
stuff.

“Not that, precisely,” Ardyn said, “but a related matter. I will tell you now, if you wish, but I believe
it would be best to show you, when we return to the capital.”

“Okay.” Prompto folded up the handkerchief and stuck it in his pocket. Curiosity and dread itched at
the back of his brain, but he could put those both off for later.“Show me then. I've had about as many
big ugly surprises as I can handle for one day.”

“So you have,” said Ardyn.

It felt good just talking to him again.

Prompto leaned back with his hands braced on the rock and looked up at the sky. The breeze dried
his face off. He was emptied out of everything he'd been carrying, and instead there was an energy
rolling back and forth inside him.

“So,” he said, his eyes falling towards Ardyn. “Angry sex?”

Ardyn stood and clasped him around the wrist to pull him up. He nodded. “Angry sex.”
Prompto shoved Ardyn up against the wall and kissed him hard enough to whap his head into the painting of sailboats by Galdin Quay.

“You scared me,” he accused, rubbing his face on Ardyn's cheek and letting the stubble scrape his sore, hot skin. “You called me easy.”

“Not meant in that sense,” Ardyn said, and it was a bounce to the ego that he was kind of out of breath already.

“Don't care.” Prompto shoved Ardyn's sweater up and yanked it over his head. He tossed it on the floor, then dove in and nipped all over Ardyn's chest. He couldn't let any part of him be still. It was like there were ants in his palms, like in that old movie they'd gone and seen together. “You selfish-- sneaky-- asshole.”

“Yes, yes,” Ardyn said, with his hands caressing Prompto's shoulders, big enough to cover them. “Tell me more.”

Prompto didn't care about being nice right now, so he bit right on Ardyn's nipple as hard as he wanted. Ardyn moaned and threw his head back with a spray of purple hair against the picture.

“Quiet,” Prompto said. He was full of leftover adrenaline and a sticky mass of emotions from the fight, and his heart was beating fast, making him stupid-brave enough to do this. “The guys are in the other room.”

He bit the other nipple to even things out, and when Ardyn opened his mouth it was soundless.

“How would you feel if your hands got cuffed?” Prompto said, biting his collarbone and his shoulder. His skin tasted salty. “How would you feel shoved down on your knees?”

Ardyn's head lolled back. “There is but one way to find out.”

With a pink flash there was a pair of handcuffs and a key in Ardyn's hand, held out in offering.

Prompto spun him around and pushed him up against the wall. The handcuffs shut with a satisfying snap. He pocketed the key, turned Ardyn around to face him, and shoved down on his shoulders until Ardyn folded to the ground. The sight of him looking up with his eyes warm and expecting knocked Prompto dizzy. His shoulders were pulled back by the cuffs, and his mobile hands were kept still for once.

The rest of Ardyn wasn't, though. He leaned forward and rubbed his face against Prompto's stomach, making the shirt drag over his scars.

“Show me,” Ardyn murmured.
Prompto’s fingers got around the hem of his shirt and stayed there for a second before pulling it up. He tossed it on a chair and Ardyn was already kissing his skin, working from left to right across and in between the spiderweb of new scars.

“Not real pretty,” Prompto said. He could feel pieces of Ardyn's kisses, depending on where they fell. He slid his hands into Ardyn's hair and felt the smooth, cool slide of it between his fingers.

“I disagree.” Ardyn nuzzled his face against his stomach. Prompto felt the scratch of his stubble on the patches of unscarred skin, like feeling it through a chainlink fence. “Who could disdain the marks of your courage?”

Prompto thought they were more like a signpost in the same font as the one outside the monkey's lair: You Have Come THIS Close to Being Dead. The thought made him giddy. They were Ardyn's marks, too.

“Yeah, that's right,” Prompto said. He tugged on Ardyn's hair and felt the hot breath of his moan on his skin. “You, you better be nice to me.”

“You have my solemn vow.”

Ardyn lowered his face and nuzzled against the front of Prompto's pants, and Prompto's stomach jumped. It was interesting to watch how he had to shift his shoulders around to keep his balance. Ardyn took the zipper in his mouth and pulled it down with a sound that Prompto less heard than felt run along his skin.

“The button's gonna be tough,” Prompto said. Ardyn flicked his eyes up at him with an amber watch-me look.

He really did it. He dove right forward with his hair tickling Prompto's stomach, and with a few tosses of his head and what must have been a whole lot of tongue and concentration, got the button undone with his mouth.

Prompto scrunched up handfuls of Ardyn's hair and said, “Wow.”

“For the rest,” Ardyn said, mouthing at Prompto's underwear-clad cock through his open fly, “I request assistance.”

Prompto shoved his pants and underwear down. He kicked them off, along with his shoes while he was at it. He grabbed Ardyn's hair and pulled him forward. He had really good hair to grab by. Prompto yanking him around had to have him off balance. Having your hands trapped behind your back really threw you off, Prompto knew, and thinking about why he knew that hit him with a spike of anger that mixed with the feeling of Ardyn's mouth wrapping around his cock like vodka and Red Bulette.


The sound Ardyn made was mm-hm.

He moved up and down, bending from the waist, and Prompto smoothed his fingers shakily through his hair as he watched the moving muscles in his back. He took a breath that pleasure put a shudder in, and worked his fingers down and across the scars on Ardyn's shoulders. His hips swayed into the heat of Ardyn's mouth. There was concentration on his face, and his closed eyes made his lashes lie against his cheeks.
Prompto got a good grip on his hair, held his head still, and pulled free. Ardyn caught a quick loud breath and looked up. His lips were dark.

“Up,” Prompto said. Ardyn got to his feet and loomed over him right until Prompto shoved him backward onto the bed. The squeak from the springs mixed with his little oh. Prompto pawed Ardyn's belt open and yanked his pants off, leaving him naked, all warm skin that shone even in lousy hotel lights. He knew he was getting let do that, but manhandling a guy twice his size felt good anyway. Felt pretty nice to see Ardyn was hard from this, too. Prompto hopped up on the bed between Ardyn's legs and smacked his hands down on his chest. His blood was riled up and whatever he said now, Ardyn had to listen.

“Don't you ever scare me like that again,” he demanded. Ardyn's stomach rose and fell underneath him with his breath.

“Never.”

“You better be ready to make up for it.”

Ardyn said softly. “I lay myself at your mercy.”

At the same time as his heart turned over, Prompto couldn't stop himself from laughing. “You drama queen.”

“That I will not deny.” He put on a piece of a little smirk that made Prompto bend down and bite him. He nipped all over Ardyn's chest and didn't bother being gentle. He got a whole sequence of sounds that went from hiss to gasp to moan, and out of nowhere Prompto was hit with the thought of never getting to have this again, and what if the last time had really been the last time.

“Don't you go scaring me,” he said, raking his nails down Ardyn's ribs, “and don't you go throwing yourself at fire monkeys, and don't you go running off risking your life like a crazy idiot without even saying goodbye. You're not just yours anymore.”

“Oh?” Ardyn said, with a teasing note in his voice even while it wasn't real steady, and his eyes big and gold. “And whose am I?”

It might be too far to go, but Ardyn was trying to get him to say it and it was what he felt, down in the tightness balled up in his stomach, and in the sharp thing in his heart that was pushing heat into his blood.

Prompto bit down hard on Ardyn's pectoral. He kissed the mark, looked up at him, and said, “Mine.”

Ardyn's head fell back, and Prompto felt his moan vibrate through his body. That made his heart pound, and he fit his hips against him and rolled so their cocks pressed together and sparks went shooting up his spine. Ardyn couldn't be real comfortable with his hands trapped underneath him like that, but the noises he made weren't complaining.

“Guys are in the next room,” Prompto reminded him, and then paused as he got an idea. “I could gag you.”

That got him a louder moan than anything else. Ardyn threw his eyes at the closet. “Top inner pocket, left side.”

Prompto hopped up went there where Ardyn's coat was hanging, singed all over and with reddish stains on the lacey stuff. He rummaged inside and pulled out a purple silk handkerchief with ALC in the corner and a pattern of little silver skulls.
“How many of these does one guy even need?” Prompto said, kneeling on the bed beside Ardyn.

“It would never do to be caught unprepared,” said Ardyn, and opened his mouth.

Prompto tied the handkerchief around his head. It was just long enough to get a good knot in. He sat back on Ardyn’s stomach and looked down at him, pretending like he didn't feel his cock just behind his ass.

“You look pretty good like that,” Prompto said, drumming his fingers on Ardyn's chest. From the look in Ardyn's eyes, he got the idea at the same time Prompto did.

He pulled his camera out of the armiger and snapped a couple quick shots. “Just for me,” he said, and even tied up, Ardyn posed. He tilted his head so the light hit him nice. He had a real talent for that. Prompto would've liked to get a couple more shots from the side, to get a good show of how the gag went behind Ardyn's teeth and made a bold purple line across his cheek, but if he got caught up he wouldn't get anything else done tonight. He vanished the camera and pulled out the stuff he'd gotten in the habit of keeping in his own little private part of the armiger.

Even while he was playing around the anger was snapping energy all through him, like the raw elemancy pulled out of the ground and turned into the stuff that crackled in a flask. He got off Ardyn and went on his knees on the bed between his legs. He gave the side of Ardyn's thigh a smack to tell him to pull his legs up, and it was a pure shot of power when he did. Ardyn was watching him with his head lifted up and his eyes all heavy, and when Prompto's fingers went inside him the lines at the sides of his eyes deepened, and he grunted into the handkerchief.

“Attaboy,” Prompto said just to be annoying, and got a muffled laugh. He leaned on Ardyn's folded-up leg and worked his fingers further in. He'd never even thought about doing this before, but he wasn't thinking much right now. Brain, you're on break. Feelings, it's all you.

“No more secrets from me,” Prompto, paying more attention to what Ardyn looked like than what he was saying. His chest with its maroon hair was moving up and down quick, and his breath was pushing against the gag. “No more jerking me around. You take me seriously.”

Ardyn said, “Mhm.” Prompto leaned his weight on Ardyn's bent leg and pressed him down so his body made an impression in that bedspread with the fat flower print that every motel had to have by law or something. He was making more and more urgent noises, but he was just going to have to wait until Prompto was good and ready. He worked his fingers in and out, watched Ardyn's head swish back and forth and sweat break out on his forehead, and felt powerful.

Prompto's body had always done emotions a whole lot better than his head did.

Ardyn's half-open eyes were latched onto him the whole time he was rolling the condom down over his cock.

Prompto wasn't real gentle. He didn't feel like being patient right now. He'd had to chase Ardyn down that whole flight of stairs, scared and angry and sure he was about to lose him. Now he had him caught, almost bent double on his back, with Prompto's arms under his knees while he moved into him.

“You're...ngh...pretty flexible for an older guy,” Prompto said, and when Ardyn was mid-muffled laugh he snapped his hips forward and turned it into a groan.

“Better hold on,” Prompto said, feeling a wild smile creeping onto his lips, and watched Ardyn realize he couldn't do that with his cuffed hands just as he really got moving.
Ardyn's head was rocking back and forth, making his hair swat against the pillow. Prompto took all the energy snapping around inside of him and turned it into fucking him hard enough to make the headboard shake. The lamps on the attached end tables jumped as Prompto thrust forward and pleasure hit him back. Ardyn's sounds weren't in his ear like usual, and he couldn't say anything sweet or disarming or that'd trick or charm Prompto into going easy. He could just moan, and the handkerchief made it so you had to lean forward to hear. Each time Promtto sank into him Ardyn got pushed up a little, so soon he was half sitting up. When Prompto moved it carried through Ardyn's whole body, making his legs tighten over Prompto's arms and making his tied-back shoulders smack the headboard.

“I wanna keep you forever,” Prompto said, barely knowing the words coming out of his mouth. His fingers dug into Ardyn's hips. Raw emotions jangled around inside him like change rattling in a can to scare a cat off the furniture. “Wanna make you sorry. Wanna slap you, for pulling what you did.”

Ardyn's moan was an invitation.

Prompto stared and kept pounding into him. “Dude. Seriously?”

Ardyn “mm-hm”ed, and his hair scattered against the headboard with his nods.

Prompto lifted his hand, and Ardyn's eyes followed.

It took a weird kind of coordination to slap somebody and fuck them at the same time. It wasn't very hard and didn't really land right, glancing off Ardyn's jaw at an angle. It felt good anyway. Ardyn's head fell to the side with his eyes closed and his face tilted up like he was basking in the sun. The sound he made was something like, “Again.”

On the backhand Ardyn's head snapped in the other direction and the whap bounced off the walls. The impact that jolted up Prompto's arm was as fierce a satisfaction as the roll of Ardyn's hips beneath him.

“One more time,” Prompto panted, looking at him without blinking, “for good luck.”

When he smacked him, Ardyn arched his body right off the bed and his cock actually twitched, a whole jumping movement. Prompto had to grab it then, and pump in time with his hips, eyes trapped on the red staining Ardyn's face and how his mouth worked at the gag. All the muffled whimpers and gasps he made belonged to Prompto. Everything he got was what Prompto decided to give. Prompto leaned over him, planted his forearm on the stomach for leverage, and pumped him fast while he pushed in and out in long strokes that turned the anger and energy into sweet sharp fire in his bloodstream.

“You're such a bastard,” Prompto whispered. “You're so beautiful.”

Every move Prompto made carried into him and doubled him up more, with his legs hooked over Prompto's elbows and then his ankles locking behind Prompto's back to pull him in harder, and Prompto just let him have it all. His own breathing fell out loud and ragged and mixed with Ardyn's moans. The gag made his voice just a throaty blur but it was sharp and urgent, and when Ardyn's body jerked and his shoulders thrashed against the bed and his cock painted his stomach, it was Prompto who'd struck him breathless and silent.

His head fell to the side. His eyes slitted open and he watched Prompto fuck him. His body was relaxed and flexible, like Prompto could just move him around however he wanted, just take all the good feeling for as long as it took. Prompto's breath hitched and his hips rammed in faster. He felt his edge coming up on him. Ardyn made a noise like he was trying to get his attention. When Prompto's
eyes went to his face, Ardyn lifted his chin up, trying to tell him something. It took Prompto a second to make a guess and holy shit he could not be right.

“You want me to...?” he managed, in between the work he was doing.

Ardyn said, "Mmm."

Prompto wasn't going to waste time thinking about it. He let Ardyn's legs drop down onto the mattress. He pulled out, yanked the condom off, and vaulted onto Ardyn so he was sitting on his chest and stroking his cock right in front of him, and could feel him breathing underneath him, and it was the wrongest sort of weird-hot and then Prompto was coming right onto his face. Prompto's hips stuttered and his mind swam, and he watched his come make white lines over Ardyn's closed eyes and the handkerchief tied across his cheek and the content curved-up corner of his mouth.

Prompto gripped his shoulders and shook a little while he came down. He felt like a piece of paper twisting around in the air until it got to solid ground.

He took some long, deep breaths to get his pounding heart to slow down a little. The scars on his stomach tightened when he breathed hard. The room was suddenly real quiet. Outside, somewhere nearby, that owl was hooting. Ardyn's body was hot underneath him. He watched a drop of come trickle down Ardyn's jaw, along the stubble.

Prompto reached behind Ardyn's head and fumbled at the gag's knot. It took a couple tries before he got his fingers worked in. It was hard to do without yanking his hair. He got the knot picked and undid it, taking it out of Ardyn's mouth. Ardyn went mhm and worked his jaw. Must have been sore. His face settled into a serene smile. It slipped into a frown and a complaining noise when Prompto slid off him.

“Hold up a second,” Prompto said. “Just cutting you loose.”

He got down on the floor, with the sweat cooling on his skin and giving him goosebumps. He dug around his clothes until he found the key in his pants pocket. Ardyn rolled over on his side when Prompto said to, and that still felt nice.Undoing handcuffs was a lot easier when they were in front and you had the key. They clicked open, and left red marks on Ardyn's wrists where they'd been pressed there by the mattress.

“I kinda went overboard there,” Prompto said. He laid down and looked up at the ceiling, worrying the cuffs in his hands. The skin on his face was heating up. Had he really just done all that?

“You were perfect.” Ardyn's voice was low and throaty, a big cat's rumble. He took the handkerchief and wiped off his face. Prompto propped himself up on his arm to watch. “I enjoyed every moment.”

“Wow,” Prompto said with something like awe. “You're freaky.”

“Mm.” Ardyn let his head drop on the pillow, and looked at Prompto with that old secret twinge of a satisfied smile. “Now call me a slut.”

“Dork.” Prompto spun the cuffs on his finger. He didn't feel tired. He felt like he did after a long, hard fight, when they'd gotten their trophy and were heading back to town.

He flopped down onto his back, holding the cuffs up to jingle around by the chain. He could see the picture on the wall through the metal circle. They'd knocked it cockeyed. Ardyn's hand came over and laid on his stomach, fingers running over the scars.
Prompto's breath had settled down by the time he said, “We're gonna have to talk more.”

Ardyn looked over at him. His hair was dark with sweat at the roots and a tangled mess everywhere. There was red on his cheekbones from Prompto's hand. “I have nothing in the world but time.”

It was so easy to lay next to him, but there was no way to know how things were going to be now, except different. It was all marshy territory, with no trusting the next step. He was-

“Hey,” Prompto said, squinting at the cuffs, “how come these say *Property of the Crownsguard*?”

Ardyn dabbed the corner of his lips with the handkerchief. “The Marshal wasn't using them.”
The scars on Ardyn's back were long pale lines like rock ridges seen from an airship. Prompto's fingertips traced down them. Ardyn was lying on his stomach with his face pillowed on his arms, so the light from the bedside lamp pooled on his shoulderblades.

Prompto said, “How did you really get these?”

Back in Ardyn's rooms in Insomnia, after the day spent filling a camera with images of him, Ardyn had tossed off the explanation like the marks were a souvenir from an adventure.

“The tale I told was true by the letter.” Ardyn's face was resting on the back of his hand. His eyes were half-closed, but that wasn't what he looked like when he was drifting off to sleep. “It was the spirit I misrepresented.”

“It really was Nifs?” Prompto didn't really want to know, but he needed to. His elbow sunk into the mattress to prop him up. The sweat had cooled on his skin and left a chill there, so he pulled the covers over himself. They were stiff, like hotel bedspreads always were.

“Yes.” Ardyn said it slowly, like his voice was water soaking through thick cloth. “It's a long, unpleasant story.”

Ardyn was an amazing storyteller. Sometimes when they were driving Prompto would fall forward and hit his head on the dashboard, he was laughing so hard. Ardyn had that talent where he could make anything sound wild and funny.

“Tell me,” Prompto said, as he watched him gathering up words and trying not to do that.

The room was dim, with just the bedside lamp on. It threw Ardyn's shadow toward Prompto, a double of his outline in darkness on top of the bedspread's flowers. Outside, the wind came up hard enough to make the trees rustle.

“I was young,” Ardyn said, like he was admitting a mistake. “I was arrogant about my lineage's power and my individual skills, and like all the young, I was invincible.”

People said that, but Prompto had never felt that way himself. He would've said he knew his limits plenty, back before he really knew what almost dying felt like.

“Even then, I enjoyed taking on espionage assignments. There is no better infiltrator than a man who can quite literally slip through the cracks. I had the same abilities as Regis but far more latitude in using them, as I was something my brother was not.”

“Sneaky?” Prompto said, knowing he wasn't going to like the real answer.
“Expendable.” Ardyn said it with a distant irony, and must have known how it made Prompto's guts clench. He took Prompto's hand and kissed the back. “My apologies, but strictly speaking, it is true. The country could continue without me, so I could gallivant about in freedom while Regis stayed back, chained to the throne.”

It was something Prompto knew, really. There were the people who could die, and then there was the heir to the throne, who couldn't. The Crownsguard all knew that. It wasn't that the other people didn't matter. It was just that there was one who had to be okay, no matter what.

“It's pretty easy to imagine,” Prompto said. “You, gallivanting.”

“Oh, I was marvelous.” It was interesting to watch Ardyn's face sideways, when it was half hidden by the pillow. It made the little wry motions of his lips and his eyebrows stand out. “I daresay I was nearly half as good as I thought I was. I traipsed right over the border and into a little crossroads of a town to meet my contact.”

“You mean, like, a spy?” Prompto said, immediately imagining somebody in a balaclava.

“Not intentionally. He was a laboratory technician, and might have remained a happily loyal citizen all his life had he not stumbled on his facility's unconscionable secret. He brought proof at great personal risk. He placed the folder into my hands himself, full of crucial information about all manner of research projects; names, details, locations. He had kept it in a secret compartment of his briefcase. Very cleverly made, but not nearly so secure as my hiding place.”

“The Armiger.” Prompto had hidden stuff in there before, but it usually just got him Noct rolling his eyes and going, Dude, I can tell.

“Precisely. Anyone could search me to their heart's content, and they would find not a shred of anything incriminating.”

He had a small smile on his face, like he did when he talked about old tricks he'd pulled or stuff he'd gotten up to with Noct's dad. For a second Prompto listened to him and ran his fingers between the long bumps of his scars, and it was like any other story.

“In my haste to return home, I grew careless.”

His smile faded.

“How'd they find you?”

Under his hand, Ardyn's back rose and fell with a deep breath. “I would like to say the memory has no power over me. And yet, I cannot deny the reason that part of the deal with Researcher Besithia was a guarantee of safe passage.”

At the checkpoint, it had taken everything Prompto had not to shuffle from foot to foot while the guard looked at Ardyn for a long, long time.

He said, with his skin going cold, “They got you at the border.”

“Mm.” Ardyn's eyes were distant. “Even from a distance, there was too much activity at the crossing. I should have taken the warning. But my business was urgent, and the next point with reliably lax security was two days' travel away. Later, I would discover there had been an attack recently that had raised the alert. Then, I knew only, from the look on the guard's face, that he had recognized my papers as forgeries. He signaled to the others, and I went without protest into the interrogation room.”

He exhaled the shadow of a laugh. “Until the moment they struck me with a truncheon, I truly
believed I could talk my way out.”

He was way bigger than Prompto, and took up more than half the bed. His feet went a little off the end. He looked so calm and peaceful it was hard to imagine they'd just had rough sex here, except for how the blankets were all askew. You were supposed to hate hotels like this, all cheap and samey, with the horizontal row of black light switches on the wall and the printed sunset art without any interesting visual composition, where you’d crash at two in the morning sore from tangling with a bunch of daemons because Moogle Maps sent you down this old dirt road that dead-ended in a swamp, and then you all piled on the beds and ended up watching Dinosaur Forest Park because it was on. Prompto loved them. They were a little private, peaceful place, a hidden piece of the world that was all theirs for a while. It was strange to be safe in a place like this with the blankets pulled up to your shoulder, trying to picture Ardyn getting hurt.

Prompto swallowed. “They just started hitting you?”

Ardyn’s nod was a sideways motion of his face along the pillow. “With not so much as a preliminary question. Niflheim border guards put little stock in delicacy. Do you know, at first I felt less pain than sheer indignation. These things were not meant to happen to such a clever fellow as me.”

Prompto kept running his fingers over the scars, like the contact was a string tied around Ardyn that would keep him there.

“And you couldn't fight, or they'd know. So you just had to take it.”

“Yes. If I drew a sword, slaughtered them all, and made my escape, the bloodbath would cause an international incident and compromise everyone we had working behind the lines. If I made the attempt and failed, they would know what they had a captured, and a weapon against the kingdom would be in their hands. Even were it not to unveil my identity, it would reveal that I had a way of caching valuable items outside of ordinary reality.” Ardyn's eyes meandered past Prompto. “I did the equation in my head as they strung me up.”

Prompto must have made a sound. Ardyn's gaze came back into focus.

“My dear,” Ardyn said, “you need prove nothing by forcing yourself to listen to this.”

“No,” Prompto said, and was surprised at how easy the decision was. It hurt to hear, but it was part of Ardyn, and Prompto was Crownsguard. You couldn't protect anybody from pain if you kept avoiding it all yourself. He kissed the tail end of a scar that tapered off on Ardyn’s shoulder. “I want to hear it.”

“All right,” Ardyn said. It took him a minute to get started again. Outside the trees creaked in the wind.

“They shackled me and hung the chain from the hook in the ceiling, where I could keep my feet with some effort. I remember wondering if they had ways of adjusting for height. By the time the whips were out – ah, my shirt had been stripped, of course – they had begun to ask questions.”

“But you didn't confess.”

“Oh, I confessed to all sorts of things.” Ardyn made a flicking gesture. “I would like to say I was a paragon of stoic courage, but I made as much noise and spectacle as you could ask for. Being a Lucian spy I admitted as a matter of course. Past that I lost hold of all my carefully crafted lies, but fortunately I had no lack of spontaneous nonsense. In truth, with my attention occupied by their labors, I would not have been able to provide detailed and accurate information had I wanted to.”
Prompto’s thumb ran the length of a scar that slanted across the left side of Ardyn’s back. He failed at not imagining the white line when it was red.

Ardyn said, looking past Prompto to the curtains that held out the night, “I still find that very funny.”

“You got away, right?” Prompto’s heart was thudding like there was any other way the story could have gone and still had Ardyn here to tell it. It was like there was a chance that in the retelling it would go differently, and it wouldn't be set in reality for good until he knew the end.

“Eventually they grew tired of the sport. They were green boys, serving out what should have been a dull posting in the middle of nowhere, nerves already jangled by the recent attack. I doubt a one of them truly had the stomach for interrogation. I was cast to the floor and left. I looked about for security cameras, thankfully found none and forced myself to be still. Time seemed an endless ocean. I waited for darkness, and was certain in every next instant I would hear the footsteps of them come back to kill me. To keep myself conscious, in my head I recited Regis’s favorite film, a dreary, self-serious historical drama he’d watched so often I’d long suspected I had it fairly memorized.”

“Like Noct and The Red Giant,” Prompto said softly, thinking about Ardyn on the floor in a cell, scared and hurting.

“Yes. Just like that.”

Their little circle of lamplight made the world feel private. Prompto’s left side was under the blanket. Ardyn’s back kept his right hand warm. Prompto tried to be ready, though he was scared to hear anything Ardyn had to psych himself up to say.

“The cell grew dark, and I could see the edge of the moon through the bars of the window. I could hear no one anywhere near, but still did not dare the Armiger’s damning flash of light. I kept a coin for good luck in a hidden trouser pocket. A Lucian coin, the more fool I. The one with the great-great-and-so-on grandfather that I thought looked like Regis and Regis believed looked like me. When I was ready as I could be to test my luck, I took it in hand and flicked it out the window. The glitter of the moonlight…”

Ardyn’s eyes turned up toward the shadows on the ceiling. His eyes were a deep, dark amber, here and now.

“Memory is such a whimsical creature. Of all things, that moment is what stays etched behind my eyes. I could not describe to you the faces of my tormentors, but I can see still the grain of the concrete where the bars were anchored, the angle of the light from the face of the coin, and the surety in that instant that I had been discovered and shot, and the rest was the vivid madness of a mind in the moment before death. I had heard of such a thing, from patients I led back from death’s front garden. Vivid hallucinations. An altered sense of time.”

Watching his eyes from the outside, you could tell he wasn’t seeing the room at all.

“To this day I sometimes believe I was killed in that moment.”

Prompto sank down and pressed his face against Ardyn’s shoulder. His skin was warm, and tonight he didn’t smell like anything except a little like sweat.

“You’re here,” Prompto said. “You’re alive and you’re here and you’re not going anywhere. I’ll pinch you whenever you want.”

“Ahh.” Ardyn sounded faintly surprised to remember there was someone else there. His hand rested on Prompto’s hip. His thumb made a slow circling motion there, like Prompto was the one who
needed comforting. “These things sound like a shameless ploy for sympathy, don't they.”

“They sound true,” Prompto mumbled into his shoulder. “Say the rest.”

He felt Ardyn's body sink with his sigh. “I warped, and I was outside on my hands and knees on the cold ground. I could see the lights of the road through the border crossing. My side of the building was blessedly dark. I thought nothing of risks anymore. The only concept I could grasp was the need to get home, a place divided from me by concrete and barbed wire. I hobbled away as far as I could force myself, then used the coin to carry myself over the checkpoint's wall to Lucian soil. It was the purest of luck that I was not spotted from a guard tower, or that I did not deliver myself into the arms of a patrol. I stumbled homeward in a daze, certain that soon sirens would rise behind me.”

There was the rumble and woosh of a car driving past the hotel.

“It was luck as well that I only encountered minor daemons. Clumsy strikes were enough to dispatch them from out of my way. They've never paid much mind to the smell of my blood. To my addled senses it was an eternity that I wandered through the dark with the wind turning the blood to strange ice on my back. When I saw the lighted sign of a gas station, I believe I may have wept. I finally dared to heal my wounds and withdraw my telephone to call my contact. He was nearby, as we'd been scheduled to rendezvous soon. He was able to decipher my babbling, and shortly before sunrise, he arrived. I'd never seen a thing in the world as welcome as Cor Leonis's friendly face.”

Prompto's head lifted. “Cor's who found you?”

“Yes, and who brought me home. We'd worked together fairly regularly over the years, and had quite the adventures. He could tell you all sorts of stories. Yet he has never told anyone of the wreck who fell into his arms that day. The only ones to know the full tale are he and Regis, and now you.”

The king, the marshal, and him. It sounded like a joke that should have gone walk into a bar. It was a lot to take in, all the pain hidden in the marks Ardyn wore like crayon on a wall.

“So there it is,” Ardyn said, “my maudlin, sordid history. Not the sort of story that pleases a crowd, so hardly worth the telling. What of you? Will you give me applause?”

Prompto wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tight, pressing his face against Ardyn's back and feeling a scar against his cheek. It was hard and wrong to imagine that anything like that could happen to anybody so solid.

“I'm sorry,” he whispered. “I hate what they did to you. I hate it.”

Ardyn must have felt the wetness on his skin. He sounded astonished when he said, “Do you weep for me, after all I've done?”


He felt Ardyn laugh in his arms. He could still do that. Make him laugh.

Prompto said, “But I'm glad you told me. It's like you take me seriously now. Like I'm not just for fun.”

“My dear, in the guise of 'just fun,' you destroyed my defenses. You brought me to my knees.”

Literally, a bit ago. That was as hard to believe as the metaphorical sense.

“You were more than I bargained for,” Ardyn continued, his arm coming around Prompto's to hold it
there pinned under his body, “and more than I ever deserved.”

Prompto’s free arm pulled the blankets over both of them. He could feel where Ardyn was getting cold. He wanted to go back in time and be with him when he escaped, to be the hero who snuck him out and got him home. Not like the action movies he and Noct watched, but maybe the serious kind Ignis liked, where there were lots of close-ups and people talking in urgent murmurs under full moons.

Prompto said, “You don’t like getting sympathy, do you.”

“Ah. Perhaps not.” Ardyn shifted in what must have been a shrug. “It is not a coin I am built to easily accept.”

Prompto could see that. Ardyn had always dodged anybody trying to be too personal with him by making it a joke, like a vending machine letting a 10-gil piece fall through and clatter down into the change return.

Prompto had his own thing he needed to say. It kept rolling around in loops in his head, passing closer to his mouth each time. Maybe he needed to match Ardyn’s confession, and give him back something hard to admit. Maybe he just needed to come clean.

Quietly, without loosening his grip around Ardyn, he said, “Do you want to know what I was thinking? When we were all caught, and you were there with that guy.”

Ardyn breathed in slow, and out again. “Yes. I do.”

“I thought, ‘that makes sense.’” He closed his eyes and pushed through before Ardyn could say anything, even though repeating what had happened that night rang hard in his head, like a hammer hitting sheet metal. “You saying you’d been, you’d been using me. It explained why a guy like you was with me.”

Ardyn moved beneath him. “Prompto.”

He rushed to get it out. “I mean, you’re this whole different world from me. Not just the being a prince part. There’s this feeling like, no matter who you were, there’d be all this hidden stuff to you. You could be a garbageman and you’d still have secrets.”

“I’d be an exemplary garbageman,” Ardyn murmured.

“Yeah. But see, it never added up. You never fit with a nobody. You’d make more sense with...I don’t know who. But somebody on your level, not somebody who lost his virginity after a couple rounds of beer pong. So when you said that, it cleared up the big mystery. It was just saying I’d been right all along. You’d always been too good to be true.”

“My Prompto,” he said softly. Prompto could feel his voice rumbling, there with his ear pressed on Ardyn’s back. “That is wrong in every detail, but I knew your belief, and used it. Of all my crimes, that is the blackest.”

Prompto swallowed past the thickness in his throat. He’d kind of known that, too.

“Getting close to somebody, that means they pick up on that stuff, huh. Those weaknesses.” Prompto shut his eyes tightly. “Guess I can understand why you don’t like doing that.”

Ardyn said, “Ruse though it was, it involved a true betrayal.”
It was satisfying to hear in words, though it hurt, like thumbs digging into a knotted muscle. Prompto linked his hands and wrists beneath Ardyn and said, “Yeah.”

“There we have it,” Ardyn said. “I am true, but I have never been good.”

Prompto rubbed the wetness on his face off on Ardyn's back. The story of the scars there belonged to him now, a thing he shared, the way they both had memories of captivity. Prompto was exhausted from the night. Fighting, sex, tears, they'd all taken everything out of him until he felt like a throw rug tossed over Ardyn's back.

He started laughing. It was a rattling, hiccuping sound that made his body shake.

“See, now that makes sense. You're a sneaky asshole and I'm a guy who ate a bunch of nutmeg to try to get high once.”

“The effect isn't worth it,” Ardyn said.

“You-” Prompto's head lifted up a little. “Okay, that's a story for later.”

“Whenever you like. I will tell you all of my secrets.” His voice was getting that low rumble, and Prompto didn't need to see his face to know his eyes were closing. “But if you know nothing else, know how wonderful you are. You are worthy of anyone on the face of this world.”

Prompto reached out and turned off the bedside lamp. He rested his face on Ardyn's back, listening to his heartbeat. He wondered if believing something might not be a thing you had to do all at once. Maybe it was like a jigsaw puzzle, and you could work on it a chunk at a time. Not so hard once you got the corners.

Ardyn said, “There is one thing I must ask. Regarding what you've told me.”

“Hm?”

“Are you good at beer pong?”

Prompto pulled the blankets tighter around them. “I am amazing at beer pong.”

It wasn't the chirping birds outside or the sunlight through the curtains that woke them up.

“Where the hell is Prompto?”

That would be Noct's frantic voice cutting right through the wall.

“Right here, buddy,” Prompto called, groggily trying to figure out which parts of him were tangled in the blankets and which were stuck under Ardyn. He was proud of solving the puzzle enough to half sit up. Ardyn moved around and made some murky noises under him.

Running footsteps pounded outside, coming closer. The door flung open to sunlight and half-dressed Noctis.

“Oh thank-- gahhhhhh.”

While Noct slapped his hands over his eyes, Prompto yawned and rubbed at his face.

“Looks like they made up,” said Gladio, appearing in the doorway.
“As well as out,” said Ignis. He still had the scar over his eye. Obviously. Not like it was going to fall off overnight.

“Rhgm,” said Ardyn, pulling the blankets around himself, which made them slide off Prompto.

“Okay, couple favors to ask, here,” said Noctis. “One, maybe don't go disappearing right after you almost die.”

“Oh, jeez, sorry,” Prompto said, “I didn't even think—”

“Two.” Noct's hands were firm over his face. “Please, please put on some pants.”

Chapter End Notes

For more about what happened after Cor picked Ardyn up, read alexclusive's companion fic Without Borders, which is so damn perfect I can't handle it.
Darling,

As I'm sure you've heard, the cherry blossoms were spectacular. I am so glad I managed to arrive at the peak of the season, though with more than the expected company. Our hosts were very welcoming. Thanks to a strike of bad weather we had to leave with one less souvenir than we'd hoped, but I know you'll forgive me. The whole little family is well, and we're on the way home. I can't wait to see you again. I have so many stories. You'll laugh and laugh. Give my love to John.

Kisses,
Your plum pudding

They set out late, the four young men in the Regalia ahead with Ardyn following. He did not mind. He had always found silence meditative, though recently he'd grown used to company. He watched the car ahead of him and now and then scratched his back. After more than twenty years, he was no longer aware of the scars in themselves. What lingered was the sensation of Prompto's fingers weaving between.

In dusk and Duscae they turned off the main road, and Ardyn followed the plume of dust to a campsite. Runes and a low fire glowed invitation. The tent was readied, and Prompto, Noct, and Gladio were deliberating over something while Ignis was at work at his station. The scene brought a sudden strike of nostalgia, like a cold morning flaring a sore joint.

The three were going out to hunt a treasure they'd heard rumor of, a prospect that filled Prompto's face with vivid animation despite the many times they had met disappointment on similar ventures. Ignis requested Ardyn's assistance with dinner, so he remained behind. He was not eager to go running about in any case, being somewhat sore. The campsite's rune-marked stone circle was raised on the hillside, and provided a view to watch Prompto turning to wave as the little team headed towards the woods. Ardyn and Ignis were left with the crackle of the fire and the tap of the knife on the cutting board.

Ardyn peeled potatoes beneath the purpling sky.

Ardyn said, “You wish to talk.”

“I wish assistance with the prep work. We have nothing especial to talk about.” He held the halved onion steady with the flat of his hand and swiped the knife in rapid horizontal movements. “We are both aware of the debt I owe you.”

The scar over his eye was dramatic as a sunburst. Ocular injuries were fickle beasts at best. The damage had progressed nearly as quickly as Ardyn could pour in his power, while behind him there had been Prompto's ragged breaths and Noct's reassurances, earnest and desperate as they were unconvincing.

“I was present and capable,” Ardyn said. “That's all.”

Ignis's knife sliced downwards, creating a perfect grid for the oncoming dice. He had the ability to do
that while keeping each tiny piece contained. “And you are aware that your actions were foolish.”

The peeler made snicking sounds in Ardyn's hand as it exposed the potato's white flesh. It was a simple task, but not entirely mindless. “Yes.”

Ignis swept the chopped onion into the pot and treated the remaining half with identical efficiency. “You know that your allies are a resource, and that to deliberately keep them ignorant creates unnecessary risks.”

Ardyn finished the potatoes and began work on the beets. “Yes.”

The knife quartered each potato in two swift motions. “And you know that, as a part of our group, when you make a poor decision, you are not the only one who suffers.”

The cool breeze pressed his shirt to his back. He was more lightly dressed than usual, with his favorite coat away in the armiger. It would take extensive dry cleaning to remove the odor of smoke and blood.

Ardyn kept his eyes on keeping the tool's movements steady over the uneven surface. “Yes.”

The potatoes were dispatched into the pot. The knife made clean, square segments of each beet.

Ignis said, without looking up from the knife and its firelight gleam, “You will, of course, never so much as consider doing anything that involves putting Noct in danger again.”

The beets stained Ardyn's fingers with a thin red sheen. When there was nothing more to hold in his hands, he said, “Yes.”

“As I thought.” There was a thudding sound. Ignis gathered up the vegetables and added them to the pot, turning his back to Ardyn. “We have nothing to discuss.”

He turned his attention to stirring. Ardyn found parsley and set it on the cutting board, beside where the knife stood buried point-first in the wood.

A heavy hand was on Ardyn's shoulder. His eyes flicked open to thin light through the tent framing the massive form of Gladio above him.

Gladio said, “You're coming with me.”

Ardyn dressed and stepped lightly between Noct and Prompto's forms, Noct as always an indistinguishable mass of black hair crowning a sleeping bag, Prompto, as always, wrencingly angelic in slumber. When Ardyn emerged, Ignis was on a camp chair sipping from a can of coffee, and Gladio was on his way across the open ground to the nearby woods.

He was waiting for Ardyn with his shoulders dappled by the shade, the eagle draped across him spreading its wings from under his open shirt to seek fragments of sun. The air was rich with the scent of loam and living things, of which Ardyn was one.

Gladio pulled an object from the Armiger and threw it at Ardyn.

“Come on,” Gladio said as the basket fetched up against Ardyn's chest. “We're hunting mushrooms.”

As the story went, he had spotted some promising fungi the previous evening, while they had passed through these woods bearing what had turned out to be a bauble worth a few gil. He directed Ardyn in spotting the distinctive spongy texture and elongated cap, and how to seek around dead trees and
the slopes of hills. To pluck one from the undergrowth was a genuine sensation of success.

In the silence beneath the trees with his nephew's sworn guardian, Ardyn awaited what was inevitable, after what he'd done. It was required that the Shield regain a sense of ownership over his pride. The punch would most likely be to the stomach, in order that the bruise not be visible, and it would be not so much a threat as a ritual of stating what they both already knew. Perhaps something about, as the old curse went, dying in obscurity. Ardyn readied himself as Gladio's shadow fell over him.

Gladio dropped a handful of mushrooms in the basket and said, “You ever read *Ultima's Joke*?”

“Why, yes,” Ardyn said, blinking in the low light. “I would be remiss not to be acquainted with new classics. A weighty tome, but worthwhile.”

Gladio trod through the underbrush and crouched to examine a fallen log. “Yeah, it's a long-ass thing. Most of what I remember is the kid who can't talk ever since he ate the weird moss.”

“Ah, so you do think it was the moss? I never gave much credence to the theory of the drug on the toothbrush. It struck me as a distraction, much like the question of whether the woman in the veil was truly disfigured—”

“Point is, nothing he thinks makes it out of his mouth how he wants it to. It all comes out as growling and thrashing around. Pretty horrible fate.”

“It does dip into the realm of the macabre. Are these correct?”

“Nah, those'll make you sick. You're looking for a longer cap.” Gladio held up an example. “It's a whole running thing, stuff stuck inside with no way out. The radio station in the place that looks like a big brain, the guy getting addicted to sneaking around and keeping secrets. I didn't get all the details, but that part made sense. Wanting something to yourself when your life is somebody else's, or a country's.”

“Why, Gladiolus,” Ardyn said, prying a mushroom loose from the soil between thumb and forefinger, “are you going to tell me your deep, dark secret?”

“Nah, I don't keep those. That's the idea. I've got people to talk to, and so do you.”

“So it is a moral we seek among the morels.”

Ardyn added a few of those to their collection. Gladio contributed an armload that filled the basket. “Post-modern isn't much for straightforward lessons. The book's about questions, not answers.”

Damp earth clung to Ardyn's knee as he stood. “You are quite philosophically minded.”

“Don't be so surprised. A Shield's not all muscle. That's what happens with a job where step one is dealing with how you might die. You start thinking too much about big heroic sacrifice moves. You learn how to keep your eyes front, and keep your imagination from mixing up 'might' and 'should.'”

The flaw in motion as Ardyn brushed leaves from the hem of his coat was momentary.

He said to the dark green moss clinging to the ground, “A small and crucial distinction, isn't it.”

“Yep.” Gladio's hand laid on his shoulder. The grip would leave a thumbprint on the bone. “Get out of your own head sometimes, your grace. That book doesn't have a happy ending.”
The way back was more direct than the journey out had been. The two cars wended their way across the country as near to as the Zu flew as the roads would permit. Ardyn fed a cassette into the dashboard's narrow maw, and allowed Crawly, Stillgoing, Mash & Ing to take the place of Prompto's bright chatter.

By afternoon, Insomnia's weight became a pull on the world. Signs became unweathered and consistently legible, the roads better maintained. The campground bore the empty beer cans of recent use. They made a stop just before the checkpoint, within a stone's throw of home.

Noct went down to the reservoir, while the others stayed by the roadside among the unlovely hulks of rusted cars. That the spot could be seen from the raised road was the reason, Ardyn suspected, he was able to follow without someone providing a pretext to call him back.

The reservoir smelled of silt. While the place was too industrial to be called picturesque, the brick walls gave a sense of shelter. Noct sat on the metal grating that overhung the water, arranging his equipment with a craftsman's surehanded care. Ardyn's reverberating footsteps merited a glance.

“Here.” Noct held up a spool of line like a torch. “Hold onto this.”

Ardyn threaded the spool with a stick and sat cross-legged on the grating as Noct wound the line onto his reel. Below them water lapped at the reservoir's concrete boundaries. The line zipped through the rod's guides, and the spool turned on its makeshift axle.

Noct said, “Remember when you showed me how to pick locks?”

“It took trial and error, but you were determined.” Stubbornness had been a firm presence on the child's face. “You must have broken a dozen pins.”

“Yeah, but I got it open, didn't I?”

“You did. I was very proud.”

“So was I.” The light flashed off the turn of the handle. “I didn't even think about asking whose room we were breaking into.”

“In all fairness, had the good councilman been responsible enough to stick to his schedule, we would not have been caught. The true fault was his.”

Noct snorted. “That's not how my dad saw it.”

They had stood before him, heads identically bowed, as Noct mumbled sorry Dad and Ardyn mumbled sorry Regis.

“As I recall, his exact words were-” Ardyn shifted to his brother's accent and weary inflection- “He's ten. What's your excuse?”

“So what'd you say?”

“That if the councilman wished to keep his things to himself, he would have done well to secure them.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that.” Noct spun the reel steadily. “Do not remember it working.”

“Regis pointed out that they had been, to which I made the reasonable reply that he should have done it better.”
Noct winced. “Oh yeah. He did not take that well.”

Ardyn's sigh drifted out over the water. “I was trapped with the worst of the paperwork for ages. Also given full charge of dealing with issues with the city's contractors. Do you have any idea how many squabbles can arise from basic road repair?”

“Hey, don't complain to me. I got grounded for a week.” His hand turned the reel with thoughtless motion.

“You must have been less than happy with me.”

“Nah.” Noct's eyes were on his task. “I was glad you took me along. It felt like I was in on something.”

The spool revolved in Ardyn's hands. The translucent line connected them with a thin white shadow on the dock. From atop a pipe, a bird called and took flight with a brusque rustle.

Noct said, “You could have told us.”

The line on the spool slowly drained away.

The shirt displayed Noct's arms, slender for all the muscle of training. It was a good place to get a firm grasp when one wished to set a weapon's edge against his neck. In such a position it was possible to feel him trembling with rage even as he held himself in check and waited for the opportunity to strike, and to feel, through the buffering veil of it all, pride.

Noct's hair shielded his eyes. “Gladio's a great actor. Iggy could've put together a strategy to fight that thing. If he'd known what we were up against, Prompto would've gotten more ammo...”

The click had been a hook in Ardyn's guts, yanking him to the point of what must be protected.

“...and I wouldn't've had to fall for it.”

The water eased by beneath the grating. ‘Water under the bridge’ was an odd phrase, when you gave it thought. Though a river may be constantly washing away, it remained ever present. “Noct.”

“It was easy to believe.” The reel clicked like an insect. “Did you think I never noticed how much you hate my dad being king?”

When a secret was unspoken long enough, it grew easy to forget it was an open one.

The spool ran empty. Ardyn set it down, where it nestled in the spaces between metal links. Noct performed arcane rituals on the rod's structure, face down and clouded with the resentment of being forced to speak of things seriously. Ardyn could have taught him how to frustrate and deflect until the interlocutor no longer made the effort.

The sky was so very blue.

Ardyn said, “I was never able to despise the Empire.”

The sound Noct made downwards was some breed of “huh.”

“They always had one mad leader or another, though I suppose even they believed they were only doing what was necessary. Where could they find the will to oppose the inertia of war? They were all too easy to imagine as caught up in the inevitable, each the hero of their own melodrama.”
Noct's thumb rubbed the side of the reel. The breeze lifted Ardyn's hair, slipping in complexly through its texture.

Ardyn said, “No. My hatred was reserved for the gods. They and their vaunted crystal. They were the ones who sank their tendrils into our father's veins and had the gall to call it a gift. The gods, the crystal, the Kings of Yore, all battening onto him and sucking him dry like a slice of orange. It would not be quite so bad, if they had only had the decency to allow us to hate them. A villain should take the responsibility of playing his role. But good, dutiful Regis never resented his fate, and so I volunteered for the post of resenting it for the both of us. Of course, it took some time to understand that. When I was young I only knew that I could spend half my time fostered out in distant lands, having adventures, while Regis remained with his leg caught in the trap of his birthright.”

Anger sharpened Noct's face, like the transition of an ancestral weapon from spectral to solid metal. “Don't you try to make this sound like something noble. Don't you dare.”

“I am doing my best to explain.” Ardyn had made a life's work of sounding self-serving. Old habits bit back. “You are correct. I should have expected you, of all people, to grow aware of how I loathed Regis's monarchy. It deepened each time I did my healing and pried the gods' talons temporarily from his flesh. That was my first and most enduring political awareness; hatred for the creatures that took my brother from me.”

Ardyn's hand, no longer occupied, withdrew a coin from a hidden pocket. He rubbed the surface with his thumb. The sun shot silver from the raised image of their shared ancestor.

“So it's all you trying to protect him?” Noct said, limned in dubiousness, as stubborn as when he had refused not to fight by Ardyn's side.

“Oh, not all. I've had my moments of selfishness and classical jealousy.” The air was full of the scent of fresh water. Lazy shadows of fish passed beneath the water's surface. Contained though it may have been by human works, the world continued on its way. Ardyn walked the coin across the backs of his fingers. “Once when Regis was sixteen or thereabouts, there was a ceremony of some variety. Something elaborate where he was the center of attention. After hours of seeing him barely appreciate being feted, I went off to sulk. I can't imagine how he snuck away, but he found me, and I poured all my bitterness into his ear. I asked why an accident of birth should mean he deserved the place of honor. What gave him the right to power and respect.”

Noct said, “What did he say?”

Ardyn tossed the coin and let it fall into his hand. “He handed me a coin and said-” He put his voice again into Regis's register- “I'll flip you for it.”

Noct's eyes were on Ardyn's hand. “Guess you lost.”

“I returned the favor he always did me whenever I suggested running away to the countryside to live as vagabonds in disguise.” His fingers closed. “I pretended to believe he was joking.”

“Huh. Figures.”

With thoughtlessly deft movements of his fingers, Noct tied a hook on the line. He was skilled at quiet things, the sort so specialized most people never noticed they were unable to do them. Regis would have been the one to teach him. He'd made a habit of sneaking off when Noct was young. Ardyn's part of the conspiracy was to occupy the court's attention while their monarch was telling a bedtime story to his son, and the price was the promise that he would put in a bit about a purple octopus. Between them was an unspoken understanding that the prince and king should have
moments when they shared the human realm, and not exist always divided by the glass wall of duty, the father always at a distance. It had been easier for Ardyn, who had been closer to their mother, with her strange sense of humor and her projects. And so Regis would find a moment to slip away and Ardyn would have his fun on the stage before the empty throne, feeling its terrible gravity calling him as steadily as the void beyond a cliff's edge.

Noct said, “Hand me the flan lure.”

Ardyn peered over the colorful oblong objects arranged in the tackle box. “Ah...”

“Top row, third from the left. The blue one.”

Ardyn did as directed, and Noct attached the thing with a few unhurried motions. The clouds were lovely today. Ardyn tilted his face up towards the white wisps, tracing their travel.

Noct set his pole down and picked at the flakes of rust on the dock's grating. “You taught me a lot of stuff. The shoelace trick, all the things about the old kings that people don't talk about. How to hotwire a car.”

“You've always had an aptitude for acquiring new skills.”

Noct said, abruptly enough that it was either a sudden thought or something he had intended to say for a long time, “You don't want me to have the crown.”

Ardyn answered, “I don't want it to have you.”

Honesty came poorly from him. It exited his throat at an awkward angle and scraped out a space for itself in the atmosphere. The metal of the coin had grown warm in his palm. He opened his fingers and let it shine in the sunlight.

Noct said, in the face of that other and surer knife against his neck, “It's what I need to do.”

“I know. And so I, like the rest of the kingdom, will labor in your service.” Ardyn glanced toward the prince. “Unless, of course, you have me beheaded.”

He could recite a list of those of royal blood who had been executed for lesser treasons than his. The historians loved those details.

Noct snorted. “Like that’d shut you up.”

Ardyn smiled faintly into the crests of the moving water.

Noct baited his hook and cast his line out. It landed and sent concentric circles out across the water's surface. He was a picture of stillness, patient and self-sufficient as a monk in meditation. You could imagine him there until the end of the world, the sun and stars revolving on his axis.

He said, “I guess Prompto forgave you.”

“He might.” Ardyn thought of hands in Niflheim military gloves on Prompto's arms, and a door sealing shut with Prompto on one side, him and his fate on the other. “Someday.”

“I don't think he should.” It was steadier than anger. His voice was soft enough not to scare away the fish. “But I can't tell him what to do.”

He was not using a prince's definition of can't. Not with Prompto.
The impetuous boy who had charged into the library that day would give the order for the sake of his friend. The king of someday in the future would give the order for the sake of the law of his kingdom. Neither would be wrong.

Ardyn watched Noct staring out over the water, and did not know what this young man would order, or for whom.

Noct said, face averted, as though he could avoid the act of speaking something he meant, “Don’t hurt him again.”

Ardyn parted his lips to say, “I swear by the graves of our ancestors, by the tears of the moon, by white wind and black waltz, by my hope of remembrance, if I so much as once more do him harm, you may drown me here yourself.”

The words dissolved on his tongue.

With the edges of the coin digging into his palm, Ardyn said, “I won’t.”

Noct turned to look at him. It was a long enough pause that it was a decision when he said, “Okay.”

Ardyn unfolded to his feet. His boots clanged as he found footing on the metal grate, and flicked the coin in Noct's direction.

His nephew performed a deft catch. “What's this?”

Ardyn stepped off the grating onto the rock of the shore. “Consider it a memento.”

When Ardyn mounted the stairs to the narrow pathway, at a turn out of sight from the embankment above, there was someone waiting for him.

“Why, my dear Marshal Leonis,” Ardyn exclaimed, “what a pleasure to see you here.”

Cor barred the way like a portcullis. “What did you do?”

“Have you heard, there's a charming habit among rustics to begin a conversation with an old friend with a certain social ritual, such as a 'hello.'”

Was there anything in the world as reliable as that stony gaze? “Hello. What did you do?”

He accepted, to his credit, that the answer would not be brief.

They found a sheltered corner among the reservoir's fortifications. They would not be overheard; Cor could sense eavesdroppers the way a pickpocket could sense a heavy wallet.

Cor said, “Your message told me you needed me here.”

“I said all was well.”

“That's what you said. That's not what it told me.”

Ardyn reclined against the wall. “Too perceptive as always. What gave me away?”

Owing to extensive experimentation, Ardyn was one of the few in the world to know that Cor Leonis had patience for nonsense. Now, however, he was wearing the expression he had when staring ahead through the windshield during certain Bruce Strifesteen songs. An expression not to be
toyed with. Though such a confession would never pass his lips, Ardyn was not so much in the mood for games either.

“So my sources tell me,” Cor said, “that the Nif top brass are losing their minds. A base got raided and their Chief Researcher's dead. Everything's top secret so we can't get our hands on much solid info, but the idea is the reason they've been making such a push lately is they've got a pair of superweapons in the wings. Now they're gone and the whole army's overextended, high and dry.”

Ardyn had never understood how Cor didn't smoke. He was the sort of man whose hands should have something to be efficient with in any circumstance.

Cor said, “Then I get a message from you, going out of your way to say everybody's fine. Meaning there was a chance they weren't going to be.”

“Is that all that sent you flying to my side?”

Cor's gaze was heavier than most, and lingered longer. “You haven't talked about John McCleigne in the field for twenty years.”

The cold phone pressed to his face, the wind freezing the blood on his half-healed back, his voice babbling I'm not John McCleigne I'm not

Ardyn watched the shimmer of sun on the higher levels of the complex. He liked a sunken place like this, where one could skulk. Softly he said, “And what did that tell you?”

“That you needed me.” Cor could say that without arrogance or subterfuge. An exceptional talent. “Whether you were going to admit it or not.”

“Perhaps I fell into a nostalgic mood,” Ardyn admitted.

“I put some things together, from what's come out now and what you were working on. Figured out that that 'little project' you've been talking about was something I would've only taken on with a full squad and a month's prep.”

“A few can sometimes do what many can't, with the assistance of the element of surprise.”

“A small team can't be as thorough. Can't make sure there weren't backups or failsafes.”

“Human frailty accounts for much. Verstael Besithia's prodigious mind lead him to tragic hubris and paranoia. His documentation was destroyed, and he allowed his secrets to none but those he trusted. Sadly, he trusted no one.”

“Yeah.” Cor gave him a significant sidelong eye. “Stupid thing, that.”

Ardyn could not find a satisfactory means of argument.

Cor sat on a broad pipe that rose from the concrete and ran parallel to the ground for a few yards before vanishing into the depths again. It made a hollow reverberation when he patted its flank. As indicated, Ardyn sat. Cor pulled a flask from his jacket and handed it to him. Ardyn unscrewed the cap, sniffed the contents, and met immediate regret.

“Cid's stuff,” Cor said. “Brought it as a reward for if you were honest.”

In faint dismay Ardyn said, “What were you going to do to me if I wasn't?”

He took a sip with caution that was, as ever, insufficient. He coughed and passed the flask back to
Cor, who partook with an unmoving face.

"Hey, it was generous of him to give me some. Don't know what he's gonna degrease the engine blocks with now."

The aggressive heat of the liquor settled to a warmth in Ardyn's throat. "Will you be riding back with me? We can listen to Cait Sithvens and talk about old times."

"And you can give me back my handcuffs."

"Of course, of course. Generous of you to let me borrow them."

"You mean stupid of me to turn my back."

"That as well." The memory of metal remained on Ardyn's wrists. After a moment he said, "Prompto will be delighted to see you. He speaks of you often."

"That kid is something else." Cor's eyes were meditative.

A gentle soreness lingered on Ardyn's cheek where he had been slapped. The deep blue of Prompto's eyes was more vivid still when he was shouting in the streetlight. "He is."

"I first met him when they told me to train up the prince's friend for the Crownsguard." Cor sipped from the flask. "Small, not a serious bone in his body, so close to shaking in his boots that I knew he must've heard those rumors about me tying people who pissed me off to the minute hand of the clock tower – yeah, I know somebody's been spreading that one, and yeah, I know it was you. I pegged him for washing out within the hour."

"His looks are deceiving," said Ardyn, who'd thought the notion of the bells drowning out the screaming was a nice touch.

"Yeah. Turns out there are old pros with less determination than that skinny kid. Whatever I told him to do, he did. I could get an extra couple miles out of him with one 'good job.' Never even showed a sign he remembered he could quit. This wasn't a case of somebody finding a loophole to hang out with his buddy more. I don't know what Noctis did, but he'd go to the moon for him."

"He has a striking sense of loyalty," Ardyn said, thinking of Prompto on his knees at gunpoint shouting out defiance, and his pride in him. Though there had been no choice, he had made the right one.

Ardyn took the flask Cor offered and took a sip that in this case qualified as a slug. The hygiene of sharing was no concern. Any microorganisms within a foot of that liquid would have died of despair.

"He's not reckless, though. Usually I have to spend some time smacking the cockiness out of guys his age. Some never lose the habit."

Ardyn lowered the flask and said, "Marshal Leonis, is that significant stare in my direction?"

His gaze was steady and not so much piercing as akin to being shoved with a blunt object. "Some of them think they're invincible. Other ones don't."

"Perhaps it was a risk, but as the youth say, I lived, bitch."

Cor's expression did not change. "It was a stupid chance to take."

The pipe they sat on was round, and required planting his feet well to keep his balance. "Hold on a
moment, I need to recall who I am being lectured on recklessness by. That is to say, a man who is famously 'astonishingly courageous' and infamously 'utterly insane.' The man who went venturing into the Tempering Grounds at the age of fifteen. That man.”

“Ardyn.”

Ardyn spread his hand. “Oh, a mysterious immortal creature that slaughters any who dare to give it challenge. Well, I just shaved for the first time this morning and I'm feeling vigorous. I shall go punch it.”

“Ardyn.” It was just a little more pointed, in order to make his attention stick. “I was the kind of idiot who thinks he's immortal. The Blademaster got me over it.”

Ardyn would have said that going into a place no one walked out and emerging alive should by all rights only reinforce that notion, but he and Cor had always had very different ways of seeing the world.

Cor took the flask back from his hand and said, “If I thought I could be the one to knock sense into you, I'd do it.”

“You've made admirable efforts over the years. It has been too long since we last sparred.” Cor was a refreshingly ruthless opponent. He'd gotten some of his best bruises that way. “But there is no cause for concern.”

The long look Cor gave him was not so much accusation as the acknowledgment of the baldness of the lie.

Cor said, “I know what kind of mission this was.”

Denial was a finite resource, when it came to old friends.

Ardyn's exhalation was like the drop of a curtain. “It had been set into motion long ago. As the old folks say, there is no getting off of a train one is on.”

“There are stops all the time. That's the point of trains.”

“Oh my dear, practical lion.” Ardyn reached for the flask again. After the initial blow to the back of the head, the stuff became nostalgic. “Perhaps...it is time I switched tracks.”

“Mhm,” Cor said, with the exquisite grace not to voice an I told you so.

He did have an art of picking up the pieces.

Here between the walls of half-forgotten industry, Ardyn abandoned the customary layers of irony and jest that armored his voice.

“I did a terrible thing to someone.” His thumb pressed the edge of the flask. “Several someones.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I don't know,” Ardyn admitted. The future was an unclear place, here in the uncharted territory past where his plans had ended.

“You'll have to figure that out on your own. I'll only tell you one thing.” Cor took the flask back and tucked it in his jacket. “Don't walk out on my boy.”
Ardyn calatogued the chips of broken concrete and metal shavings that littered the ground as he let that sink into his mind. Cor rose. His boots crunched across the debris.

“Come on, Ardy,” Cor said. “Time to get home.”

Ardyn's head shot up. “Did you call me-”

Cor mounted the stairs without looking back. “No one will ever believe you.”

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to alexclusive for Bruce Strifesteen and John McCleigne, and for a bunch of other stuff from some extremely useful brainstorming discussions. Cor wouldn't have been here at all otherwise, and the lion's share of the best stuff in this part is hers.

Also, go read her fic Without Borders, which expands on Ardyn and Cor's relationship in this AU and is absolutely wonderful.

Ultima's Joke is by David Foster Evilwallace.

Update: There is now some incredible art for this chapter by kickingshoes, I keep looking at it and giggling in joy.
The Place I'll Return to Someday

It felt like forever since Prompto had been home. Even the on-ramp to the freeway felt welcoming. He couldn't stop looking up at the way the sun glittered off the buildings.

“Woah,” he said.

Noct laughed. “Dude, you've lived here forever.”

“Yeah, but coming back makes it different. Tourist photo!” He snapped a good one of Noct driving.

“It has been a long time,” Ignis said.

“City hasn't changed a bit,” said Gladio.

It felt a world away from coming back from one of their quick trips out for a few hunts. This time Prompto was bringing back new scars, a lot of experience, and some Wiz Chocobo Post keychains for his parents.

Cor had come to see them home. Well, Ardyn said Cor had come because he 'missed me unbearably and couldn't wait another moment to chat', so it was probably actually some official spy stuff they had to talk about. The radio kept saying the Nifs were falling back and nobody knew why. It was weird to think that something happening out in the big world of war and politics had anything to do with the up-close real world where the five of them had killed a giant monkey.

No matter how many times you saw it, the palace never looked smaller. And there they were, pulling up to the big sweeping staircase. Home safe.

“Insomnia, sweet Insomnia,” Ardyn said, vaulting out of his car. On the other side, Cor used the door like a normal person. “At long last we return to her embrace.”

“It's certainly good to be home,” Ignis said. Prompto didn't envy him all the questions he was going to get about his face. All the phone numbers he was going to get, maybe a little.

“Iris should be out on the training grounds,” Gladio said. “It's been a while since I've seen her give 'em hell.”

Noct headed up the stairs. “I've gotta talk to my dad.”

His voice was casual, but there was a lot for him to report. Prompto didn't know how much he would leave in. Ardyn just watched him go.

Just like a hundred times before, everybody headed off in their own direction. Prompto hung back by the cars for a minute.

“It's funny,” Prompto said, with his hands in his pockets. “I almost just went to the library to go hang out with you. Old habit and all.”

“Yes, that was the herald of the prince's return.” Ardyn looked at him sidelong, like they were talking about old secrets. “You, arriving to share the spoils of your clever eye. There were those that you posted publicly, and those that were for me alone.”

“I never managed to stump you,” Prompto remembered. “Not once.”
“There is plenty of time for that yet,” Ardyn said, and it was weird to realize that up until a couple
days ago he’d thought there wouldn’t be. “Ah. Antesignatus will have returned on her own
imperative, but she’ll be requiring some thorough looking-after. Care to assist me?”

“Sure!” Prompto said, brightening up. Sure, the end of a journey was kind of melancholy, but Auntie
was a big sweetheart.

They trekked around the palace, getting waves from the Crownsguard and Kingsglaive who spotted
them. The stables smelled like greens and bird. The light through the windows came in blocks that lit
up flakes of dust in the air. It always reminded Prompto of the first time he'd ever ridden a chocobo,
when Noct had brought him here and let him try, and he'd been awed by the privilege right up until
he’d gotten up on one side of a bird and slid right off the other, and Noct nearly broke a rib laughing.
Feathery faces poked over the stalls as they went by. Prompto had to give them all a pat. One hung
her head over the door and went *kweh!* right in his ear, so he had to stop and scratch her chin.

“Ah, Celeritas,” Ardyn said. “I recall when she was but an egg. The mother belonged to another
noble house, and so she was hatched in the creche of an incubator, with the sheltering warmth of a
heat lamp rather than down and feathers. Not strictly natural, but then, none of them has been for
centuries.”

“How d’ya mean?” Prompto said, though most of his attention was on scratching the soft little
feathers on top of the bird’s head. He showed he liked it by nibbling Prompto’s shirt. Chocobos were
the best.

“Humans have been breeding these dear beasts since time immemorial.” Ardyn patted the bird on the
neck, and they kept moving along the row of stalls. Stray straw crackled under their feet. “Selecting
the desired traits, suppressing the undesirable. Choosing what is to be passed down to the next
generation, and thus slowly directing the course of the species. Have you ever seen sketches of the
ancient variety? They’re practically unrecognizable.”

“Bet they’re still cute though.”

“That would depend on your definition.”

Auntie's stall was down on the right. Her head cocked when she heard them coming, and when she
catched sight of her rider she danced in place and *kweh’d* bright and loud like, *Took you long enough!*

“Why hello there, my dear,” Ardyn said as he pushed open the wooden door. “Have you been
behaving yourself?”

The big black chocobo headbutted him in the chest, and her little clicky chirp probably meant *no.*

There was a water trough on one side, next to another one for greens, and a place for the fancy
saddle and reins. It smelled homey, like bird and dusty wood. Just like you'd figure for a prince's
steed, the stall was one with plenty of room for all of them. You could have a little party in here. Oh,
chocobo party! He so had to do that one day.

Once she'd said hi to Ardyn she came right over to Prompto, and he gave her feathers a good ruffle.
Then they got down to work. A chocobo needed a lot of care, especially after she'd been all over the
country. Ardyn lifted up her claw to trim her nails while Prompto set to straightening and oiling her
feathers.

Ardyn said, “Antesignatus herself is the end result of a great deal of selective husbandry. Her smooth
stride and impeccable shanks are a careful science in the flesh.”
“Aw, are your shanks impeccable? Yes they are!”

The trimmers snipped. Prompto gave Auntie a scratch to distract her, but she was real patient about it. Some birds got kind of wigged about the process. Prompto could relate. The one time Ardyn’d talked him into going and trying a pedicure, it had felt really weird.

“It raises an interesting philosophical question,” Ardyn said, and sounded more thoughtful than when he said it because Noct had asked Why're there goldfish in the water jug? “Does deliberate artifice in its birth make the bird different from the others? Less natural?”

“Hey, hold still!” Auntie batted her wing around while Prompto tried to get a grip. “Feels like a normal chocobo to me.”

“Mm.” Ardyn was being careful about the nails, looking at them real close. “Now, what if there were a way to expedite the process? Say, if instead of a hundred years of breeding to select for a high crest, the same result could be achieved by fiddling directly with the genome when the chick is only a handful of cells. Theoretically, it's quite possible. One could do anything from designating a plumage color to adding resistance to disease.”

“I guess it's a good thing, if it makes them healthier.” Nothing was sadder than a sick chocobo. “Kind of a creepy idea, though. There's stuff people shouldn't mess with.”

“Indeed, though that rarely stops them. Left now, my dear.” Oh, he was talking to Auntie. She shifted and he picked up the other foot. “Would that make the chick itself less lovable? A monstrous creation?”

Prompto's heart rebelled. “Dude, if you're gonna be a jerk to a bird I don't want to talk to you.”

“Strictly a hypothetical.”

Prompto tried to think about it. “Well, it'd just be a normal little chick, wouldn't it? It'd still act like the natural ones, and it'd have all the same feelings, right?”

“That it would.”

Working the oil into the other wing was easier. Auntie was more used to it now. “Then it wouldn't be any different. Not its fault how it got born.”

Ardyn was looking down at Auntie's foot. He tested the edge of her nail with his thumb. For a simple thing, he did it deep in thought. With a sudden, sharp ache, Prompto realized he wanted a picture of that.

“Yes,” Ardyn said. “I completely agree.”

He straightened up and came over to help Prompto work oil into Auntie's tailfeathers. It was relaxing to do, with Ardyn humming next to him. Like cleaning machinery, but cuter and kwehing sometimes. Something useful to do with his hands so he could stop thinking for a while.

They stepped back for a look at their handiwork, and Prompto put his hands on his hips. “Look at you, all shiny.”

Maybe some people would call it stretching her neck out, but Prompto knew it was a pose.

“She is a fine co-conspirator, isn't she,” Ardyn said.
They stood there for a while. The stables were full of dusty sunlight, and Prompto didn't want to be anywhere else quite yet. Ardyn had brought him here to cheer him up, and it'd worked. When Auntie leaned down and rested her head on his shoulder, he felt brave enough to ask.

“Are you going to tell it to me?” Prompto smoothed the soft feathers on Auntie's forehead. “That secret. About me.”

Cloth rustled as Ardyn stepped up beside him and laid his hand over Prompto's. It covered his like a mitt, and Auntie leaned into it, looking for a scratch.

“To know will bring you no benefit.” His voice was quiet, held in by the stable walls. “Only pain.”

Prompto's heart jolted with dread. He gave a thin smile. “You know that just makes me more curious, right?”

“I was afraid so. But there is no better way to warn you.”

Prompto swallowed. He twisted his hand around so he could lace the fingers through Ardyn's. He was big, steady as one of those walls you ducked behind for cover in every third-person shooter these days. Prompto had faced down a fire monkey. He'd even faced down Ardyn. Whatever this secret was, he could handle that, too.

“I want to know,” he said, and was surprised at how firm his voice came out.

Ardyn said, “All right.”

He kept looking down at Prompto's hand. He brought it down and turned it over, so he could trace absent designs on Prompto's palm. Auntie, figuring she wasn't going to get any more attention, scratched herself a place in the hay and settled down. Prompto's heart kept rapping out hard beats no matter how he tried to squeeze it down to normal.

“Go home, Prompto,” Ardyn said. “Your family will have missed you. Return tomorrow, and I will show you my true lair.”
While Prompto hung from the subway strap, he watched the normal-looking freckled guy reflected in the window and tried to figure out his secret.

Like every kid who'd ever been an orphan, he used to daydream that his parents were somebody important. That way even though he thought he was just some dumpy shy kid, actually he was somebody special, too. He knew his parents were normal Lucian soldiers who'd been killed in the war, but it was fun to think maybe he was something like a prince in disguise.

That was before he'd seen Noct pale, woozy, and barely there after using one of those royal swords too much, or seen how drained Ardyn looked after a couple hours of healing. Before he knew what the crystal was pulling out of the king. He'd pass on the prince part, now.

Whatever his thing was, from the sad, serious way Ardyn talked, it couldn't be good. Shit, what if it was some kind of terminal disease? If it was that, it had to help to have a magic healer for a boyfriend, or whatever it was they were now. At First Street, Prompto was mad that Ardyn hadn't just told him instead of making him wait and torture himself. At Fourth (which used to be Second before they put the new route in, so Prompto had gotten off at the wrong stop a dozen times), he was relieved to have a little more time. At Fifth he never wanted to know. From Seventh on he just tried to think of the most ridiculous things it could possibly be. He was a Messenger, like Umbra, except nobody'd ever given him the message. He'd been found in the woods being raised by daemons. He was an alien! Okay, that one would be cool, and would sort of explain a lot.

He got off at his stop and walked down Iifa Avenue. His keys were right in the Armiger where he'd left them. He let himself in, pulled his bag out to drop it on the couch, and said, "Hey, Mom."

His mom had never been much of a hugger. Maybe she'd always been saving it up for now.

Then his dad came downstairs, and for the first time in something close to forever, they all hung out in the living room and talked. Prompto had thought it would be tough to find anything to talk about, since there was a lot he had to keep to himself – like the secret base, and the fire monkey, and the almost dying – but actually once he started, he couldn't stop. There was a ton of stuff to tell them about the places he'd been and the monsters he'd beat up, and the hunters and mechanics and frog researchers he'd met. He showed them a ton of pictures of all the guys and all the places they'd been, and promised his mom that Ardyn hadn't sold him drugs. They ended up talking until Prompto was falling asleep with his eyes open.

It wasn't until he was in his own bed that he remembered he had something to be afraid of.

The library was quiet. Empty quiet, not regular library quiet. Prompto let the heavy wood door swing shut and stepped into warm light and smell of old books that would always mean Ardyn to him. He'd rushed to get here, but now his feet wouldn't go easily toward Ardyn's desk, like the path over the worn carpet through the shelves was knee-deep in invisible snow. So he lingered back a while. He ran his fingers over the spines of the books on the shelf at eye level. This section had the ones about people taking trips, funny enough. _Travels with Angelo, On the Mi'ihen Highroad, Fight Drink Run_. Maybe someday Gladio would write about their own journey. Prompto had caught him scribbling something down once and managed to snatch a page, which turned out to be legit good, and totally worth getting chased down and put in a headlock. Later he'd found out that the only one allowed to read Gladio's stuff was Iris, and she wouldn't share no matter how cute the stuffed moogle you tried to bribe her with was. That was family loyalty for you.
Sometimes Prompto wondered what it was like to have a sister.

“Perhaps I can help you find something?”

Ardyn's voice didn't make him jump this time. He'd been waiting for it.

“Oh hey,” Prompto said, letting his hand fall. Ardyn was there a few steps away, still in fewer layers than usual. Prompto was starting to get used to seeing him without the coat. He looked like he belonged here in the library's shadows, with a sympathetic look softening his face like time and hands softening a leather cover. “I was just.”

All of a sudden he realized what he wanted more than anything was for Ardyn to say, *I was mistaken, it turns out there's nothing to tell you at all,* or argue that he should let it drop and have some piece of logic so convincing that it wouldn't be Prompto's fault at all when he said okay.

Ardyn said, “This way.”

Prompto followed his broad back in its ruffly shirt down the rows of shelves. They ended up way in the library's back corner. Ardyn stood by the shelf and gestured like a lady showing off the prizes on a game show.

“Sixth shelf down,” he said, “tenth book from the left. Volume fifty. Push it against the wall.”

The shelves were full of something called *Wind the Clock: A Complete History of Eos.* The one Ardyn was talking about was near the last of them, by *The Gunblades of August.* Prompto pushed it inwards, and something went *snick.*

“Did that do something?” he said.

“Here.” Ardyn pointed to the outside edge of the shelf. A tiny little door had slid open in the wood to show a little round metal-lined depression. “Place that charm I gave you here.”

The little star that opened the secret passage to Ardyn's room was still on Prompto's wristband. He set it into the spot.

This time the *snick* was louder, and he had to hop back as the whole shelf swung forward.

“Cool,” Prompto breathed, wide-eyed, pulling and pushing the shelf back and forth. It swung like it weighed nothing, though *Party of Rivals* up on the top shelf had to weigh ten pounds alone. “Is that magic?”

“Only the magic of clever engineering.”

In the wall behind it, there was a door. A pretty unassuming one, for a secret hidden door to a spy lair. It looked more like it should open into somebody's living room. There was a glimmer of magenta light as Ardyn pulled a key out and unlocked it.

“After you,” he said, lifting his arm in his jokey, showy sort of way.

When the door swung shut behind them, the passage was completely dark.

“Just a few steps forward.” Ardyn's voice rolled against the walls and filled the space.

Prompto put his hands out in front as he walked. Soon, they hit wood. He groped down and to the right until he found a doorknob. The room it lead to was just as dark, until Ardyn came in behind him and hit the light switch.
“Woah,” Prompto said. “This is your secret spy cave?”

It was big, and as fancy as Ardyn's own room. The rug on the floor had to be the kind with the name of a place attached. Anyplace on the walls that wasn't covered with shelves full of binders was papered with maps. Over on one side where was a huge desk covered with stacks of paper, a fancy pen thing, and one of those swinging steel ball toys that went clack.

“Oh, no.” Ardyn moved past him to the desk and took a calculator out of the drawer. “This is the decoy.”

He brought the calculator over to Prompto and showed him the little screen as he put in seven seven seven. Something clicked, and Ardyn rolled up a map of Gralea that was on one wall. Behind it at about chest level, there were two round holes the size of a gas cap. It looked like one angled up and one angled down. Ardyn set the map on the desk and lifted one of the balls on the toy thing. Prompto thought he was just going to make it swing and clack, because you kind of had to do that, but the ball came loose in his hand. Holding it between his thumb and his forefinger like a coin, Ardyn brought it over to the wall.

“Hold on,” Ardyn said. He put his arm around Prompto and put the ball into the hole on the left. It made a rolling sound for a few seconds, then plinked down somewhere.

Prompto was more ready this time, now that he'd warped along with Ardyn on a pretty regular basis during the trip. After the world yanked itself out from under his feet, it only took a few seconds to get himself and the ground in the right order again.

The lights were the ugly fluorescent kind in tubes on the ceiling. What they lit up was less of a room and more of a white box, about five good steps from one stone wall to the other, though you wouldn't be able to step there without running into the filing cabinets that lined the place. That and a flimsy table with a computer were the only furniture. It smelled cold and bare.


“Isn't it?” Ardyn pocketed the little steel ball that was the way out. The only way out. “I don't spend more time in here than I can avoid, but it is a useful secure repository. The walls are quite thick and elemantically trapped; should anyone attempt to hammer through by force, the entirety of the room will be consumed by fire.”

Prompto swallowed. It was equal parts scary and amazing. “Does anybody else know about this place?”

Ardyn walked over to a filing cabinet along the left wall. He was too big and colorful to fit into the chill white room. “Regis. Cor Leonis has visited, though he cannot enter on his own. A Glaive would be able to, but I haven't become fond enough of any to share the secret.”

“And you're showing me,” said Prompto, the kid who blabbed his locker combination to somebody cause they'd asked.

“I'm showing you.” Ardyn opened a drawer marked K-M, and it slid out with a metallic sound. “Would you like to see what I retrieved from Niflheim that night? The time I was telling you about.”

The night when he'd been hit with whips in a room that probably didn't look that different from this one, except for a little barred window. It couldn't have been worth it. Prompto was half curious and half just glad for something else to talk about. He wanted to put a buffer between him and finding out his secret. “Yeah.”
Ardyn's fingers flicked over the files until he pulled out a thick one and laid it open on the table. The label tab on the top said, in Ardyn's loopy handwriting, *Life3.*

“It’s not a matter of one large, daring heist, like in the movies,” Ardyn said. He was taking things out of the file and spreading the papers out with delicate motions, like he was setting the table for a fancy meal. “It's a matter of gathering fragments and attempting to piece them together into something that suggests a greater pattern. Often questions are raised or trails picked up, never to be answered or seen through to the end. Anticlimax is the rule of the game. In this case, what I received from our contact was the first step. The majority of this was gathered later and assembled into a coherent whole.”

“Still looks pretty confusing to me.” Prompto’s eyes roamed over the papers.

Ardyn opened up an envelope and spread out a bunch of photos. They were at odd angles, not framed well, and grainy like they'd been taken in bad lighting. The faded colors showed something like an industrial complex, a little like the one they'd snuck into. Some showed soldiers, and people in lighter jackets that might have been labcoats. In the background of some were rows of low cylindrical tanks. There was one that showed a lot of those, and Prompto.

He jolted and got a quick glance from Ardyn, but it wasn't him. Actually, when he picked up the photo and looked closer, he had no idea how he could've made the mistake. Must've just had himself on his mind too much. Even in the middle distance and through the photo's bad quality, this guy was older than him, with a rounder face and a sharper nose, and eyebrows that winged up to a point. He was in a labcoat, too, and had a focused, hunting look on his face. Something about him was familiar, though.

“Verstael Besithia,” Ardyn said softly, “was a man who lived enshrouded by the fear of death.”

The face clicked. The guy in charge of the base, the one in red and black armor who'd stood over Prompto with Ardyn beside him and said *Is he anybody?* It was just him a lot younger.

“Yet even he began with high-minded goals.”

Ardyn opened a three-ring binder with some typed up pages inside. It was a font from an old-fashioned machine, and it was marked as the transcript of an audio log.

*The more I discover, the more I learn the extent of our ignorance. There is so much to be known. What could Naevius have uncovered for humanity, given more than this paltry lifetime? What could Varinia? What could I?*

“The first incarnation of the project focused on extending human longevity. One by one his experiments met with failure, confounded by the simple realities of the flesh. There were limits that could not be surpassed. Thus, he progressed to seeking to cheat death itself. That is to say, his goal was nothing less than immortality.”

Ardyn tapped his finger on one of the pictures. It showed the guy staring at a feather in a glass jar.

“He probed relentlessly at the down of the Phoenix, and hunted the natures of the gods, seeking for the secrets of life eternal.”

“But if you lived forever, that'd mean watching everybody you care about get old and die.” It was too much like the picture that lived in a dark cupboard in the back of Prompto's brain, the one that showed Noct gray and tired too soon, limping like his dad on bad days. “That'd be horrible.”
“I would be inclined to agree. Yet it is what he desired. Unfortunately, this too bore no fruit. And so he turned to the third iteration – a plan to let his body die as it may, while preserving the germ of his consciousness.”

Prompto frowned at the blurry shapes in the photos. “That does not sound super possible.”

“Hope springs eternal.” The next picture Ardyn pulled out looked like a slide from under a microscope, showing little blobs. Ardyn's voice had a way of swaying when he was explaining something. It would be easy to just listen to the sound and not the words. “The third plan involved creating vessels. Besithia did this by creating clones from his own cells. As the theory went, the more similar they were to the source, the more amenable they would be to the transfer, though it is possible vanity played a role as well.”

Prompto felt dizzy. The walls were close and the room was stuffy. “Just, like, growing people? In those fishtanks?”

“Essentially, yes. Not entire perfect copies, however. He created quite a few, seeking the ideal gene combination, tweaking the DNA to enhance the immune system, sight, reflexes, whatever he desired in an incarnation.”

Some of the pages were full of formulas that made Prompto's head spin. All he knew about genetics was making the little squares where you put the capital and lowercase letters that'd tell you whether somebody's kid would have blue eyes or not, like they'd done back in freshman biology. That and the thing about how a bunch of it had gotten figured out by a gardener monk, so he and Noct had this whole joke about a guy punching plants into being better at being plants, and they'd ended up giggling like idiots because it was dumb and hilarious the way that only being stupid with your buddy when you were bored in class could be.

Ardyn said, “Unfortunately, as his years progressed, so too did his paranoia.”

Ardyn flipped the pages in the binder to one that said

has suggested marking the clones in some way. Does he think me such a fool, to inhabit a traceable body clearly labeled as a construct? He seeks my research for himself, as anyone would. I won't give any of them the chance.

“So he wanted to swap places with one.” Prompto could almost understand that. Back when he was a kid, there'd been plenty of times he’d wished he could just trade his body for a better one instead of having to remodel it himself.

“There were several promising ideas for the method. However, not a one of them panned out. In the end he was forced to admit defeat. He ordered the project abandoned and the vessels destroyed.”

“So they were, like, empty person shells?” Even if he hadn't been in a little white box of a room, the idea would've been creepy.

Ardyn was looking down at a picture where you could just make out little shapes in the tanks. He didn't turn his head. “No. That would have been far too difficult to construct. Though born unconventionally, they were human in every way.”

Ardyn sounded like he was reading the narration for a documentary. Usually his voice was full of swoops and lilts.

Prompto's hands opened and closed. “He was going to kill them.”
“To his way of thinking, it was only cleaning up a failed experiment. However, even in the high echelons of weapons development, not all Niflheimians are monsters. There were those who drew the line at the slaughter of infants. At great personal risk, one of them reached out to us.”

“The one you got the papers from?”

The connection to Ardyn snapped the story into the present. There was something about it that scratched at the back of Prompto's mind. It made his guts knot up with dread and made him not want to think. He definitely didn't want to think about what the cold, snarling man in the black and red armor would do to somebody who betrayed him.

“Yes. Him I have no record of, for safety's sake. Not so much as a true name. He was a beetlish little fellow, one you would expect could be intimidated by a moth. Yet he was responsible for one of the most flagrant acts of courage I have ever borne witness to. He is one of those aspects of the story who vanishes incomplete from the narrative. I prefer to think that after he handed over the crucial documents to me, he vanished to live out a life of placid anonymity.”

Prompto's hands kept going to the documents and leaving again like nervous birds. Some of these were the ones somebody'd risked their lives for, and that Ardyn got whipped for but didn't give up.

“Can't imagine,” Prompto said, throat dry. “Doing something crazy like that.”

Ardyn paused, caught his eye, and said, “Can't you?”

The things Prompto had done had never felt brave. Just something he had to do while scared out of his mind. He didn't touch the scars on his stomach to check if they were still there.

“What did you do?” he said. “When you got home.”

“As soon as I was back in Insomnia, I passed the information along to the Crownsguard. My offer to join the mission was denied, to my great and secret relief. I was instructed to lie low in the Crown City and recover my strength – or, in Cor's delicate phrasing, 'Settle your ass down and go babysit your nephew.' Noct being an infant at the time.”

Prompto wanted to make a joke about Ardyn being old, but his mouth couldn't force the words to happen.

“Must've been a whole action movie squad.” Prompto paged through the binder. The writing didn't make much sense to him. He thought about letting his eyes make patterns in the type, and nothing else.

“Close to it. The operation was carried out by several exceptional operatives, Cor among them. It must have been quite the sight. Besithia had made many clones, intending to transfer himself to whichever proved most ideal. There were more than a score of them—”

“A who?”

“Twenty.”

“Then say twenty!”

“In any case, an impressive number. However, the saving grace was that they would not be missed – Besithia had been told they were destroyed, and had no reason to believe otherwise. Whatever the method, they were smuggled out of the facility and found somewhere to go. Some were claimed to be war orphans and fostered in Niflheim itself, at least one, so the rumor goes, even among the noble
families. I cannot say for certain. It was thought best that as few know the details as possible.”

It was a long war. There were lots of orphans. Prompto's eyes were dry from not blinking enough. Ardyn's voice bounced back and forth in the tiny room and hit him from both sides.

“So too with those infants brought back into Lucian territory. Of course, it was not entirely an act of altruism. A nation at war can ill afford those. Our scientists sought to glean value from Niflheim's research. On concluding the stolen projects to be in all physical ways only ordinary children, birth certificates and other records were forged and they were placed for adoption among the more conventional children. The traces were erased so that eventually none whatsoever could say with certainty who they were, or where.”

Prompto moved the photos to the side, one by one. The framing was really bad. So was the color. Workstations. Tubes. Machines.

“And so time passed, and they melted into the citizenry.” Ardyn's eyes were steady on him. They were looking at him too hard to let Prompto blink. “Their only memory lives in a glimpse of perhaps a young man here or there who is, now and then, in a certain light, the picture of a young Verstael Besithia.”

“No,” Prompto whispered. His hands froze. “No, no, no.”

The photo at the bottom of the stack was a kid in a test tube. In this one, finally, it was close up and clear enough to see that the baby was blond, and snub-nosed, and him.

“Prompto,” Ardyn's voice said, like it was through water and on the other side of glass.

The desk receded away from him. He didn't know his feet were moving until a filing cabinet rammed into his back.

“That's not me. I'm a Lucian. I'm a Lucian!”

His shout hit the walls and careened back at him like a gunshot.

Ardyn was coming toward him. “Wait.”

“Shut up. You're wrong.” His body wasn't right. It was a foreign thing he was stuck to. It'd been pressed out in a factory like dorm room furniture. His knees went out and his ass hit the cold floor. He chanted through lips that wouldn't move the way he wanted. “This is all a mistake. My parents were soldiers. They died in the war. I was adopted when I was a baby. I grew up on Banora Street. You take a right at the cafe. I'm normal. I'm weird but I'm normal. I'm not somebody's science project. I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not I'm not--”

“Ardyn, listen to me.” Ardyn knelt down on the floor in front of him and grabbed him by the shoulders. Prompto's twitch knocked his back against the file cabinet. Ardyn's eyes were big, bright, urgent. “How you were born is nothing but an anecdote.”

“Not born. Made.” A horrible crazy laugh wanted to bubble up in Prompto's throat, and he clawed it down. “You're telling me I was cooked up by that old psycho. Just a blank for him to bodysnatch.”

“It's all right, it's all right,” Ardyn said, like he was soothing a panicking patient. “He is very dead.”

The words got absorbed by the bag of white noise wrapped around Prompto's head. This one fact was rippling backwards into the past and changing everything, flipping all the cards upside down.
“And you knew. You knew what I was, and you kissed me, and you--”

Ardyn grabbed him by the face and kissed him hard. “And would again a thousand times.”

Prompto's fingers gripped his sleeves and sunk into the fabric like an animal's claws. His mind kept running in demented circles. “What the hell am I?”

“You are the same person you ever were. The most human man I have ever known.” Ardyn's hand was on Prompto's knee, and it was like the last time he'd been kneeling in front of him on a hard floor, looking scared and saying stay and please. “You said yourself you would not hold method of birth against a bird. It means nothing.”

“That's different. That's not me.” His hands grabbed onto his face, putting the white room through blurry bars. “Fuck. You were setting me up. Oh, fuck. Fuck.”

He did one good, hard shudder, front to back. The filing cabinet rattled. Then he went still.

Prompto's body felt freeze-dried, like moving it would take chemical processes he didn't have. He wanted to be back in yesterday. He wanted to wake up and do the day for real, and find out that the secret was anything else. The rasping noise coming out of his lungs filled up the room.

Prompto didn't know how long it was before he said, “Get me out of here.”

Ardyn's hands levered him up. Prompto's body couldn't seem to do much but stay where it was put. Ardyn led him to the wall, and put the steel ball in one of the holes. Warping didn't make Prompto any sicker than he already was. His feet sank into carpet, and color filled his aching eyes. They were out.

Everything was in 2D for a while. Ardyn slid from one side of the frame to the other and put the ball back on the toy thing. He was back by Prompto, holding him by the arm, and the secret passageway slid past around them. Then there was the library, like the backdrop in a kids' school play. The light in the outside passageways made his eyes ache. His lungs pulled in fresh open air that he couldn't taste. There was a big wooden door. There were the hallways. He was on the couch in Ardyn's rooms with his knees pulled up to his chest.

When Ardyn's shape started to move away, Prompto's hand latched on tight to his arm.

The couch shifted when Ardyn sat down next to him. Prompto pressed up against his chest. He pushed his face against the texture of that weird ruffly accordion-folded shirt, and felt the lines of the pattern measuring ruler-straight down his cheek. He stayed there where it was dark and listened to Ardyn's heartbeat. Ardyn put his arms around him and buried his hand in Prompto's hair. His hand was so big it basically covered Prompto's skull. He'd always liked that.

Today Ardyn smelled like rosemary.

He felt the rumble against his face when Ardyn started to talk.

“You turn over beetles that are on their backs,” he said, out of the warm darkness. “You never stop moving, yet I have seen you wait half the day to catch the perfect light. Your theory about Black Flan daemons was mistaken; one did in fact once strike me in the face, and it did not taste at all like black licorice. You make up little songs about stairs. You seek nothing but beauty in this dour, relentless world.”

Ardyn's other hand pressed on the small of Prompto's back, and he said, “I adore you.”
Prompto let that lay over him, and breathed for a while, feeling out the edges of himself. He'd been on this couch a hundred times, watching movies with Ardyn, or laying with his head in his lap and being read poems.

When he was as ready to find out as he'd ever be, he said, “How long have you known?”

He felt Ardyn's chest rise and fall. “I did not at first. I was, ah, distracted. As time went on, I suspected. The resemblance could have been coincidence, but your background fit too well to be ignored. I was not truly sure until the scanner at the base confirmed it.”

The scanner sliding a bar of light under his palm, and the output reading CHIEF RESEARCHER BESITHIA. It'd been too good to be true.

“What would you've done if it didn't work?” he mumbled into Ardyn's shirt.

“Improvised something else. But as I hoped, you were able to let your brilliance shine.” His fingers stroked through Prompto's hair. “The blood that allowed you into the system was only a tool. You were the one who employed it to save us.”

Prompto burrowed against him and thought about how he'd always wanted to be special.

Cor said for a tough target, you worked from the outside in.

Don't start with the petri dish and the mad scientist and the machines. Start with Cor.

Cor said he had a steady eye. He could have rejected Prompto from the Crownsguard but he didn't. He'd given Prompto his gun and his uniform, and said he had dedication. That was a thing that had happened. The one part of the past didn't change the other.

Gladio trusted him to cover his back. Ignis joked with him, and said they were fortunate to have him as a comrade. Noct liked him.

Ardyn adored him.

His parents were still his parents. They only weren't if he decided they weren't, and he sure as hell wasn't going to do that.

Okay. That was a start. There were some outlines to border the dark staticky area that was him.

“Ardyn?” he said quietly.

Ardyn's thumb stroked over the nape of his neck. “Yes?”

Prompto lifted his face up a little and opened his eyes. Ardyn was looking down at him, same old stubble as always. He found a piece of his voice. “Wanna get day-drunk and watch weird old TV shows?”

The light and the angle made artwork out of the lines of Ardyn's face. The ones by his mouth, the soft ones at the corners of his eyes. Prompto would find that again, and get a picture, and keep it. “Very much.”

Ardyn went and got a bottle of wine. Prompto watched the color of it as it poured out and felt the cool curve of the glass fill up his palm. The taste didn't mean much to him, but it never really had. Just one of those pieces of the fancy kind of life that he wasn't made to get.

Ardyn put his arm around him, and Prompto rested against his body as the show started up where
they'd left off a long time ago. He didn't make much effort to make sense out of it. He just watched the colors move and let the words drift around him while he listened to Ardyn breathe and the wine warmed up his cold fingertips.

The only time they talked was when Prompto said “Why a monkey mask?” and Ardyn said, “No one knows.” Prompto stopped listening to his own brain, and somewhere along the line his eyes drifted shut.

The light outside the window was still bright when Prompto woke up with the DVD menu playing and his mouth tasting like wine. He felt scraped out, like he'd been put together in the shape of himself out of a substance he didn't know real well. Ardyn was asleep with his head clonked back on the back of the couch. Even when he was in a bed he always looked like he'd sprawled out there on accident. Prompto went and got the quilt out of the hall closet to put on top of him. It was weird to watch his own body do what he told it to. Like the rest of him hadn't gotten the memo that nothing should be normal anymore.

His bare feet padded on the carpet. He felt strange and new, like he'd just come out of a mold.

Prompto went into the bathroom. Same as always. The towels with initials on them, the toothbrush and hair stuff he'd started keeping here a long time ago, the big tub with the bath salts in a caddy on the edge. (The tangerine ones were nice.) The mirror.

Prompto put his hands on the edge of the sink and stared himself down. It was just a kid in his twenties in a red sleeveless shirt with blond hair that was stuck lopsided from sleeping on it. The only difference was now there was a shadow of the Imperial scientist from that picture when he was younger, if you squinted your eyes and looked just right.

What somebody in a movie would do right now was splash some water on their face to clear their head. Prompto tried it and mostly just got water all over his shirt. Weird enough, he did feel a little bit better.

“I'm still me,” he said, to try it out.

So that was his secret. He wasn't dying or anything. He just wasn't who he thought he was. Lots of people weren't.

He tried, “It'll be okay.”

Then he pulled out his phone to start finding out if that was true.

Me
there's something i need to tell you guys

Noctis
sure what's up?

Me
it's kind of an in person thing

Noctis
u ok?

Me
Gladio
come over to noct's

Me
i mean
kind of not

Noctis
cmere and talk to us

Ignis
I'll make a quiche.
The sun was getting tangled in the city’s skyscrapers. Noct hadn't seen these buildings in weeks, but when he looked out from the window of the little meeting room him, it was like he'd woken up this morning in Insomnia like always.

“You saw Ignis's face,” Noct said.

His dad said, “It must have been quite a battle.”

“Yeah.” Noct's thumb pressed against the windowsill, running back and forth along the edge of the shiny wood. “Prompto has some too, now. Scars.”

His dad didn't say anything. He knew how to give Noctis the time work around to what he needed to get out, letting the silence wait like a catcher's mitt.

When Noct had the words stitched together enough, he said, “How do you handle people getting hurt for you?”

This was the hour when you could swear you could see the sun working its way down along the side of the buildings, making their windows shine like fire. Bright white fire, not thick oily flames clinging to an animal. Not the kind you felt stuck hot and aching to your skin like a sunburn but moreso, when you were so tired and wrung out from being scared that you couldn't sort out one ache from another. Then you woke up in a stolen airship with a cool cloth on your face and the pain gone, because your friend took care of it for you. If you were a lucky sort of guy.

“It's never easy,” said his dad, a man who sent a squad of the people closest to him into warzones every day. “You use what their sacrifice earned for you, and respect the choice they made to fight for your sake.”

“How do you get..” Noct struggled for a word that was easier to say, and couldn't find one. “...worthy of that kind of thing?”

Things like your friends going into an enemy stronghold just because you said so. Things like them yelling they were on your side, when they would've been safe if they weren't.

The chair creaked, though Noct didn't turn to look. The footsteps were slow and a little out of rhythm. His dad was behind schedule on healings. Noct's dad's hand rested on his shoulder, and through his t-shirt he could feel the sharp shape of the ring.

“I'll tell you,” he said, “if I ever know.”

After this many years, Noctis had a feel for Ignis's food code. The chicken soup with the lemon and rice in it was for rainy days. Fried pork chops were for when Noct had really gone all out in training. The little pastries with the whipped cream were for when there was something to celebrate.

Quiche was for when something serious was going down.

Whatever it was, it had to be rough. Prompto texting without any pictures of dogs or piles of emoji
was pretty much unheard of.

They didn't try to figure it out while they waited. It felt good to be quiet for a while, after having a long talk with his dad. Specs beat eggs, Gladio was stretched out over the couch reading something by a guy named Umaro Eco, and Noct was over by the table, pulling stuff from the trip out of the Armiger. He had to figure out which souvenirs were going to who.

The apartment was starting to smell good when the door opened and Prompto came in.

“Hey guys,” he said. His smile was slippery and hesitant, and his heel kept pushing the grain of the carpet back and forth.

It was definitely a quiche day.

Sometimes Prompto needed a minute to wind up. They sat around the table and talked about how the city'd changed since they'd been gone, and Prompto's fork grabbed the picked-out pieces of mushroom from Noct's plate.

When there were only crumbs left, Prompto took a deep breath and said, “So.”

He started with *I'm not who you think.* The rest of it wasn't really that long. Staring down at his plate, he told them about a secret project and a rescue twenty years ago.

It was like reading a comic book where one day they dropped a crazy backstory on the one normal guy, just to shake things up. Those always bugged Noct, especially when the character was plenty interesting on his own.

“So yeah,” Prompto said. He was bent over in the chair he always took in Noct's apartment, staying turned away a little so his hair shielded the side of his face. “That's me.”

“Ardyn told you all of this?” Ignis tilted his head to get a fix with his good eye.

“Don't be mad at him. I asked him not to hide stuff from me anymore, and tell me anything he knew, and this...was a thing he knew.” Prompto's fingers were pinched tight around the edge of his plate. “And now you know.”

“Hey,” Noct said. It must have come out right, because it got Prompto to look at him. “You know we don't care, right?”

Prompto pulled one side of his lower lip under his teeth. “You don't?”

“Who you are is in your actions,” Ignis said. “You are one of us.”

“Kinda gives us all something in common,” Gladio said. He was leaning back with his hands knitted together, looking up at the ceiling. “We were all put together for one job or another. That's what a noble line is. Your deal's just more direct.”

“None of us chose our heritage,” Ignis said, “only what we do with it.”

Prompto looked from one of them to the other, blinking like they were throwing strobe lights. He gestured helplessly. “But...creepy experiment. Test tube. Evil scientist.”

“So?” Gladio sat up. “He's not the boss of you.”

“There's just one thing I have to know,” Noctis said.
Prompto's Adam's apple jumped when he swallowed. “Yeah?”

Noctis steepled his hands in front of him and gave Prompto a long, steady look in the eye. The room went quiet, waiting.

“Does that make you Solid or Liquid?”

Prompto burst out laughing. “Dude, not funny! Too soon!”

You could always tell when tension fell out of him. His lights switched on and he went fast and mobile like he was supposed to be, smacking Noct's arm.

“What? It's an important question!”

“You're such a dumbass,” Prompto said, smiling like there was ever any doubt.

“That's Prince Dumbass to you,” Noct said, "if we care about that stuff all of a sudden.”

Prompto said, “Then I guess I don't.”

Noct had told his dad everything. The Niflheim base, the machine they'd made to break the wall, the maddened half-robot ape. It was intel, and it was important. He only left one part out.

His dad could tell it wasn't the whole story, but he didn't push. He'd always said a king had to have his own judgment. That was what Noct was going to be, however the hidden worst part of him had felt for an instant when he'd been on his knees, betrayed, when the weight of the ring was going to be off his dad and the kingdom was off his shoulders, and it wasn't his fault.

“Hey Dad?” Noct lingered by the window. He hadn't been able to sit down much since getting out of the car. The energy in him kept shifting from side to side.

“Hm?”

“Do you trust Ardyn?”

His dad leaned back on the table and let out a long sigh. “All right, which did he do: a scheme or a ruse?”

“Kind of both.” Noct's fingers were twitching in the tuneless percussion way Prompto's always did. They kept moving, even when Noct's eyes were downcast.

“He does that.”

The carpet had a border of tiny flowers that must have taken somebody ages to weave in, hundreds of years ago when it was made.

Tapping at the windowsill with his nails, Noct said, “It was stupid and cruel.”

“He does that, too,” his dad said. The rueful corner of his mouth twisted into his beard.

“So do you?” Noct said, more jagged and artless than he meant it to come out.

“Yes. I would not have let him go along with you if I didn't.” His dad didn't hold it against Noct when he said things wrong. He came and stood next to Noct, looking out the window. The hand that rested on the sill was an old man's. “My brother is...complicated.”
“No kidding,” Noct muttered.

“He’s in a strange position, loving the family as much as he hates everything the name means. He has all of us at heart, and I know the things he has done to protect us. However, there is a point where volunteering for the ugliest and most painful jobs is no longer a virtue.”

In the red emergency lights at the bottom of the steel stairwell, Ardyn had opened the reinforced door he had been about to go through alone, looking like something had been stolen from him.

“I think he actually wanted us to hate him,” Noctis said.

“That’s likely. He always preferred that role.” He slipped Noct a sidelong look and said, “I never once got to play the bad cop.”

Noct cracked a smile he didn't mean to. “I'm still pretty mad at him.”

The resentment at what Ardyn had done lived low in Noct's stomach, resting there half-awake like a reptile stuck on the underside of a branch.

“Anger is what he understands best.” A rectangle of orangey light covered the top half of Noct's dad as he looked out at the city. “I would not trust him alone with the gods.”

Chapter End Notes

The Umaro Eco book is *The Name of the Sylleblossom*.

Assassin's Creed exists inworld, and it's had crossovers with Metal Gear. Therefore Metal Gear is also a thing, and therefore, incidentally, Nikita Khrushchev exists in Eos, but only as a superminor character in a video game.
The way you forget a big assignment due tomorrow when you're at the arcade, or the way you forget popcorn in the microwave, Prompto kept forgetting his big life-changing secret. He spent a lot of the next day trying to get himself to feel as wrong as he knew he should, but it wouldn't quite take. His body thought it wasn't any different than it ever had been, and it kept convincing him. His legs took him over to the kitchens like normal, his reflexes got him around the crowds of cooks and under the giant fruit platter somebody was carrying, and his senses reported a smell as good as it had always been. His arms picked up the covered tray and did all the little physics things to balance it, and his legs walked him out through the palace to the big garden the same as a dozen times before.

There were still some people lined up outside the pavilion, so Prompto took a bench and waited. Word was Ardyn had been in with the king all morning, and it'd been a long time since the last public healing. Prompto swung his still-him legs off the edge of the bench and texted Noct dog pictures until the last person came out.

Prompto ducked under the tent flap, the canvas sliding over his back like somebody petting a cat. Ardyn was there under the dusty gold light, in the chair next to the table with the pitcher of water with lemon in it, and it was a punch of nostalgia like hearing the little song from the title screen of the first King's Knight.

“Hey,” Prompto said, “you got your coat cleaned up!”

Ardyn lifted his arm and let the black sleeve drape. It made him a whole different silhouette. “Yes, though the fellow at the dry cleaners may never forgive me.”

“So everything’s back to normal,” Prompto said, keeping the idea that he believed it pretty steady for about half the sentence. The folding table swayed when he set down the tray. “Got lunch here for you.”

Ardyn's eyes didn't flicker. He gestured to Prompto to sit down in the patient's chair, leaned forward toward him, and pressed his hands over Prompto's stomach. His palms felt weird through the t-shirt cloth, with the scars blunting the feeling.

“Have you had any pain?” Ardyn said. “Any restriction to motion?”

“Ayah,” Prompto said. The healing energy probing at the injury felt weird, like a cat's cold nose bumping on your skin. “I've been okay.”

Ardyn let go. He sat back in his chair and said, all significantly, “Have you?”

“Right. The other thing.” Prompto's hand brushed through his hair, and he looked up at how the top of the tent swayed in the breeze. It was different from the tent they camped in. Canvas, not vinyl. “Actually? Yeah. I mean, it's still weird. But I told the guys, and all that happened is we figured out I don't have enough robot tentacles to be Solidus.”

Ardyn blinked. “Pardon?”

“Long story, not important.” Prompto shrugged, and his vest jangled. “So it's worked out. I mean, it's working out. Or will. However you wanna say it. But dude, eat, you've gotta be a hungry hungry
hundlegs over there."

"I am a bit peckish," Ardyn admitted.

He did a delicate little swoopy thing to take the cover off the tray, and then wrecking ball'd a whole roast fish, a pile of dumplings, some green beans, and a vegetable pie thing the size of a brick. It was like watching pine needles get tossed in a bonfire.

Prompto said, "Wow."

Ardyn dabbed his lips with a napkin and sighed, "Much better."

It was quiet for a minute, with just the breeze swaying the tent walls. Prompto tried to work out what to say, but his brain couldn't get moving unless his body was too, so he got up and paced. Ardyn's eyes followed him back and forth like one of those tacky cat clock things they had in the worst kinds of souvenir stores where they both always made Iggy and the guys pull over.


Ardyn's hands folded together. "I am here to listen."

"About you. Me. Whatever..." Prompto gestured back and forth between them. "...us, is."

"You've made up your mind, then," Ardyn said, real neutral, with the corners of his eyes wilting like the edges of a flower that had been in a vase too long.

"It's not a bad thing! I've just...yeah. I've been thinking. About how I'm maybe never gonna not be mad at you. Like, I'm not gonna have a day when I wake up and go, 'oh, that thing, I'm over it, it's totally fine!' But that thing, what happened, that's not all of you. You're still everything else you've always been. And being mad at you for some stuff doesn't make me like the other parts less. I mean, sure, the part where you saved my life and Iggy's face, but more that you're the guy who hopped fences with me, and who went to concerts with me just cause it was some band I heard on Lunatic Pandora, and who helped me run back and forth in and out of Kenny Crow's that one time so we could get the guys sitting in just the right position so it'd look like Nightthunderocs, and you love reality shows where people throw drinks in each other's faces, and you have purple armpit hair..."

Okay, weird moment to get choked up. Prompto gulped down a breath and barreled through. "...and really strong opinions about brunch. You're the only person in the world who's actually done the thing where you sneak somebody in prison a cake with a file in it. You're still that guy, and I like that guy. A lot. And you told me the truth about who I am, when it would've been a lot easier not to. So whatever I am, wherever I came from, what I want to be is with you."

With his breath all gone for the sake of that, Prompto made himself stop pacing. What made the tent suddenly so quiet was less the lack of his voice than losing the sound of his boots swishing through the short-mown grass. Prompto felt like he'd just run up a flight of stairs and crashed into Ardyn, who was watching him with a look like he'd forgotten anyone was watching back.

Quiet enough that it was like the tent flap brushing back and forth over the top of the grass, Ardyn said, "You have, as ever, an artist's eye."

Prompto swallowed, and watched him.

Ardyn said, "I would like that. To remain with you."

Relief smacked Prompto in the face like a wind-blown screen door. He'd done it. He'd actually gotten it out.
“So,” he said, “can we just, like, start over? Not totally from scratch, but like one of those games where you go back to the beginning but you still have all your experience and items and stuff.”

“And your knowledge,” Ardyn said. The look on his face and in the corners of his lips was, crazy enough, relief, too.

“Yeah. That too.”

“A marvelous notion.”

“Okay,” Prompto said. He really did feel like he was headed out onto unknown territory. Just with someone he knew real well.

“Well then, my handsome stranger.” Ardyn stood up. His coat swished around him and skimmed the top of the grass. He took Prompto's hand and kissed it, because he was a dork like that. On the inner side of his sleeve, you could see where a burn hole had been skillfully patched up. “May I take you on a first date?”

By their third, things were a little bit closer to normal. The air between them was something they were both a little careful with, something tender at the edges, like a limb with a recent sprain. With a mutual vow not to tell Ignis, they went to a place that had those milkshakes in mason jars with sprinkles and chocolate-covered marshmallows on top, and they were sticky and ridiculous and stupid and it was good to be alive.

On the way back, a few steps into that giant crowded crosswalk outside the station, Prompto looked up from dodging between people to see the huge TV screen on the Kwehfront building flash a Breaking News graphic.

Ardyn stopped beside him. People kept flowing around.

The volume must've gotten turned up. Even over the noise of all the people, you could hear the word Niflheim, and then, so close it had to be impossible, declared a ceasefire.

The constant motion of the street drifted to a stop. The whole crowd craned their necks up and went silent, like the city taking in a breath together.

The giant newscaster's head kept saying things. Prompto felt the words vibrate the air, and his fingers latched onto Ardyn's sleeve. Does this mean an end to the war?

When the noise started they were already moving. As fast as Ardyn could move, Prompto was right behind him.

Within a block the streets between the towering buildings were freer of people, just full of cars waiting at the light. Ardyn didn't pause in his step as he grabbed Prompto around the waist, flung a knife from the Armiger, and warped the both of them right out in front of one.

Ardyn opened the driver's side door and said, “Might I requisition this vehicle for a moment? Royal business.”

The driver was a brunette woman about Prompto's age with wide eyes and her hands still on the wheel. She blinked fast and said dizzily, “I guess I can be late for band practice.”

“Splendid.”
She scrambled over the console, Ardyn took the wheel, and Prompto was barely into the back before they screeched out into the street.

“Holy shit!” the lady said, while Prompto whooped and held on.

That was the day he learned another thing: Ardyn could drive like an absolute maniac. The guy who he’d spent weeks meandering down seaside roads with was slaloming through the streets dodging buses and taking corners on two wheels. There was a fifty percent chance Prompto was going to die and a one hundred percent chance it was going to be awesome.

It was a thirty minute drive from there to the Citadel. They did it in ten. The car screeched up to the steps and then came to a nice clean stop between the sleek fancy cars that were already there. It’d barely quit rolling before Ardyn was out and heading up the steps.

“Thanks! Sorry! Good luck with your band thing!” Prompto called as he scrambled out after him.

“Sure,” said the woman’s faint voice.

He sprinted up the stairs after Ardyn, and they walked into the end of the war.

The first thing Gladio said was, “Don't get too excited. There's been false starts before.”

Prompto did anyway. He spent the first few days buzzing like a killer bee who’d had a rock thrown at it by somebody on a dare (you know, hypothetically.) He calmed down after a while, around when it got clear that if this happened, it wasn't going to happen quick.

It turned out that war was hell, but peace was work. There were meetings and negotiations and hammering out the details of offers and getting them rejected and doing counteroffers and countering the other counteroffers, and that was just for starters. Noct had to be at a bunch of these things, and wherever the prince was, his Crownsguard went too, so Prompto stood in the background in his stiff black uniform looking official and being desperately grateful he wasn’t royalty. Sometimes while all the old guys were talking he zoned out and started thinking about how this all had to do with what they’d done personally at that secret base, and that was so weird it made him as dizzy as Ardyn’s driving.

The thing was, Prompto was so busy he couldn't think much about being a science project a crazy guy made to stick his brain into. So that was good.

For days on end, except for one kiss stolen in a janitor's closet, Ardyn was so busy Prompto only saw him from the back at the big table in the council chambers. Ardyn had his own part of the negotiations, and it wasn't even anything dramatically grandstanding or sneaky and underhanded or anything else that would've been fun, just paperwork and phone calls.

“How is it possible to hate people more when they're not trying to kill you?” Noct said, when the five of them finally had a minute for a breather at a coffee shop.

“Welcome to the joys of royalty,” said Ardyn. His eyes were heavy and his hair was somehow less combed than usual. He slugged down a drink so tiny it had to be as concentrated as a bullet. “Defence, elaborate clothing, and endless, endless legwork.”

“That's if you don't weasel out of it,” Gladio said. He'd been wearing shirts for over a week and looked haggard from the effort.

“Why Gladiolus, I would never.” Ardyn faced up to the flat look for a good three seconds. “All
right, I would usually. But negotiation requires all angles of attack, and I am the only one our opponents will approach from a usefully underhanded perspective. They are more likely to tip their hand when dealing with someone without so many obvious troublesome scruples as my brother.”

“Playing good cop, sleazy cop, huh,” said Gladio.

“Indeed, and I fear I have somehow been typecast.”

“Well, yeah.” Noct was drinking coffee without even dumping sugar in it first. “You look like your address is, like ’The Woods.’”

“The true battle is hardly begun.” Ignis was thumbing through notes and arranging them in order. He’d been sharp and electric the whole time, and his hair was perfect. At least he was fun to see in action. Seeing the Council’s staff try to push him around or outmaneuver him to get to Noct was like watching somebody play tennis against a wall.

“Don’t remind me,” Ardyn sighed. “I fear I shall be spending weeks finagling, wheedling, and being charming, and of course we can’t call them hostages…”

Noct said, “When this is done, we’re gonna celebrate. Then I’m gonna sleep for a week. Or the other way around.”

Prompto smacked his knuckles against the wood tabletop. “Dude, shut up! Don’t jinx it!”

You had to be careful not to look too close at the hope that this whole war might someday be over. Ardyn met his eyes, gave him a tired smile, and tapped his fist on the table too.

Gladio drained his cup and said, “All right, cut it out. Sounds too weird coming from you.”

“Hm?” said Ardyn.

“Just call me Buttercup like you want to.”

Ardyn looked at him for a moment, then the coffee-dark corner of his lips twitched. “Why, my dear Magnolia. I’ve no idea what you mean.”

It was a bright, cool morning when the delegation arrived. Prompto stood with the Crownsguard and the Glaives, tilted his head to watch the airships come down, and wondered if anybody’d ever picked up that one that they’d ditched in a field.

He probably shouldn’t mention that to any Nifs.

Also should get out of the habit of calling them Nifs.

Hair riffling in the wind, Prompto leaned toward Ardyn and said, under the whirring noise of the descent, “Is the Emperor in one of those?”

“He doesn’t yet trust us enough to set foot on Lucian soil.” Ardyn spoke without taking his eyes away from the ships. “He has sent envoys in his place, as well as those whose leashes have been reluctantly loosened.”

Before Prompto could ask what that meant, he had to hurry off to get into place. Left of Ignis and Gladio, a step behind Noct.

“Looking all kinds of princely, buddy,” he whispered, and got a piece of a smile over Noct’s
The three transports touched land. For a second the ground shook, and as the engines powered down, the whole crowd went quiet. All eyes were on the king, who was standing there with Gladio's dad next to him, calm as if getting flying machines full of guests from places they'd been at war with forever was a thing that happened every day.

The hatches opened, and ramps slid down with a mechanism so smooth and quiet that Prompto itched for a closer look at how it worked. The first people to come down were a squad of soldiers in polished armor that tossed the sun in your face, who came tramping down the ramp to make two flanking lines of sparkle and salute. Prompto stared into the airship's shadows and fought the urge to straighten his coat, which was already straight.

The sunlight on the ramp's metal hit the eyes hard. All you saw for a while was white clothing emerging step by step. It took a lot of blinking to make it turn into two people, and more before they made sense to the eye as High Commander Nox Fleuret and Lady Lunafreya.

The news articles the next day weren't quite right when they said emerged to cheers. Prompto would always remember the held-breath silence, and the whisper of Lady Lunafreya's sandals touching the grass.

Chapter End Notes

Hungry Hungry Hundlegs™ is a children's game produced by a subsidiary of Leastweasel Holdings. It is horrifying.
Jesters of the Moon

Ceremony was still weird to Prompto. Noct did all this reciting words to people, and they recited things back, but you'd never mistake it for talking. Prompto stood back in formation, listened to Noct go through a script of set fancy phrases it must have taken ages to memorize, and felt pride radiating off Ignis so hard it could probably give somebody skin cancer. Ardyn didn't say as much. Lately Noct had been doing more of the spotlight stuff.

It must have been Ignis who'd hammered out a place in the schedule for them to actually say hello. In the middle of the crowd breaking up, while the Niflheim soldiers (who were visitors, not bad guys, Prompto kept telling his hand whenever it wanted to grab for the reassuring weight of his gun) tromped back up into the airships, the five of them got to see the Oracle and the High Commander face to face.

Well, more like face to chest, for the one. Half of Prompto's quiet awe was the Oracle's grace and poise, and the other half was for the fact that there was another person in the world as huge as Gladio. He had bright white hair and looked like he was mostly made of scowl. Him and Gladio kept glaring and being giant at each other. Maybe they'd end up friends, like the coeurl and the dualhorn in that one internet video.

As for Lady Lunafreya, she was a woman in a pure white dress with the kind of noble self-possession that made her look like she'd stepped right out of a sorceress's tower, or else a shampoo commercial. She took Noct's hands in both of hers and said, “It is so good to finally meet you.”

“You too, Lady Lunafreya.”

Her smile made her eyes crinkle like the frosting roses Ignis put on top of little cakes. “Please, there is no need for formality between old friends.”

“Oh.” Noct's smile was goofy enough that Prompto was going to go all warm inside now and totally make fun of him for it later. “Luna.”

“You must tell me all about your adventures, and about your friends.”

Oh shit, her eyes were over here. Prompto felt Gladio straighten up next to him and did the same a beat out of tune. Back straight, fist over the heart, just like Ignis said, eyes forward, don't get distracted by the thing moving by the giant scary High Commander's legs--

“Tiny!” Prompto forgot everything and went right down on his knees in the grass. The white dog bounded up to him, jumped her paws up on his shoulders, and licked his face. There was nothing on the planet that could stop him from petting her all over. Her tail was so fluffy it had to be criminal. “Woah, you're not so tiny anymore!”

“She has been eager to see you again,” Lady Lunafreya said.

“I see you're acquainted,” said Ardyn.

“Oh yeah, didn't I ever tell you?” Prompto buried his hands in furry dog ruff. “I ran into her back when I was a kid. She was hurt, so I patched her up a little. It's lucky she was in my neighborhood.”

“It certainly is.” The top half of Ardyn's face was looking hard at Lady Lunafreya while the bottom
half smiled. “What a fun coincidence.”

“So hey,” Noct said, putting his arm out, “how'd you like to see the palace?”

Her nails had that kind of polish that was just an arch of white on the very tip. “Very much.”

The teacups in the Oracle’s suite were delicate things, fine as seashell, a conscious simplicity that abided in a tier above ostentation. They made Ardyn’s hands brutish by contrast. She curated one of those silver trays of tiny sandwiches that appeared and vanished without anyone ever doing anything so crass as eating them.

“No do you know who I found prowling about the library the other day?” Ardyn said conversationally. “Your brother.”

“Did you?” said the Lady Lunafreya, in whose hands the tiny cup was unabsurd.

“It appears he has an interest in philosophy. I caught him rifling through the great figures. Ludwig Mithranstein, Aristarutaru, David Hume...”

She gave the impression of decorously covering her mouth to laugh even when she did not. “I believe he was seeking to resolve an argument with Gladiolus.”

“That explains the triumphant ‘hah.’”

Over the past fortnight they had cultivated quite the rivalry. Snowdrop kept a wary eye on Ravus, whom he caught constantly in contests. The Oracle he had accepted as another little sister, quickly stepping from due reverence to a point where he could ask her about how it felt to communicate with the gods, as well as if it was anything like the character speaking to his author at the end of Breakfast of Etro’s Champion. (Apparently, no.) Ignis treated the Oracle with deference and had a certain rapport with the High Commander that involved a deal of verbal sparring. Noct was diplomatic with the one Nox Fleuret, thick as thieves with the other, just as close-knit as the little prickling needles of destiny had always intended to stitch them. Prompto held them both in awe, especially given, as it turned out, the misadventure with the gods’ messenger in dog guise had been what first led him to seek Noct’s friendship. It had just so happened.

“Hey, Ardyn!”

Ardyn turned to the sound of footsteps running rapidly down the hall and saw Prompto skid around the corner. He trotted up to Ardyn’s side, hope and energy painted in the color on his face. The talks were going well.

“Aren’t we exuberant today,” Ardyn said.

“Yep! I figured out something good.”

Ardyn leaned toward him. He loved a conspiracy. “Do share.”

“Just, this body was technically made for somebody else, right?”

Not a thing one would think could be said lightly, but Prompto was a remarkable man. “Yes?”

Prompto threw his arms open and caught him with a smile that required blinking spots from his eyes. “So I’m gonna ride it like I stole it.”

Ardyn swirled the tea in his cup. Black, with a hint of a floral aroma. “So the two of them are finding
avenues of competition besides whacking at one another with training blades. The poor High Commander is not popular among those who have tasted the fruits of his command.”

Among the dark murmurs that followed in the wake of that pure white coat, the word *traitor* was often discernible.

“His role has always called attention,” said the Oracle. “His sword attracts enough enmity there is little left for anyone else. It's interesting how quick people are to cast siblings as black and white.”

Ardyn sipped with studied indifference. “If only he and our dear Shield could find a way to set aside their differences and get along, like civilized folk.”

“Fortunately they have us to set an example,” said the Oracle. She had an earnest purity of expression that one could never quite define as crossing the line into sarcasm. “There is a reason I invited you here, Your Grace.”

“Why, not only for my scintillating company?” Ardyn demolished a little sandwich. It was crustless and impeccably rectangular.

“I wished to thank you.” She had a voice like the artful swirl of frost on a windowpane. “You worked tirelessly to secure us a means of coming here, despite your personal dislike.”

“Dislike? My dear Oracle, wherever did you get such an idea?” Ardyn folded his hands over the white tablecloth and smiled. “I despise you and the gods you serve to the core of my being. That is a very different creature from dislike.”

Her eyes were as unmoved as the blue pattern on the china. “What could the gods have done to earn your enmity while they still sleep?”

“Oh, they've managed a few things. Such as crushing my brother beneath the throne, sucking his life away, and dooming my nephew to the same. Won't you have a sandwich?”

Very icelike, those eyes. Spare of color or ornament, like her dress, giving as little shelter to the viewer as a frozen mountainside.

She said, “You would not have consented to speak with me without something important you wished to say.”

That this was true did not prevent Ardyn from resenting its statement.

She said, “I am listening.”

*Between meetings, between negotiations, between calls and arguments and wheedling, Prompto stole time and shared it with Ardyn. He caught the current of hope in the air like a lightning rod, and it made him shine.*

“Come on,” Prompto said, in welcome ambush from an alcove, “I have a great idea for a photo.”

*They found the perfect target by the fountain.*

*Prompto got into position from a suitable angle, steadied his camera before his face, and whispered “Now!”*

“Oh, Gardenia!” Ardyn called, and made the toss just as he turned.

*Rapidly, the camera flashed. The shield plucked the peach out of the air the moment before it struck...*
“What was that for?” he said, taking a bite.

“Look!” Prompto trotted over and showed him the back of the camera. He had a right to be proud. The superimposition had worked out beautifully. “It’s the Cousin of Humanity!”

Prompto had told him all about the childhood adventure when he had stumbled across an injured animal that had happened to be a divine messenger, who had set his steps on the path to Noct’s friendship and to the Crownsguard. To Ardyn, and to bleeding out on a warehouse floor in the stink of burning hair, and to whatever might come next.

“I wish you to pass along a message,” Ardyn said. His fingers were too large to thread well within the cup's handle. It pincered them closely enough to ache when tightly gripped. “Tell your gods to keep their vicious little claws out of my family.”

The Oracle arrayed her fingers neatly around her teacup. Her hair was an arrangement of intricate braids. Gauzy white curtains wafted guard about the windows, and birds in the garden plucked at the silence.

“You imagine the gods speak orders,” she said.

“Of course.” His expression felt held in place by wires. “That is the divine right, is it not? To move one's pieces about the board as you please, and replace them when one happens to be used up.”

She said, “What they give, Your Grace, is information. Even in dreaming, the vision of the Six extend beyond our sight. They do not dictate. They reveal the consequence, and grant the means to make a choice. Free will need not be blind.”

“How admirable of them to give the beasts a tour of the slaughterhouse.”

The Oracle turned the cup in her hands, blue pattern interrupted by her pale fingers. “What the Six tell us demonstrates their faith. Their ways are strange, and they are not able to give us all they know, yet they give us secrets of great consequence. Is not the true condescension to conceal facts in the name of someone's own good?”

Disquiet crept up Ardyn's neck like an aphid. “What of truths humans are not prepared to hear? Or the ones it would be cruel to drop upon them too soon?”

“You would prefer the gods conceal things until they are certain the reaction will suit them?” She stirred her tea with a silver spoon to either cover or punctuate his lack of a retort. As if sharing an interesting bit from a book, she said, “Yet it is said that is why some revelations are locked in riddles. By the time we are able to understand the message, we are ready to receive it.”

Though the Oracle was a guest in the palace, her quarters had become unmistakeably her territory, stained by her presence like the units staining squares of the map in their color in the strategy games Prompto liked to play. Her sitting room was impeccable. It made Ardyn wish to peck things.

“What admirable respect they have for free will,” said Ardyn, “these creatures who force my brother to feed his life to them for his kingdom, and who expect gratitude.”

How interesting that the two of them were among the few in the world whose experience of the gods was concrete. To her through their communications, and to him through witnessing the damage they wrought on Regis's body. Ardyn repaired what he could, and thought of how in any other case of stubborn and incurable infection, he would have amputated the ring finger to save the host. One day
the parasite would be passed to Noct, at a ceremony with polite applause. There were few lines yet on Noct's face. Only in certain lights was there the herald of a look of tragic nobility, the family trademark.

_ Ardyn was there when the King spoke to the people, and told them that the war was truly coming to a close. He stood on the marble steps as well, rather in brighter sunlight than he would have preferred, but there were days when one's desires to skulk came second. _

_ He was there a step behind the crown prince's place of honor, beside his retainers. Glaive and Guard ranked in front of them, a sea of black shoulders. All were a piece of the same animal, turning its face toward hope. _

_ When the trumpets rang, Ardyn felt Prompto's hand slip into his, and realized he was keeping a secret. _

“Tell me, Your Grace,” said the Oracle mildly, “why do you let yourself be forced to use your healing powers? It would be better for you if you did not, given the toll they take.”

A drop of acid quickened Ardyn's tongue. “I am hardly forced. I have an ability and so I employ it to protect my kingdom and those I care for-”

The Oracle fixed him with a quiet, serene look. She took a sip of her tea.

Ardyn said, “I dislike you.”

Prompto couldn't tell you exactly what progress was supposed to look like, peace-wise, but the days went on, and there kept not being a war.

Then they got proof. A gesture of mutual trust, they called it. What it meant was they were going to let Noct come into Niflheim territory and visit the Royal Tomb.

“No soldiers on either side,” Ravus told them at the cafe, giving them a heads-up before the official announcement. He was a guy who could manage to drink a green tea latte suspiciously. “You will be allowed to bring a small honor guard, and will be escorted by a neutral party.”

He didn't look real comfortable in civilian clothes, and he still got a lot of cold stares. There weren't a lot of ways to make a (former?) enemy commander popular in public, and even fewer ways to make a giant white-haired guy not distinctive.

Funny thing was, once you got past the resting asshole face, he seemed more awkward than actually mean. It was true he'd fought for the bad guys, but it was hard for Prompto to hate anybody for ending up on the wrong side of the border, knowing how easily he could've been there too. Anyway, between Ravus, Gladio, and Ardyn, they actually had an equal number of giant and regular guys today.

“Got it,” Noct said. “And hey, thanks, Ravus.”

“Hm?” Ravus said, looking like a bird that was trying to decide whether or not it was getting teased.

“It was your idea, right?”

“Somewhat.” He fiddled with his straw, like getting a thank you was something he didn't know how to deal with. “It's only right. It's Lucian property.”
There was only so much they could talk about with him and in public. Late that night in Noct's apartment, they had the real debate.

“There are no signs of preparations for a trap,” said Ardyn, draped over a chair he'd moved a pizza box off of, “if you trust my networks.”

In the little space of silence after he said it, Prompto heard, *If you trust me.*

Noct said, “I'll go.”

It must've been all the practice he'd been getting lately. Even on a couch with his feet on an ottoman, he sounded all kingly.

The idea of being on Niflheimian ground again made Prompto's stomach fold up, though his head knew that there wasn't anything magic about the soil that made bad things happen. There had to be plenty of times where nobody got thrown into cells or attacked by robot-monkeys or whipped at all. Whole days. He managed not to touch the scars on his stomach.

“We will accompany you, of course,” said Ignis, who had his own corner of those bad memories in his head and on his face.

“Yeah,” said Gladio. “I want to see what this tomb has to offer. It'd better be worth it.”

“I'll stay in communication as much as possible,” said Ardyn, “though naturally we can expect prying ears--”

“Aren't you coming?” Noct said.

Ardyn blinked. “I had supposed not.”

It was a stupid, superstitious feeling, to think that putting him, them, and Niflheim together would be gathering all the words in a spell that would make the same thing happen again.

“We were all there to start all this,” Noct said. “We should all be there to finish it, too.”

And that was that. As slow as all the talking was, when things happened, they happened fast. Two days later Prompto was lying in Ardyn's arms in his bed, ready to leave in the morning.

Prompto rested his head on Ardyn's chest, listening to his heartbeat, and thought about his whip scars and the black sky behind the floodlights above the secret base, and the cold-eyed guard in the booth as the line shuffled by.

Things with Ardyn had gone somewhere other than quite back to normal. Now Prompto had seen him in every kind of light. It was like the difference between watching your favorite show every week and going and working behind the scenes, seeing how the green screen got rigged up, putting on makeup and taking out the garbage, getting coffee orders and hearing the director yell at people. It was like going from thinking you knew everything to just starting to learn what 'everything' really meant. The mysteries were filled in, and it opened up new ones. You went from seeing the magic to seeing the work and the art it took to make it look easy, and you were a part of it. Prompto didn't know the word for that feeling, exactly, just that thinking about it or looking at Ardyn at the right angle made something go tight in the center of his chest, and that he didn't want it to go away.

Prompto said, “Maybe we'll see a yeti.”

“Unfortunately, we'll be in a rare temperate region,” said Ardyn. He was running his fingers through
Prompto’s hair in the way that made him understand how cats could want you to just pet them for hours.

“They might be there on vacation.”

“Poor things, terribly hot in all that pelt.”

“We could help out and shave them.”

“Hm,” said Ardyn, and his hand stopped moving.

Prompto turned his face to look up at him. He was framed by messed-up purple hair and the carved, dark headboard. “What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Ardyn said. “I’ve just realized how certain I am of something.”

“You gonna tell?”

“So easily? That wouldn't be like me.”

Sometimes Prompto would tease and give him crap, but right now it was nice just to lie there and feel his chest rise and fall.

“I have a little gift for you.” A flash of magenta turned into a book in Ardyn's hand. “Something to read on the long flight over.”

“Cool.” Prompto turned it over in his hand and read the title *Fifty Classic Fantastical Stories.*

“What're the little sticky notes?”

“A few tales of especial interest,” Ardyn said, in the slanting way he said things when he had a secret. “It's a riddle. Don't worry, it's something good. I shall give you one hint: the code is not in the content.”

Prompto zapped the book into his own Armiger so he could climb up on Ardyn and kiss him. He braced his hands on his warm shoulders. “You nerd.”

Ardyn smiled lazily. “Guilty as charged.”

This time they didn't have to sneak past any checkpoints. Bright and early, Cor drove them to a field just outside the city, and the Empire sent a ride.

The airship was bigger than the one they’d borrowed to book it out of Niflheim. There must have been all kinds of different models. Hearing the engine roar made Prompto want to get his hands on it and really have a good look, and maybe if peace stuck around, he’d get to.

It landed and the back opened up. Prompto could feel everybody tensed, ready for a trap, but what came out was just three people. Two guys in long uniform coats, and a whole lot of lady.

“Aranea Highwind,” she introduced herself. She jerked a thumb at the guys. “Biggs, Wedge. We're here to schlep you to the quarry and back.”

They all gave their names, and all got a nod, except for the last, which got a “Huh.”

“Something the matter?” said Cor.
“Nah,” Aranea said. “Just that I know at least three guys who say they've killed you.”

“He’s terrible at staying dead,” said Ardyn. “They say he has a guardian angel.”

Aranea looked from one of them to the other. “Oh, 'the mad prince and his pet immortal.'” She snorted. “Now I get it.”

It was a quickdraw achievement of Prompto's life that he managed to snap a shot of the look on Cor's face.

Cor went onto the airship to check for any lurking ambushers. He gave the all clear, and they climbed up the ramp.

Ardyn waved and said, “I'll bring you back a squeak toy.”

“Keep him,” Cor said to the guy in the gray coat.

It was way easier to concentrate on how cool airships were when you hadn't just almost died. Aranea's armor clanked as she walked across the metal floor, but it didn't seem to slow her down any. She walked like she had places to be and somebody to slap when she got there.

“Ampotop, Glasses, Scruffy, strap in on the left side,” she said. “Shortcake and Shirtless, you're on the right.”

After taking a second to figure out which one he was, Prompto grabbed his seat. Taking off was awesome — your stomach dropped and swooped, but in a mostly fun way. The whir of the engines was kind of relaxing, if you didn't think too much about where they might be taking you.

Niflheim was a long way, though, and after a while of looking down at the blanket of grass and trees through the porthole things in the side, Prompto followed Gladio's lead and pulled out a book. Look at them both all scholarly. There were three stories marked with purple octopus post-its behind the title page. They were all pretty short, but they made up for it in weird. One was about some kind of spider-aliens trying to deal with somebody's plan that messed with their heads when the seasons changed. It was hard to tell what was going on, since it was written like the alien thought, but Prompto was pretty sure they banged. Then one alien ate the other one, who was pretty cool with it.

The next one was about normal humans, but it was still pretty weird. It was all a lady who thought she was going to get married that day, except the guy had totally disappeared, and the place she tracked him down to was a rundown old building with some laughing voices in an empty room.

Okay, Prompto was starting to get a little freaked out about what Ardyn was trying to tell him, though he'd told him it wasn't bad news. What was that thing he'd said? The code is not the content. So it wasn't actually something in the stories. Maybe it had to do with the pages they were on or something.

He planned on thinking it over while he read the third one, but following the plot through all the time jumps ended up taking all his attention. It had to do with a guy killing a bunch of people, then a crazy dragon thing in another dimension getting all the crazy drained out of its brain, and then it all ending up in a box somewhere so opening it started a giant war.

Prompto was going to need to think about that one for a while. It was probably good that Ardyn was way over on the other side of the airship, so he couldn't just bug him for the answer.

He planned on asking for a hint when they landed, but it turned out there was so much else to do that it got knocked clean out of his head. They set down with a rumble, and the engines went quiet. The
hatch opened, and Prompto didn't realize how sure he'd been that they'd be on a base surrounded by armed soldiers until he saw they weren't. What was there was a giant scooped-out circle, like Titan had come over and grabbed a mile-wide clod of rock with his hand.

“Huh,” said Noct. He wrestled out of the seat harness and squinted out at the landscape. “Looks like a hole in the ground.”

Aranea swung around from the pilot's chair. The guy in the white coat was next to her, humming and checking dials. “Here's your stop. Have fun, kids.”

“You won't be accompanying us?” said Ignis.

Little armor glove plates made clinks when she waved her hand. “I was hired to get you here and back. The rest is your business.”

“We can handle it,” said Gladio.

“Woo! Rarin' to go!” Prompto called, and followed Gladio down onto solid ground.

They all had to wait a little while Gladio scouted things out first. It was pretty funny to see a guy that size crouch and shimmy around. Pretty soon he gave the all clear.

All was no kidding. As far as Prompto could tell, there wasn't anybody around for miles. There was no sound but the creak of the old steps as they went down into a mining operation that'd been dead so long it'd grown its whole own sweaty little jungle. There was old machinery there, half rust and half vines, and half a miracle that some of it still worked.

“Keep an eye out,” Gladio said.

The place was heavy with mist that tamped down sound. Prompto's grip on his pistol was sweaty, and Noct's head kept swiveling back and forth. It would have been creepy, except it was them all adventuring together again, and the five of them could take on anything. Still, he kept thinking something was about to jump out at them. In the end the only thing that showed up was the door to the tomb. Well, a bunch of gross blob things in front of the door to the tomb. Which Noct set on fire by magic, so that was awesome.

Standing inside the echoing tomb with his boots full of swamp water, Prompto watched Noct's weapons shine.

“So how's it feel to have the full royal set?” Prompto said.

“Not real different,” said Noct. He pulled the sword out of the air and looked down at the curve of the scabbard. This one wasn't real huge or dramatic. It was thin, kind of graceful.

“It's not quite full yet,” said Ardyn. “Dozens more remain, though many are lost or cleverly hidden. I shall give you riddles to lead to a few, when the time is right.”

“What is with you and riddles?” said Noct, and vanished the sword away.

All in all pretty anticlimactic, Prompto thought, when they walked out the door and a giant plant tried to kill them.

They'd fought meaner, but they had never fought grosser. It looked like somebody's nightmare of a jungle octopus with teeth, and it kept belching black smog that was a whole new kind of halitosis. Prompto shot it full of holes, Ignis sliced and diced, and the other three hacked off tentacles left and
right, but they just kept growing back.

“Noct, over here!” Prompto shouted, dodging a whippy vine.

“What is it?” Noct called. He warped over and landed in a crouch with his sword up. Perfect.

Prompto pulled his camera up. “I gotta get this shot!”

“Dude!” That was a great angle on Noct looking exasperated. “Fight!”

“Behold!” Ardyn called. Just as Prompto snapped the shot off, he appeared in the background, holding up a fire flask.

“The hell are you doing?” said Noct.

Ardyn smiled beatifically and ducked a tentacle. “It's a photobomb.”

Even under the sound of splashing, growling, and monster-belching, you could hear Ignis snap his fingers. “I've an idea!”

The next time the monster breathed in, Ardyn and Noct both lobbed a flask into its mouth.

Even without eyes, the thing managed to look perplexed. It made a little hiccuping noise. The tendrils on its head twitched.

Then it exploded.

Five men had gone down into the old quarry. Five glop-covered sticky green things left.

“Ugh,” Noct said, clambering up the steps, “I smell like fungus ate a chainsmoker.”

Ignis said, “I would say that creature had health issues.”

Gladio tried to wipe green stuff off his chest. “One hell of a cough.”

“Nature is truly fascinating in its variety,” said Ardyn. His coat was slick with slime and dotted with little green chunks. The drycleaner was, again, not going to be thrilled.

“Yeah,” said Gladio, “and how things can smell like a compost heap with food poisoning.”

“Hey!” Prompto called, and ran ahead as the airship came into sight. “We made it!”

The guy in the white coat said, “Welcome baaaaauuugh.”

Him and the other guy covered their faces and tried to maneuver upwind. Prompto said, “We kinda blew up a plant monster. It was badass.”

“I'll take your word for it, then,” the guy in the gray coat said faintly.

“I'm not letting you guys use my shower,” Aranea said from the top of the ramp. She came closer and said, “Never mind. Use my shower.”

Prompto lost rock-paper-scissors real bad, so he was last in line. In the meantime he used a water bottle and one of Ardyn's volunteered handkerchiefs with the initials stitched in to clean off his hands. He wanted to look at the book without gunking it up. He went to pace by the side of the airship, boots squelching, and tried to puzzle out the riddle.
“You got homework?” said Aranea.

Prompto looked up and found her leaning against the airship, watching him. Technically she worked for the Empire, but she couldn't be more different from the straightbacked soldiers marching over the concrete on the secret base. No gun, for one thing. Just a big spikey helmet held easily under her arm.

“Sort of,” Prompto said. “Ardyn said there's a trick to the stories he picked out. Maybe something they all have in common...Or the first letters of the words spell something!”

“Stay over there, you smell like shit.”

“Yeah, I know.” Prompto flipped to the first story. “Rdyhmlrhmstcg...nah, that's not anything.”

“Anything that could be an anagram? That guy looks like the kind of asshole who's into anagrams.”

“Huh, could be. Man, I don't even know where to start.” He could ask Noct for help, but it might be something dirty, and that would be cruel.

Aranea was polishing the helmet with the corner of her cape thing. “How about the titles? That could mean something, put together.”

“You know, I actually didn't look. They're on their own separate page.” Prompto'd been so focused on the stories that he'd forgotten that part.

He flipped to one title page, then the next. He blinked fast. The world seemed to get quieter, like there was acoustic padding between the swamp and him. He had to be imagining things. He looked at the third one. The dizziness wasn't from the reek of his clothes.

“See anything?” Aranea said, from miles and a few steps away.

“Yeah,” Prompto said faintly, as Gladio came down the airship's ramp and called Your turn.

The shower was cramped, lukewarm, and wonderful. Ardyn had put in a bunch of those little soaps he'd filched from hotel rooms, and getting all the gunk off nearly took a whole bar. Prompto went on autopilot and floated for a while. He put his hand over his mouth and let a giddy laugh bubble up. He washed his hair and, over and over, thought the word all the titles had in common.

“Okay,” he whispered to himself as he twisted off the water. “Okay.”

He got a towel and some clean clothes out of the Armiger, and got his hair back up to where it was supposed to be. He walked out of the shower, went through Aranea's room without looking to either side, and headed out of the airship. Ardyn was at the base of the ramp, looking broad and solid without his coat. Prompto broke into a dash and hopped onto his back.

“Why hello there,” Ardyn said. His voice was warm and his hair smelled like shampoo and just a little bit like ashtray, and Prompto's heart was pounding like crazy. “Did you solve my riddle?”

“Yeah,” Prompto said. He wrapped his arms tight around Ardyn's chest and felt the lines of his vest marking his skin. “I love you too.”
The big question for years afterward, was “Where were you when it happened?”

Prompto never had to think much. When the Wall came down, he was right in the front row next to Noct.

Compared to all the preparations, all the traveling in a convoy out to the border, and all the work that went into knowing for sure that Niflheim wasn't building an ambush army somewhere, the thing itself wasn't that flashy. The whole Wall was just a coloration to the air and a line in the slush of the late snow. Noct's dad walked up to the shimmer between all of them and the Niflheim delegation, and put his hands up like a conductor.

Ardyn whispered to Prompto, “That is not actually necessary.”

Even in the sunlight, you could see the ring glow.

The shimmer to the air dissolved from the bottom up, like putting a match to paper.

While everybody else was cheering, Prompto's eyes went to where Ardyn and Noct were looking, at the king. They were the ones who caught the long sigh he let out and the way his shoulders straightened, like he'd finally set down a sack of bricks he'd been hauling for a long, long time. Prompto had never noticed the line between his eyes until it was gone.

Noct went to his dad's side. Prompto snuck his hand into Ardyn's and looked way out into the color of the new sky.

The city breathed different. It was like after you'd had one of those colds that lasted forever, and then one day you realized you could taste things again. Every once in a while Prompto said the words out loud to himself, just to test what they sounded like. The war's over. It was in the little things, like the Glaives all being home at once, or seeing trade shipments instead of supplies being sent to the front. It was in seeing the Emperor on the news a lot, but with words like “agrees to” and “opens.” He still looked like a freaky white spider, but maybe now he was the kind you could catch in a glass and set outside.

Lady Lunafreya and her brother were fixtures now. They celebrated the hard part being over by going to a new Niflheimian restaurant, where they had a bunch of fried pastries and sausages and funky cheeses and Ignis took a bunch of notes in his secret recipe book, and it turned out drunk Ravus looked just as serious as the normal kind but he told a weird rambling story about a moth talking to a Tonberry about all kinds of stuff and then it turned out it'd just come over because the lantern light was on, and he totally deserved all the napkins that got thrown at him.

The next day, in the hangover-friendly environment of the nice, quiet library, Prompto showed Ardyn the pictures he'd gotten.

“Marvelous,” Ardyn said. Prompto was really proud of how the framing caught Gladio with Noct in a headlock at the perfect focal points. “You are a true artist.”

“Nah,” Prompto said, rubbing his hand through his hair. “You call me that a lot, but artists make stuff. I just show what's already there.”
“On the contrary. You add something essential that could not exist without you.” Ardyn reached out and tapped Prompto’s temple. “Your awareness.”

“Does that make a difference?”

“All the difference. While you are invisible, your presence and your affection saturates the scene. How you choose to see the world enriches all you capture.”

Ardyn was the fancy talker. Prompto was more the kind of guy to turn red down to the shoulders and go, “Aw, dude.”

Ardyn didn’t always say things just through talking.

One day he said, “I have a surprise for you.”

At first Prompto thought it was going to be another of those shows where you got in with a password and it was all down like six layers of basements, but where Ardyn took them in his awful, wonderful car was the field on the outskirts of town that the Nifs-- Niflheimians had been using as an airship field.

“Man,” Prompto sighed, leaning out the window on his elbows to look at the field full of big metal hulks like drowsy garula at rest. “I'd love to get my hands on one of those beautiful things.”

“What a coincidence,” Ardyn said as he pulled over.

Prompto's eyes went plate-sized. “No way.”

“Veritably,” Ardyn said, getting out and offering him his hand. “Yes way.”

They walked across the field to an airship that looked more and more familiar as they got closer. Prompto figured out why just as the owner came into sight.

“Hey Aranea!” he called, waving. She lifted one metal-gloved hand.

“I pulled a few strings,” said Ardyn.

“He paid me money,” said Aranea. With a clang, she patted the side of the ship. “Wedge'll show you around the engines. Break anything and I'll break your face.”

“Yes ma'am!” Prompto said, and sprinted up the ramp.

He spent delirious hours shimmying through service hatches and diving into the airship's guts. Wedge was kind of stiff at first, but when he saw how into these things Prompto was, he loosened up and got proud about showing off the ship.

When he clambered out, tired, happy, and filthy, Aranea and Ardyn were sitting on plastic patio chairs, sipping drinks with little umbrellas in them.

“Where'd you requisition all that, ma'am?” Wedge said.

Aranea jerked a thumb at Ardyn. “You wouldn't know by looking at him, but Scruffy's pretty useful.”

“Yeah,” Prompto said. He thumbed grease off his cheek. “Scruffy's the best.”
Prompto loved Ardyn's giant, ridiculous bed with its giant, ridiculous curtains. It was a perfect place to lay naked with the fancy sheets tangled up and get poetry read to you.

“Wait,” Prompto said. “My turn this time.”

Ardyn lay with his head resting on Prompto's knee, purple hair going off in all different directions. He smiled up and said, “Regale me.”

Prompto pulled a well-loved booklet out of the Armiger and cleared his throat. He ran his fingers through Ardyn’s hair, found the right warm register for his voice, and said, “The ZG-3645 intake unit (hex model B) can be serviced by removing the induction panel and simultaneously pressing switches 1a and 1b (see diagram A)...”

Commuters were a thick crowd through the subway tunnels at this time of day, an hour when everyone had somewhere to be. Some were curious enough to peel off and stop for a second at the card table against one wall, where a man wearing a hat drawn down low whistled and made a set of playing cards dance.

“Test your luck and make a buck!” called his assistant, darting through the crowd and lighting sparks of energy. “Spot the doll, catch the moll, find the pretty lady!”

“Hey Ardyn!” Prompto trotted through the citadel’s gallery and patted his boyfriend’s butt to get his attention.

Ardyn turned around in a little personalized coatswish. Prompto would never stop being proud of how he could make this guy’s face light up. “Darling, so there you are.”

“What're you doing right now?” Prompto walked alongside him through the big, airy room. Light slanted in through the high windows, and the paintings were old friends.

“I'm going to peruse a few documents and craft the meticulous details of a treaty.”

“No you're not.” Prompto could barely keep still.

The folder vanished from Ardyn's hands. “No I'm not.”

Prompto grabbed him by the arm, fingers sinking into the plush black sleeve. “You've been seriously working hard. I think it's freaking Cor out. So we're going out for a while.”

“Oh, is this going to be a lark?” Ardyn said, following Prompto toward the door.

“Totally!” They walked out onto the steps, and the way the sunlight hit Ardyn's hair was pure inspiration. “You know how you keep looking all princely and serious all those times when I'm supposed to be Crownguarding so I can't get my camera out? You owe me, like, eight hundred pictures.”

“I am, as ever, your humble canvas.”

The big staircase in front of the citadel was a great place for them. For a second Prompto wasn't sure Ardyn would be into posing when there were a bunch of people around to see, but about the time Ardyn was draped over the steps like a singer on a grand piano, he realized he should have known.

“Perfect. Beautiful.”
They went all over the citadel, catching different lights and angles. Tapestries, ivy-covered garden walls, vaguely perplexed Glaives, they all made backgrounds Ardyn stood out sharp against.

“The camera loves you!”

Prompto didn't have to be self-conscious about moving him around and making him hold a pose. Ardyn soaked the flashes right up. Most people eventually got tired of it and said stuff like maybe put that down for a second or okay seriously Prompto, but if Ardyn hadn't been born into royalty he could have been born to be a model.

“Work it!”

He got dozens of shots. Probably more than anybody in the world really needed. Honestly, he could have kept doing it forever, catching every move of Ardyn's expressive face and feeling his heart beat fast, but the sun was going down and they'd worked their way to where they needed to be, right on time. Just like in that old favorite photo, the light was soft and warm-tinged, and the sky was going gold.

Prompto pointed to the palace roof and said, “Take me up.”

“Anything you wish.” One of Ardyn's arms went around Prompto, and the other pulled out the crossbow.

Prompto's guts would never be totally used to warping, but he was better at dealing with it now. He looked out at the city's horizon where it lay suddenly a lot lower and took deep breaths until his head was straight. Well, mostly straight. As much as it was going to be, today. He rested his hand on the little wall and looked out over the sunset city. There was a shuffle of cloth and some black in his peripheral vision when Ardyn came and leaned next to him.

“Hey,” said Prompto.

Ardyn said, “Hey.”

It felt quiet up here, after all the furious shutter snapping. Prompto made his camera go away and rested one hand in his pocket. It was so peaceful. Private, like nobody else in the world knew about it, though all the life of the citadel was going on under their feet.

Prompto said, “Remember when you called me handsome?”

“If you can recall particular instances, then I am not doing it often enough.”

“I mean, the first time.”

“I do. A kiss such as yours has a way of sealing the memory.” Ardyn glanced at him from beneath hair gone dark in this light. “I knew myself a lucky man.”

“Yeah, well. I mean.” That first kiss had made him giddy and lightheaded, almost as much as he was now. Maybe it was the warping. Maybe it was how he'd thought taking some pictures would get his guts up, and his eyes were still full of Ardyn, posing and framing him to keep. This was a good place to do crazy things. He took a deep breath and faced Ardyn straight on. The grit on top of the wall was scratchy under his palm. As soon as he really started talking the words jumped out of his mouth fast, like they were making a run for it.

“Look, there's something one of us is going to do sooner or later, and Ignis says if it's you it'll be quote 'not something the kingdom would easily recover from,' so I guess it has to be me.”
Ardyn rested his chin on his hand, with the sky going orange behind him in a way that would make for a fantastic picture. Focus, Prompto. “I'm listening.”

“Okay.” Pull in air. It's not complicated, buddy, you do it all the time. “You're great.”

The corner of Ardyn's lips twitched. “I'm listening raptly.”

He was such a dork. Prompto's tongue loosened up a little. “I mean, you're amazing. You're smart, and brave, and weird in a way that makes the whole world more interesting. I don't want to ever not be around you.”

“You're rather wonderful yourself,” Ardyn said.

“Not always.” Prompto took a breath, and everything came out with it. “I mean, I'm nervous. I'm insecure. I still don't understand what 'bespoke' means. When you took me wine tasting I acted like I understood all the stuff about oakiness and whatever but actually they all just tasted like grapes and I don't know if I'm good enough for you.”

Ardyn clasped Prompto's hands in his. His eyes were around the same color as the fading sun, and warm. “I'm secretive. I scheme. I have fits of pique. I own the rights to half the catalogue of Quake Aero and Flare and I don't remember why. I cheated at cards every single time.”

Prompto smiled tremulously. “Dude, we knew.”

“You know my cruelties and my mistakes, and you are the most courageous man I know. Each day you let me be at your side to share your joy, I count as a gift.”

Prompto said, “Wanna get married?”

“Certainly.”

“Wait, wait, that doesn't count, I gotta do this right!” Prompto dug in his pocket for the little box. He scrambled back and got down on one knee so fast he banged his knee on the stones. He opened the box up and cleared his throat. “Ardyn Lucis Caelum, Prince of Lucis, Duke of something I forget, super cool spy dude, and guy I once saw lick a toad, will you marry me?”

He was so tall from down here. He was a shadow against the sky. Magenta stubble covered his throat, and moved when he swallowed.

“My beloved,” he said, in a low voice like velvet rubbed the other way to show the color nobody ever saw, “it would be my honor.”

It wouldn't make a good picture, Prompto thought, with his mind floating in that second where everything was frozen and gravity was gone, warping standing still. The angle was too low and the light was coming from a direction that'd mean losing the details. He wouldn't be able to catch the look on Ardyn's face, but that was okay. It wasn't something he'd ever forget.

Ardyn leaned close and said, “That means yes.”

The stretched-out time snapped like a rubber band and hit Prompto in the face. He rocketed to his feet and whooped. “Holy shit! You said yes!”

“Quickly now.” Ardyn had a dizzy punch-drunk smile, and he held his hand out with the fingers spread.
“Right! The ring!” Prompto fumbled it out of the box. “It's not made of magic king ghosts or anything. It's just a family thing – regular family, not the evil scientist clone one – but...look, just, here.”

He took Ardyn's giant hand in his and slid the simple mythril band onto his finger. Ardyn held it up and let it sparkle in the setting sun.

“A perfect fit,” Ardyn marveled. “It must be fate.”

Prompto felt full of wild energy. “Yeah, fate, or getting Iggy to swipe one of your gloves and measure.”

“My dear.” Ardyn looked at him, his hair a wine-colored cloud around his face. “Did you conspire?”

“Sure did!”

Before Prompto knew it, Ardyn's arms were wrapped around him, and he was getting good and kissed.

“I love you so,” Ardyn murmured.

His coat was a good thing to hold onto. Prompto's fingers hooked through the lacy stuff. “Love you too, big guy.”

He stayed there for a minute with his face against the vertical ruffles of Ardyn's shirt. Then Ardyn broke away and spread his arms at the sky.

“I'm going to release doves!” he proclaimed. “I'm going to get doves, and I'm going to release them!”

Prompto flopped backwards onto the low wall. If he fell he'd just float and spin around like a feather. “I want a giant wedding. I mean, stupid huge.”

His fiance leaned over him and promised, “The kingdom will never be the same.”
Noct smiled and said, “Hey, congratulations.”

Gladio slapped him on the back and said, “So you're finally getting hitched.”

Ignis stared a million miles into space and said, “Chocolate. A bittersweet caramel layer. Ganache.” Then he vanished.

For the next few weeks, Prompto was simultaneously on the moon and and busier than he'd ever been in his life. Planning a peace between warring nations had nothing on planning a wedding. Noct was the same old steadying Noct he'd ever been, Gladio was a good old reliable hard-ass who still didn't let him skimp out on keeping up with Crownguard training, and Ignis was just a streaky area in the atmosphere.

Ardyn kept waving his hand around and going, “Oh my, what is that sparkle?” in the same super-casual, no-big-deal voice Prompto used to tell his parents he was marrying a prince. (“No, the other prince.”)

He also had a bunch of new things to call Prompto just to make Noct groan. (“Has anyone seen my dearest, my darling betrothed, most precious to my heart, the jewel of Lucis?” “Just say Prompto!”)

At first Prompto wasn't sure he'd have many people to invite, but once he sat down with Ardyn and the guys and started making a list, the friends he'd made on their journey started adding up. Ardyn's list was long, and Cor had to spend a lot of time looking over it for security concerns. (“I do so hope they can come. It would be a shame if minor logistical issues were to discourage anyone from attending...” “We'll temporarily waive outstanding warrants.” “Splendid!”)

Mostly Prompto had way too much to do to spend any time looking at the tabloids. Sure, there'd been a couple pics back when he and Ardyn were first dating, but now they were everywhere. Prompto didn't know how Noct dealt with this kind of thing all the time, even if it was kind of flattering how often the word “commoner” came behind “cute.” (Holy Matrimony, It's a Crown Commotion! Cute Commoner to Become New Lucis Caelum!)

The guys helped figure out the decorations, though most of Noct's job was reining Ardyn in. (“I assure you it will all be impeccably tasteful.” “Sure, taste, that's what you get from a guy who likes the modern day storyline in Assassin's Creed.” “That's the good part!”

There was a suit to get fitted for, and things to get skulls embroidered on, and flowers to order that Prompto had only ever heard of because Ardyn had called Gladio by their names. Sometimes the molecules of Ignis whizzing in orbit around the area would vibrate in the same place long enough to ask something about shrimp puffs. There were chocobos to rent, and bird clothes to put on them (“They're called caparisons”) and seating charts that looked like the map for the bonus dungeon in King's Knight before the patch to make it more possible. (“Oh, you'll want a bit more space between these two fellows. You know how rival syndicates are.”)

The one thing that nobody had to decide was the venue. There was no question of doing something this big anywhere but the plaza in front of the Citadel. For one thing, it was the only place with a good spot for the choir. (“What are we going to do, not have a choir?”)

A few days before The Day, Prompto sat on the couch in Ardyn's rooms with his head on his fiancé’s shoulder. It was late and the curtains were closed. The TV cast the colors of a coffee shop on
Ardyn’s face, and they were ready.

“I can't believe it's all done,” Prompto said.

“Mm,” said Ardyn. He lolled his head over. “There was one more idea I had.”

“Is it about tablecloths? Because let me tell you, I didn't know tablecloths could be this complicated.”

“No, no. Something very simple.”

Ardyn told him.

One of the six people on screen said something that made the audience laugh.

“You'd want to do that?” Prompto said. His mouth moved as he tried out the syllables. They fizzed on his tongue and sent bubbles up to his brain. “People'll freak.”

“That's a bonus.”

“You'll have to get new letters on your handkerchiefs.”

The flickering light turned Ardyn's stubble dark maroon. His smile drew down the corners of his eyes. “I've been needing a more stylish set.”

To visit a shrine before a momentous event in one's life was a half-forgotten tradition, one now kept only by the especially devout, or, as in Ardyn's case, the devoutly sarcastic. Though the whims of the Hexatheon did not much bend towards demanding sacrifice, the prudent might make offering in supplication, in search of blessing, or in truce.

At the entrance to the little grove, Ardyn took the dipper from the spring and poured water over his hands. He clapped for their attention and was answered by a deepening of the silence as the birds went still.

Six statues were placed there, called art more by grace of age than particular skill or statement. They stood as straight and dauntless as Regis walked, these days. Tradition in mind, Ardyn placed offering before each. Medicine, cloth, grain, bell, music, ornament.

For the Landforger, a muscle lineament that was pungent, yet remarkably effective.

For the Frostbearer, a warm jacket.

For the Tidemother, a bowl of rice made savory through the addition of vinegar, sugar, and a pinch of salt.

For the Pyreburner, a carbon monoxide detector.

For the Stormsender, artisanal wind chimes.

For the Bladekeeper, a handful of magnets from destinations across the kingdom. The best one showed a bird with its beak pressed against a man's face and bore the legend, *A Peck on the Cheek from Wiz’s Chocobo Post.*

This done, Ardyn felt eyes watching him. As expected, they were from about two feet above the ground.
“Hello there, Tiny,” Ardyn said. “Just the celestial canine I wished to speak to.”

The white dog approached him, paws silent on the carpet of fallen pine needles, and gazed upward.

Ardyn said, “I will not kneel.”

He bent and gripped the dog about the middle. To lift her took not insignificant effort, as she was not so diminutive as advertised. His hands sank into the dense fur, and he gazed into placid blue eyes. Prompto had assisted this being once, in the sort of reflexive kindness that was rarely rewarded.

“I consider us at peace. Carry to your masters this most earnest of prayers: if they do not trouble me, I will not trouble them.”

The Astral's messenger yapped and licked his face.

“I shall take that as a yes.”

The day dawned bright and clear, which was good, because Prompto had said that if it rained after all that planning they were going to run off and get hitched at one of the drive-throughs in Lestallum. The courtyard was covered in flowers everywhere you could physically set flowers and bunting everywhere you couldn't. There was a crowd already gathered outside the traffic barriers, a whole squad of earpiece-equipped Crownsguard was going back and forth between the rows of folding chairs, and somewhere a crate was cooing.

One groom's best man was out under the skull-embroidered cloths that were draped over the entrance arch, doing his job.

“Howdy, Prince!”

“Hey, Cindy. Glad you could make it. You're over on the left side.”

The name was marked off on the clipboard by Ignis, who was doing the job of groomsman/guy with the clipboard.

“Hard to believe he's really getting married,” Noct said as she went in.

“Who, Prompto or His Grace?” said Ignis, and directed a lady with a giant snake around her shoulders to the other side.

“Both. Maybe Prompto a little bit more. Hey, Dave.” Noct pointed the hunter over toward near where Luna was sitting. Her lady-in-waiting was over at the refreshment table looking at the ice swan, probably also wondering how it wasn't melting in the sun. “Never imagined him settling down.”

Ignis made a thoughtful noise and waved in a guy in a snakeskin jacket and an eyepatch. “I suspect he is a traditionalist at heart.”

Noct shielded his eyes from the sun to look out over the people who'd already come in. He was glad they hadn't overdone it too much at the bachelor party. It'd been pretty chill, except for the part when Prompto had jumped in a fountain, and the time when they'd had to take a break to go bail his uncle, his dad, the King's Shield, the Marshal of the Crownsguard, and a Niflheim mercenary out of jail. Aranea was out sitting near the front, looking pretty hungover.

“Why do so many people on Ardyn's side have monocles?”
“Fashion, perhaps.” Ignis glanced at an invitation held by a man who was balancing a fluffy white cat in the other arm. “Welcome, your seat is on the right.”

“Obliged,” the man said. He stared hard at Ignis long enough that Noct was about to tell him to knock it off. “Incidentally, would you happen to be seeking employment?”

Noct looked up from petting the cat and said, “He's taken.”

The next group was some people in black suits and sunglasses who were taking a while at Claus’s weapons checkpoint, so they had a minute to breathe. They watched Nyx and Libertus pacing the perimeter and trying to keep their chocobos from nibbling on their own bird-clothes. Caparisons.

“Huh,” Noctis said, squinting into the sun and smiling.

“Hm?” Ignis was checking down the guest list again.

“Just thinking about that time you put vinegar on ice cream.”


“Yeah. You wouldn't think it'd work, but it did.” The white cat had hopped off the guy's lap and come back over to them, exploring. Noct knelt down to pet it some more. “Kinda like my best friend and the family weirdo.”

“They are a surprisingly effective combination, aren't they? The honest goodness of Prompto's heart, accentuated by the eccentricity of the royal line.”

“Hey, the only eccentric is him.” Noct grabbed a can out of the Armiger and opened it up. The cat went mrr and stuck its head inside, tail swaying.

“Do you carry cans of tuna at all times?” Ignis said.

“Well, yeah.” Noct's hand stroked down the cat's fluffy back. “Sometimes there's cats.”

It was getting close to time, so they left the rest of the guests to the Glaives, picked up Gladio on the way, and headed into the palace. It was cool and dark after the bright sun outside, though just as full of people hurrying back and forth.

“What's next on the checklist, Iggy?” Noct said, dodging somebody with a covered silver tray.

Ignis adjusted his glasses. “I have it here as 'make sure Ardyn hasn't done anything stupid.'”

“Damn, you've got your work cut out for you,” said Gladio. He rapped on the dressing room door. “Hey, Ardyn, you decent?”

“I am,” his voice lilted through the door. “Come right in, Trillium.”

They came in. The door closed behind them.

It was a lie.

“Huh,” said Gladio. Ignis coughed. Noct managed one good breath before he started laughing, which was good, because he might never get another.

“That's your suit?” he managed. It was white, you could say that much. Actually that was about all you could say before human language gave up.
“Why, yes,” Ardyn said. He held his arms up and spun around, which made absolutely everything worse. Light glinted on the shiny parts. “Is it not quite what you expected?”

“I-- I definitely should have!”

The room was one that used to be for putting on armor and stuff. It used to be a bigger space, but there’d been some wood dividing walls put in once chainmail wasn’t a thing people had to deal with much anymore. The other three walls were made of stone that still had halberd scratches in it. There was a full-length mirror for Ardyn to pose and make things worse in front of.

“Is he dressed?” Prompto's voice called from the next room. “I wanna see!”

“No, you don't,” said Gladio.

“I'm afraid you can't, my dear,” Ardyn called back. “It would be bad luck to see before the wedding.”

“It's bad luck to see ever!” Noct was doubled up against the wall.

“Mm. Yes.” Ignis had his phone by his ear, and was nodding. “Is that so?”

“You look like the magician at a casino,” said Gladio.

“In seven days I'm gonna get killed by a tacky ghost!”

“Indeed. I see.”

“But one where you shouldn't eat the shellfish at the buffet.”

“Did you borrow that from an archbishop's pimp?”

“I'll let him know.” Ignis snapped his phone shut. “Your Grace. The next time you see the author of the Electric Elixir Acid Test…”

Everybody meandered to quiet. Ardyn looked at him. “Yes?”

“He'd like his suit back.”

“You're killing me, here!” Prompto's voice called. “Can't I just take a peek?”

“Uh-uh,” Gladio said. “You don't want to jinx a match this good. This guy looks like he owns a whole lot of cattle.”

Noctis was just about able to catch his breath and stand up straight. The trick was not looking directly at it, like with a cockatrice. “You two keep an eye on, uh, all of this. I'm gonna check on Prompto.”

“I assure you I cannot look away,” said Ignis.

Noct left them eyeing Ardyn, and slipped into the next room.

He leaned against the door, trying to catch his breath. “Seriously, you're gonna want to be real ready for-- woah.”

“Woah what?” Prompto said.
Noctis had seen him in black plenty of times. A tux shouldn't have been that different. Maybe it was just the lightheadedness, but something about the cleanness of the suit made him look like he was a Prompto from a little ahead in the timeline, one who'd grown up some moment when Noct wasn't looking.


The quick smile was so honest it made his heart beat with a physical force he could feel.

“Honestly, I'm kind of freaking out here,” Prompto said. “Going out in front of everybody, getting married-- I don't know if I can be an adult. I don't even know how cufflinks work.”

“Here.” Noct came and gestured for Prompto to give him the little box and put his hands out. Noct slipped the little silver skulls into place on his sleeves. “You're gonna do fine.”

“Okay.” Prompto took a deep breath. He looked at himself in the mirror and straightened his bow tie. His nod made his hair bounce. It was up like always, just a little more perfect than usual. “Let's do this.”

Noct went over and poked his head through the door, got Ardyn's suit in his eyes all over again, and said, “He's ready.”

“Marvelous,” Ardyn said, with a gesture that threw blinding white fabric everywhere.

When Noctis turned back, Pompto had his eyes closed and was murmuring, “Okay. Okay.” He opened his eyes and said, “What?”

“Nothing. I'm just happy for you.” Noctis kept right on smiling contentedly. “Plus, I realized something.”

“Yeah?”

“You can never give me crap for anything again.”

Muffled by the door, Ardyn's voice said, “As goes the ancient invocation of luck, let's mosey.”

Noct said, “You're marrying that guy.”

_____
almost forgot they were there. The king's voice got lost under his heartbeat. After a minute he didn't see the cameras anymore. Just Ardyn.

Ardyn was pretty hard to look away from, honestly. He was looking at Prompto the way he did at camp by firelight, when he rested his chin in his hands to watch him work out new gun tricks, and said _Do the little spin again._

Also, that was one hell of a suit.

Prompto felt his own _I do_ buzz in his throat more than he heard it. Ardyn managed to make his sound like something secret murmured in his ear in the middle of the night.

Okay, so it took two tries to get the ring onto Ardyn, with how Prompto's hands were shaking. Maybe he wasn't that calm. His own ring felt strange and new as it warmed to his skin. He looked down at little shiny gold thing that meant his life had changed.

The king left out the part Ardyn had suggested (“*By the power vested in me by a big magic rock,*”) and said, “In the eyes of the Kingdom of Lucis, I pronounce you married. You may now kiss your husband.”

Screw it. Prompto jumped into his arms.

A whole wall of sound happened at once. A lot of the bricks were made of cheering, plenty more were the woosh of wings, some were the blood rushing giddily in Prompto's ears, and just one was Noct's voice saying to somebody, “I'm not crying. _You're_ crying.”

Prompto got set down on his feet in a different world.

It was a while before everybody was quiet. The king waited until and there was nothing but murmurs and scattered cooing.

Another thing Ardyn had said was, _I've always monopolized the best roles. For once, Regis, you should have the good line._

Noct's dad smiled and said, “Congratulations, Prompto and Ardyn Argentum.”

Now _that_ was a crowd losing it.

The cake was the height of a man and basically pure art, just with little frosting roses instead of a museum placard. Prompto had learned some things from hearing Ignis rapidly muttering plans under his breath, like that the little skulls were made out of marzipan and that there was such thing as something called _fondant_ that filled Iggy's voice with cold, implacable rage. He still had no idea how a mortal human being could make something like that. Ignis being Ignis, there was even a perfect place between the decorations to aim when they gave the cake the traditional elegant stab to make sure it was dead.

_“Nice job, Mister Argentum,”_ Prompto whispered, with his hand under Ardyn's on the knife's handle, and even under hundreds of cameras flashing, that smile was just his.

The cans tied to the back of the Midlife-Crisis-Mobile rattled all the way to Galdin Quay. They would set out to Accordo the next day, where they'd sit in little cafes and make artists draw each other and ride little boats like dorks, but that night they spent in a the ridiculously expensive fancy hotel where Ardyn carried him through the door until Prompto started laughing so hard he nearly got
“Holy crap, you actually did the rose petals on the bed thing?”

Ardyn said, “Would I do any less?”

When he tossed Prompto on the bed it poofed up a red cloud. He followed after, and kissed him until his head spun like gravity had gone away. Prompto undid the buttons on front of the tight white pants and pushed them down, and then was laughing too hard to do anything again.

“You were wearing those the whole time?”

Ardyn wriggled his hips out of his pants and looked as innocent as a man in lacy panties could.

“They're my something blue.”

Prompto pounced on him.

The rose petals stuck to bare skin, it turned out, especially when you kept turning over and grabbing somebody close again and again, and when Prompto pushed Ardyn down on his back and rode him he rolled off with his calves coated in red petals.

He lay sweaty, sticky, and giddy next to his husband. His eyes traced the maze Ardyn's tangled hair made on the bright white pillow. Prompto reached out and touched his face just to feel the smoothness. Ardyn pressed his face into his hand, eyes half closing.

“Now,” Ardyn murmured, “say something devastatingly romantic.”

Prompto looked at the man he loved lying naked draped across the bed, and said, “Can you lift up on your elbow a little?”

Ardyn smiled in his slow, filthy way. “Anything you ask.”

Prompto got off the bed and knelt beside it. He reached out to arrange Ardyn, brushing his hair forward onto his shoulder and positioning his hand to rest between his legs. “Now cross your ankle over, and get a handful of flowers. Okay, and look really sexy.”

“Like this?”

“Perfect.” Prompto pulled his camera out of the Armiger, adjusted for the low, intimate light, and took the shot.

He scooched over to Ardyn to show him how it turned out. Ardyn looped his arm over him and rested his chin on Prompto's shoulder. His chest hair was scratchy on Prompto's back.

“Hm,” Ardyn hummed. “Reclining beauties are a popular subject. Give me a moment to ruminate.”

“Ruminate away.” Though Prompto might drift off, worn out from the celebration and the sex and from being so happy his body didn't know how to hold it. “Hey. You know, I never asked. What made you post that painting to that Hasteagram pic way back when, anyway? The one with the two guys on the floor.”

“A whim, in part. I had been watching for some time, but the resemblance struck me as too fortuitous to let pass. The Nude Huntress?”

“Nope! Really, you were?”
“I enjoyed looking at the chronicles of your adventures, breathing a little vicarious fresh air. I envied your ability to strike off into the countryside, as I was once able to do. *Sleeping Shiva*?”

“Close!” Prompto pressed his shoulders back. Ardyn felt giant and solid behind him. “You know, you can go wherever you want, now. You can do whatever you want.”

“Such dizzying freedom.” There was that voice Ardyn had when he was joking, but kind of not. He'd always worked so hard to look like somebody who didn't care about anything. “I don't know how you stand it.”

“You'll smart. You'll pick it up fast.”

“Mm.” Ardyn's head went heavy on his shoulder. “Ah. I've got it. *The Shiva of Altissia.*”

“Bingo! Here's your prize.” Prompto used the thing on the camera to make a hard copy of the picture. He leaned over off the bed, braced one hand on the floor, and reached for Ardyn's jacket. Halfway through the move a notion struck him, and he pulled another thing out of the Armiger. He tucked the picture into Ardyn's pocket, behind another that showed the five of them in front of the Disc of Cauthuss, the one where you could tell that Prompto had had to move fast to get under Ardyn's arm. “Keep 'em safe.”

“Evermore,” said Ardyn, like that was a word people said.

Prompto's legs kicked up a bunch of rose petals when he got under the top sheet. Ardyn stretched out next to him, huge enough that his toes touched the fancy carved footboard. He was sweaty, with petals stuck to his thigh and elbow and above his hip, his purple hair mussed up, and the light laying on him like a steeped dark gold liquid, like tea, stirring around purple arm hair and letting shadow lay curled up in the hollow of his throat.

“Are you admiring me, my dear?” he murmured.

“Yep,” Prompto said, because there wasn't any reason anymore not to admit whatever he wanted and be proud. “Love the lighting.”
It was best to stay a little bit back from Crowd Territory when visitors were coming through the Citadel. If your timing was just right, you could catch a head of gray-streaked maroon hair drifting around until opportunity caught the owner's attention, and he leaned in toward a high school kid who was looking up at the portrait of the king leaning on a giant mace. If you happened to be close enough, you might overhear, “Ah, the Fierce. Do you know, they say he could whap people's heads off with that bludgeon like a child lopping the bloom off a daisy.”

“Hey, Marshal Argentum.” Noct stepped up beside Prompto. The crown over his ear stayed steady when he tilted his head for a look over the people in the gallery. Finding that thing a steady place had taken some work. It'd slid all over the place and gotten dropped a dozen times in the week after his dad retired, when he'd still been getting used to it. “Can you get your husband to quit hassling the tour?”

The drifting voice continued, “And of course, they say standing still for this portrait so concentrated his restless wrath that to this day a curse falls upon any foolish enough to gaze too long upon it…”

“Can, but won't, buddy,” Prompto said cheerfully.

It would've been wrong not to let him finish the story. Once he did, Prompto went over and pat him on the butt to get his attention.

Ardyn swirled around and said, “Why, hello there.”

“Sup. You ready to go grab dinner?”

Ardyn held his arm out and walked him past the kid who was now trying not to look directly at the portrait. “I certainly am.”

Noctis raised a lazy hand when they went past him in the doorway. “You know that painting is from a hundred years after the Fierce died, right?”

“Snitches get stitches, Your Majesty,” Ardyn said.

They walked through the courtyard and said hi to Luna, who was feeding some of this spring’s generation of doves. It was still pretty chilly to be wearing a sleeveless dress like that, so Gentiana was lending her a warm jacket. Since Gladio'd asked Ardyn for book recommendations, they stopped to bring him a copy of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Genji Helm* from the library, then went out into the city.

In the little crowded street full of shops on their way to the ramen place Iggy'd vouched for, Ardyn paused.

“What?” Prompto said. The air smelled like garlic and soy sauce. The setting sun hit him in the eye through a gap between buildings and made him blink.

Ardyn held his hand out, his head held real still like he was trying not to lose the framing of something. “May I?”
“Huh? Oh, sure.” Prompto handed over his camera, and Ardyn took it like a bird plucking a berry off a bush. It was strange to see this side of the lens.

“Back a bit,” Ardyn said, with half his face behind the black rectangle. “To the right. Ah, not so much-- perfect.”

The camera flashed. As soon as he could, Prompto jogged over to see how it came out. He slung his arm around Ardyn's shoulders and leaned over to look at the preview screen.

“Not terribly bad for an amateur, if I do say so myself,” said Ardyn.

“Pretty nice! I look cute.” Though Prompto wouldn't have chosen that funky green wall for a background, the way a vertical line of sunlight went down his right side made for a cool effect. “If it's an art joke, though, I'm stumped.”

Ardyn's hand meandered down his shoulder, toying with the weave of the Crownguard uniform, fingertips following the threads. His face was close to Prompto's, and his cheek was rough from the stubble that'd be there forever.

The angle of the sun gave texture to his smile and richness to the gold of his eyes. “This one is just you.”

Chapter End Notes

And it's done! It's really, truly done. Thank you all so much for reading and commenting, and huge thanks to the OP of the kink meme prompt that started all this. I have had a blast writing it. There's still plenty of Promdyn in me, so keep an eye out if you're into it, and in the meantime, come say hello to me at higharollakockamamie.tumblr.com.
Here's a quick guide to the art Easter eggs.

So the one I had in mind was the Salvador Dali one:

![Salvador Dali painting](image)

but as it turns out, it's historically been a popular subject for anybody who wants to paint weird monsters. Seemed appropriate for Ardyn. I especially like Michelangelo's **The Torment of Saint**
because he looks fully fed up with this shit.

Chapter 1

“Nah, somebody posted a picture of a dude hugging a dead guy on the floor.” Prompto squinted
closer. “Like, a painting.” ...

“I do not look like a guy hugging a dead body. Totally wrong hair.”

Gladio came over, smelling like smoke. He leaned over for a look at the screen. “You’re both pretty bug-eyed there.”

“Yeah, it’s that!” Prompto said. “Kinda got the same expression, see? And look, the whole composition of the picture. See, that tree is in the same place as the dresser, and that round pillow thing is Gladio’s duffel bag.”
Fun fact: in May 2018, a drunk guy attacked this painting with a pole.

Chapter 3

The first one Prompto was really happy with was a picture of Gladio ripping into a roast chickatrice leg. … “Huh, this one's weird. What's 'Ifrit Feasting on the Mortals' supposed to mean?”

Prompto cackled in triumph. “It means he got it!”
Saturn Devouring His Son by Francisco Goya

The repeating dead son motif was, uh, not intentional.

*They were racing up a hillside when Noct's chocobo scrabbled in the shale and did a little hop that made Noct toss his arm up to keep his balance. … A striking likeness of The Conqueror Traversing*
“You sure you don't want to come cliff diving?” … He got some great ones, in fact, and then one
where he waited and watched Ignis soar down toward the water until he hit the surface with hardly a splash.

- Boring, there's not even anybody in this one.
- look down in the lower right in the water there's legs
- Nice view of the sea.
- Hey, I know that weapon cart guy.
- My room mate Cassia makes 9,000 gil a day over the internet 3-5 hours job a day with weekly payout simplest job I have ever do
- Haha you took it a second too late my bro!
- Landscape and the Descent of the Flighted One. (lady waving) (four-leaf clover) You're going to have to go farther afield to confound me. (umbrella)

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus by Pieter Brugel
Ardyn’s fingers spread out the four photos. ... There was Ignis coming out of the tent. Him offering the plate of tofu to Gladio, who was pointing out of the frame to the next vict-- to Noct. Ignis and Noct standing beside each other, both wearing looks of growing unease. Ignis standing with his hands reaching out helplessly above where Noct was doubled over. ... “It’s the Kadamitas Tetraptych,” he said.

This is where I will just confess that this whole fic began life as a Loss joke.

Chapter 4

Prompto got the black chocobo chick arranged just right in Ardyn's arms. ... “Okay,” Prompto said, done petting the bird (for now) and hopping over to his equipment, “look off to the right. I mean, left. Your left. Loosen your scarf some. Yeah, perfect!” ... “What are you doing?” Noct's voice called.

“Maiden Holding a Weasel, I presume,” Ardyn said.
Lady with an Ermine by Leonardo da Vinci

A neat thing about this one; it was part of the inspirations for Phillip Pullman's idea of daemons in His Dark Materials.
Chapter 5

“There’s this shot with this guy watching TV, see, except you’re from his viewpoint, so you’re actually looking between his feet, and there’s this picture above it and these two lamps on the sides, and it’s all symmetrical and totally perfect—“

Chapter 6

“Now, what shall we put before your lens today? I was thinking we could attempt The Trio at Their Instruments, though it would require we find two volunteers and a table that can be seen from all directions at once.”
Ardyn’s an ambitious man.

*It was silly to be this nervous. It wasn't like it had anybody naked on a clam or anything. It was just a guy with a bare shoulder. There was something about it that seemed so personal, though, how he was half in the dark and had that look on his face like he and the painter were sharing a secret. Maybe because it was an expression he'd seen on Ardyn, and one that he'd like to see some more. …  “Put your right hand up here, pointing – yeah, like that.”  

“A pity we have no holy symbol,” Ardyn said as Prompto went behind the camera. “Perhaps this can suffice.”  

Magenta light morphed into a silver staff in his hand. It was bigger and flashier than the thing in the painting, but then again, so was Ardyn.*
St. John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci

The model for this one is said to be Salai, the guy rumored to be Leonardo's lover.

Yes, I only know that because of Assassin's Creed.
Chapter 8

“Look,” Noctis said. He sighed and his shoulders fell some, so he was standing less like somebody about to get in a fistfight. “I don't think you're actually out to hurt anybody. You just think weird stuff is funny. Like that movie with the guy wearing the dead anak.”

Ardyn is a fan of the Eos version of the Tom Green film Freddy Got Fingered. I was planning to include a picture of the scene, then I looked at the picture I'd have to use and decided not to. The movie is mostly memorable for Roger Ebert's magnificently, wearily baffled review.

He'd dragged Noct, Ignis, and Gladio all over town so he could experiment taking pictures with different kinds of framing, and had them wait while he ran up to the top of a building to try getting a super long shot like one of these guys in a jungle in some movie he'd seen with Ardyn.
Apocalypse Now by Stanley Kubrick

(“Hey, don’t worry, I’m not going to try to get anything like the part where the guy punches a mirror and bleeds all over the place. Ardyn says that wasn’t even in the script. The actor was just super drunk and doing that that day.”)

Also Apocalypse Now, and that is true.

Chapter 10

No going out to really interestingly shot movies with flying guys fighting mechanical Ronin daemons.
Brazil by Terry Gilliam

A deeply weird dystopian movie that includes even weirder dream sequences. Ardyn has interesting ideas of date movies.
“Wait, we have to take a picture. Noct, cover your face and hand me this. Ignis, sit over here. And you, Snapdragon, put your hand on my knee and look mournful.”

“Not doing that,” Gladio said.

“Well, someone must.”

Prompto got his camera out and skipped back to get the right distance. His eyes widened and he snapped his fingers a few times fast.

“Oh, oh, oh! It's the thing! The thing with the guy!”

“Exactly,” Ardyn said, and shot him a smile. He was posing with his hand pointing in the air. “Also known as The Philosopher's Demise.”
Chapter 13

“He's talking about the time you tossed a swamp monster through a drive-through window.”

Based on a thing that really happened, involving an alligator and a Wendy's. Why yes, it was Florida.

Chapter 20

“Well, tough. ...You don't get to be the lady floating in the river with all the flowers. Yours is Portrait of a Guy Making Up for a Dick Move.”
Chapter 21

It was like there were ants in his palms, like in that old movie they'd gone and seen together.
Un Chien Andalou by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali

Either a deeply psychological classic of surrealist genius or a bunch of weird disturbing shit for the sake of being weird and disturbing, depending on who you ask. Buñuel said that he filled his pockets with rocks to throw at people if they mobbed him at the premiere. I learned that from Roger Ebert's review of Freddy Got Fingered.

Chapter 25

The only time they talked was when Prompto said “Why a monkey mask?” and Ardyn said, “No one knows.”
The Prisoner

That British '60s TV show with the famously bonkers final episode.

Chapter 27

and who helped me run back and forth in and out of Kenny Crow's that one time so we could get the guys sitting in just the right position so it'd look like Nighthunderocs

Chapter 28

“Oh, Gardenia!” Ardyn called, and made the toss just as he turned.

Rapidly, the camera flashed. The shield plucked the peach out of the air the moment before it struck
“What was that for?” he said, taking a bite.

“Look!” Prompto trotted over and showed him the back of the camera. He had a right to be proud. The superimposition had worked out beautifully. “It’s the Cousin of Humanity!”

“A few tales of especial interest,” Ardyn said, in the slanting way he said things when he had a secret. “It’s a riddle. Don’t worry, it’s something good.”

The three stories he marks are Love Is The Plan The Plan Is Death by James Tiptree, Jr., The Beast That Shouted Love At The Heart of the World by Harlan Ellison, and one with a title I absolutely could not resist: The Daemon Lover by Shirley Jackson.

Chapter 30

Prompto looked at the man he loved lying naked draped across the bed, and said, “Can you lift up on your elbow a little?”

Ardyn smiled in his slow, filthy way. “Anything you ask.”

Prompto got off the bed and knelt beside it. He reached out to arrange Ardyn, brushing his hair forward onto his shoulder and positioning his hand to rest between his legs. “Now cross your ankle over, and get a handful of flowers. Okay, and look really sexy.” … “Ah. I’ve got it. The Shiva of Altissia.”
The Venus of Urbino by Titian

I was caught between lots of variations on reclining naked ladies, but this one was my favorite. Plus it has an indifferent dog.
SOME NEVER loose THE HABIT.

MARSHAL LEONIS, IS T SIGNIFICANT S IN MY DIRECT
This scene got a wonderful illustration by kickingshoes! Ardyn's look of innocence there cracks me up every time.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!